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**“Servant Leadership on the Couch”:  
A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Informal Work  
Group Relations**

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## ABSTRACT

Servant leadership, the subject of this study, captured my attention because of its recent popularity within the popular press and business consultant circles. While servant leadership has become one of the most appealing leadership philosophies in those communities, this has not been the case in other communities (e.g. executives and leadership scholars). For the latter, the idea of servant leadership seems to be too narrow, impractical, and idealistic. Another issue of concern is that there is only little empirical support has been published in peer-reviewed journals, which most of them appear to be lacked of well-designed research methodology to explore and study the complexity of servant leadership.

This study explores the organizational phenomenon of servant leadership and utilizes a psychoanalytic frame of thinking and the substance of informal leadership and relationships in search of a richer explanation and better understanding of servant leadership. Psychoanalytically informed interviews of a small group of workers who operate in a New Zealand branch of a multinational cleaning service provider elicited quality stories which provided access to delve more deeply into the dynamics of servant leadership as it is enacted and experienced by the leader and subordinates in their informal work system. Psychoanalytic concepts (e.g. idealization, identification, transference, projection, ego-ideal) and Gabriel's (2000) poetic tropes (e.g. attribution of motive, attribution of causal connections, attribution of fixed qualities, and attribution of providential significance) are employed as the main interpretive frame to analyze the collected stories and narratives – viewed as manifest materials of unconscious organizational processes.

Servant leadership is found not to be an idealistic form of leadership, but rather a by-product of the leader and subordinates' mutual idealization aimed to protect and maintain their narcissistic identities. In their idealization, subordinates see the leader as the symbolic mother, who echoes their wishes and desires in a way that provide each of them

a healthy sense of self-esteem that could help them deal with the difficulties and hardship triggered by male managers – viewed as the symbolic father of the workplace. As a by-product of subordinates' idealization of the leader, subordinates establish a symbolic family-group, wherein relationships and leadership are informal. This informal system shares many similarities with many features of servant leadership, such as personal and close relationships, caring, community building, shared decision making and leadership, and the principle of 'primus inter pares' – first among equals (Greenleaf, 2002). The leader's idealization of subordinates is also a way to confirm her narcissistic identity that drives her to engage in serving behaviours where she seeks subordinates' love and admiration. Such mutual idealization, as with idealization in other relationships, brings with it potential benefits, but also potential drawbacks for the leader, subordinates, and the organization. In dealing with the threat of a subordinate's betrayal, the servant leader longs for intervention from a Divine figure as her final resort of defence. The servant leader's idealization of subordinates and of a Divine figure, in addition to leader-subordinate symbolic mother-child relationships within their symbolic family group, may function as the important elements distinguishing servant leadership from other theories of leadership.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Despite his belief that servant leadership offered a positive view of leadership that can bring many benefits to the welfare of the organization and its members, Robert Greenleaf (2002) called servant leadership a “dangerous creation” (p. 26). This study offers some of the possible rationales that may have underpinned Greenleaf’s thinking about servant leadership by means of critical reading through psychoanalytic interpretation of the concept. This chapter offers a prelude to my study into servant leadership within a New Zealand cleaning service company. It briefly introduces the scope of the research, and also explains the structure of the thesis.

### **A Brief Overview of Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership is perhaps one of the most talked about leadership philosophies. The philosophy and practice of servant leadership have been told and re-told via the medium of stories for centuries. Many of us are likely to have been introduced to the concept of servant leadership in religious education. The need to serve others has long been a foundational value in many of the world’s religions (Polleys, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008). For example, in the Bible, Jesus asks his disciples to be the servant of others:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. (NIV Bible, Mark 10: 43)

An example from Prophet Mohammed can be found in the following statement, in which he encourages Muslim leaders to be servant leaders: “Verily, each of you is a shepherd,

and each of you is responsible for the well being of his flock” (Nusair, cited in Sarayrah, 2004, p. 75). Lad and Luechauer (1998) found that many of the Dalai Lama’s teachings also encourage people to seek enlightenment through serving others. For believers, the life stories of many religious leaders provide the greatest stories on servant leadership, and history also provides similar stories in the lives of ancient kings and their families (Ebener & O’Connell, 2010; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Stories of servant leadership show it to be a timeless principle in the collective wisdom of many indigenous cultures (Cyril, 2006; Nyabadza, 2003; Spears, 1995).

For many people, the basic message of these stories is simple: to be a good leader one must be a good person, possessing characteristics like altruism, integrity, humility, and faith. These stories may work as sources of inspiration for people from which we can identify ourselves as the ‘ideal’ persons or leaders, who are selfless and willing to see the needs of others are met first. Another message that could be found in these stories is to warn people of the perils of leadership. One may easily provide an example of a leader who has abused power by using it aggressively, sometimes at the cost of others, only to promote his or her own desire for self-aggrandizement. Thus, the interplay of focus on self, other, and power becomes an important feature in the stories of servant leadership.

More recently, Robert Greenleaf tried to re-tell the story of servant leadership in the secular world through his popular book *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*, first published in 1977. Greenleaf, a consultant, is the main figure of a modern servant leadership movement, who promotes the idea of servant leadership as the best, yet somewhat paradoxical, model of organizational leadership. In his story of servant leadership, Greenleaf underlines the others-first model of leadership, since “the servant-leader is servant first. . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (2002, p. 27). The servants also aspire to lead, since it potentially provides a bigger and better opportunity to develop people and facilitate their growth; through their service, Greenleaf believes, servants emerge as leaders. To help the leaders maintain their identity as servants, Greenleaf (2002) asks these leaders to remember some important questions: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while

being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p. 27).

Greenleaf was introduced to the idea of servant leadership after reading Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East* (1956). In fact, Greenleaf’s account of servant leadership begins with an expression of admiration for Leo, the protagonist in Hesse’s novel. Leo is described by Greenleaf as the ideal servant leader as expressed through his character and dedicated service to others. Greenleaf, then, attempted to enrich this story driven by his belief that leaders and organizations could play a part in the creation of a more serving society. He considered that there were many self-serving leaders and institutions that had created deficiencies in service to society. Accordingly, Greenleaf presented his ‘solution’ by introducing a model of leadership that he believed could be achieved—that servants, through their service to others, can become great leaders and help build a more caring society.

Greenleaf’s idea about servant leadership has received substantial attention from popular authors and consultants (e.g. Blanchard, 1995; Block, 1993; Covey, 1998; De Pree, 1989; Spears, 1995). Many of them view servant leadership as an attractive idea and try to encourage the business community to embrace servant-hood as their managerial style. As a result, we are told that top corporations in the ‘best companies to work for’ in America (e.g. TDIndustries, Southwest Airlines, and Synovus) put the story into practice (Levering & Moskowitz, 2000; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Nevertheless, servant leadership has generated cynical reaction from the majority of business-decision makers (Andersen, 2009; Brumback, 1999; DiStefano, 1995; Johnson, 2009; Whetstone, 2002). In fact, as DiStefano (1995) claims, “managers and executives strongly resisted Greenleaf’s ideas – rejecting them as impractical” (p. 67).

The same case applies to the leadership scholarly community. When the concept of servant leadership appears in the literature, “cynicism is often the first response” (Johnson, 2009, p. 179). Yet, there have been scholars who are interested in developing servant leadership as a viable theory in the leadership studies (Russell & Stone, 2002;

Washington, Sutton, & Field, 2006). These studies focus on identifying characteristics and conceptual frameworks of servant leadership as well as developing instruments to measure key dimensions of servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya et al., 2008). Nevertheless, so far “there is still no consensus about a definition and theoretical framework of servant leadership” (Van Dierendonck, 2010, p. 1229). Some other studies underline the distinctiveness and superiority of servant leadership compared with other theories of leadership, such as authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, and transformational leadership (e.g. Humphreys, 2005; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Van Dierendonck, 2010). However, many authors (e.g. Valeri, 2007; Yukl, 2010) have suggested that servant leadership is not a distinct leadership model as it shares many features similar to other models. According to Yukl (2010), for example:

They are all normative theories of ideal leadership, they all focus on the interpersonal relationship between leader and followers, and the ideal relationship is one with high mutual respect, trust, cooperation, loyalty, and openness... The positive values or attributes in the theories are very similar, and they include honesty, altruism, kindness, compassion, empathy, fairness, gratitude, humility, courage, optimism, and resilience. (p. 427)

## **Statement of the Problem**

There is a concern from leadership scholars that the construction of servant leadership is too narrow—that it is built on a superficial and inadequate view of organizational life and its members (Andersen, 2009; Brumback, 1999; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Whetstone, 2002). As pointed out by Yukl (2010) in the previous quote, some academic commentators (e.g. Cerit, 2009; Graham, 1991; Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, & Kakabadse 2002; Winston, 2004) continue to advocate servant leadership in positive terms, echoing Greenleaf’s and popular authors’ constructions of servant leadership. These theorists view servant leaders

as moral persons and having no self-interest, whose serving behaviours will only produce positive outcomes for the whole organization. Korac-Kakabadse et al. (2002) note that servant leaders “exist only to serve followers. Indeed, they earn followers by virtue of their selfless, Gandhi-esque natures” (p. 169). Cerit (2009) elaborates on servant leadership in more detail: “Servant leaders have an unselfish concern for others, which often involves personal sacrifice. Servant leaders’ behaviours are directed toward the benefit of others even when those behaviours are against their own personal interests” (p. 602). Similarly, subordinates are believed to reciprocally return the leader’s act of service with many positive attitudes and behaviours that only bring with them good results to the organization as a whole. Melchar and Bosco (2010, p. 4) write:

The followers reciprocate for the support received by engaging in behaviors that benefit their leaders and fellow members... They are also more likely to develop high leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships in their work groups... subordinates may take on informal leadership roles... helping to meet the needs and desires of fellow group members... thus [servant leadership] builds a working climate that generates feelings of employee empowerment, resulting in better performance.

What is missing in this superficial reading are the dynamics and intricacies of leader-subordinates relations that at times may produce negative results such as conflicts, rivalries or even leadership derailment (Brumback, 1999; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Whetstone, 2002). The empirical body of research into servant leadership also has yet to examine the complexity and potential drawbacks of servant leadership.

Another strand of work that addresses the use of servant leadership is questionable on the basis of the dominant approaches and the assumptions underpinning the research methodology employed. Most studies in servant leadership use quantitatively-based surveys, and many of them utilize formal managers as the participants and utilize not-for-profit organizations as the context of the study (e.g. Cerit, 2009; Hale & Fields, 2007;

Joseph & Winston, 2005). Survey-based studies are excellent for testing the validity of particular claims in a population or sample of that population. Other research strategies, such as qualitative research, are unable to guarantee the validity of survey work, yet provide means of addressing some of the complexities of the leadership processes (Bryman, 2004; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Ford, Harding, & Learnmonth, 2008; Winston, 2010). The strong focus on formal managers and not-for-profit organizations is certainly inadequate to access and study the practice of servant leadership. My argument is that, by employing such an approach, it would be difficult for the researcher to recognize whether their participants are servants-first, whose main desires are to attend to others' needs; whether they are leaders-first, who have "served out of promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 28); or whether they may even be individuals with hidden motives and agendas in serving others.

Accordingly, I share Winston's (2010) sentiment that current construction and study of servant leadership only provides very narrow description about 'what is servant leadership,' hence, our understanding of servant leadership seems to be very limited. Richer descriptions of servant leadership are called for: those that include the utilization of other research methods that could help researchers explore the dynamics and complexities of servant leadership and, therefore, help us better understand the phenomenon.

## **Purpose of the Study**

My aim in this study is to address some of the above issues and concerns by focusing on informal relationships and leadership within a business corporation. This focus was recommended by Greenleaf (2002) as a way of accessing the practice of servant leadership. A psychoanalytic frame of thinking will help me explore the complexity of servant leadership, much as psychoanalytic insights into leadership have been used by others (e.g. Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Kernberg, 1979, 1998; Kets de Vries, 1988, 1989a, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, 1985, 1987; Zaleznik, 1977). In doing so, I intend to look in depth at, and unravel, the tensions, contradictions, emotional attachment and

power dynamics that inevitably exist in leader-subordinate informal relations. Thus, it is the purpose of this study to contribute to the servant leadership literature by providing a more in depth and richer explanation of servant leadership as well as offering a new avenue of inquiry into servant leadership.

## **Research Questions**

This study was driven by a set of salient research questions that reflect the purpose of the research and guide the research process. The key research question was: to what degree do informal relations display the idealized characteristics as well as the dynamics and complexity of servant leadership? This omnibus question can be partitioned into several other, more specific questions:

- How do the leader's and subordinates' informal relations constitute the idealized characteristics of servant leadership?
- What other psychological processes are at work between the leader and subordinates in relation to the production of servant leadership and its dynamics?
- What are the impacts of such processes both to the actors involved, to other organizational members, and to the fulfilment of organizational tasks and roles?
- How does the leader deal with the threats and challenges in the dynamic processes and ambiguity of organisational life to maintain and sustain the production and practice of servant leadership?
- What are the implications of my study for the study and practice of servant leadership as well as to the psychoanalytic literature on leadership?

## **The Empirical Study**

In the empirical chapters (4, 5, and 6), I present the collected stories and accounts of subordinates and their leader (Susan) as well as my psychoanalytic interpretation of the empirical material. While chapters 4 and 5 are mainly built on interpretation of

subordinates' narratives about their relationships with the group's leader, the managers, and with one another, chapter 6 primarily centres on the story and accounts of the leader, whose main objective is to care about, protect, and serve her subordinates.

In Chapter 4, I provide analysis of interviews with workers, whose attachment to their supervisor can be successfully interpreted as attachment to a symbolic mother-leader. Subordinates' stories and narratives illustrate their idealization of the leader, whose acts and behaviours resonate with their wishes and desires. Since caring is the main feature of subordinates' idealized accounts of their leader, I suggest that this symbolic mother-leader is similar to the Greenleaf's (2002) fantasy of servant leader. In this chapter, I also show how cleaners' symbolic relationships with the group's leader, help them tolerate the hardship and difficulties of working life – mostly caused by the organization's managers, viewed as the impersonal and malevolent agents. Having Susan as the group's leader helps build and shore up the workers' identities, because her acts and behaviours echo cleaners' sense of importance and worth. Nevertheless, my analysis shows the instability of the cleaners' idealization of, and identification with the leader, for they are not only able to help subordinates to bolster their identities, but also bring the threat of many possible negative consequences.

In Chapter 5, I provide cleaners' construction of a symbolic family group that transforms work relations into informal relationships and informal leadership. These share many similarities with characteristics (e.g. personal and close relationship, community building, shared decision making and leadership) associated with servant leadership. I also demonstrate how such a symbolic family group not only serves as the subordinates' ideal object that can, through identification, enhance their sense of identity, but also functions as a good holding environment that can support members' developmental space, experience, and sense of personal empowerment. In the final section, I also show some adverse effects that the symbolic family group may bring that might endanger organizational functioning as well as create further anxiety-ridden predicaments for the subordinates, the group's leader, as well as other organizational members.

Chapter 6 is built around the leader's own accounts and narratives that shed some light about the construction of a servant's disposition within the leader, the production of her identity as a servant leader, as well as the sustenance of such identity against threats posed to her efforts to practice as a servant leader. Such an identity creates a double-edged sword for the leader, for it not only provides narcissistic gratification and enhances her self-esteem, but it also brings with it the threat of betrayal. As a consequence of her subordinate's betrayal, Susan experiences feelings of disappointment, frustration, and deprivation. Yet, with help from a superhuman figure, Susan recovers from the situation, hence experiencing a considerable boost to her identity, leading to the sustenance of servant leadership practice.

### **The Personal Significance of the Research**

My study has placed idealization, rather than the actual practice of servitude in leadership, as the cornerstone of servant leadership, thus disputing the current construction of romantic notions of servant leadership which privilege its [leader] actors as ideal and moral persons who can only bring positive outcomes to the organization as a whole. As with any other idealization, it has both the potential to do good and the potential to do damage. Such idealization is created by subordinates' unconscious expression of the longing for the mother. Hence, my study makes a contribution to the psychoanalytic literature by providing a more nuanced discussion of gendered narcissism and leadership.

By studying servant leadership indirectly through the substance of informal relationships, and by using a psychoanalytic frame of thinking, my study not only presents insights into the extant servant leadership literature and the literature dealing with psychoanalytic approaches to leadership and narcissism, but it also provides a new avenue of inquiry into the phenomenon of servant leadership. Through this study, I hope that servant leadership can gain broader attention from scholars and researchers, who may in turn produce empirical research to further enhance the body of knowledge regarding servant leadership.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

The study is presented in seven chapters. The next chapter will seek to situate servant leadership within a wider 'leadership' context. In particular, the literature review will highlight literature pertinent to servant leadership and a psychoanalytic approach to leadership. Chapter 3 proceeds to establish the design of the research, presenting psychoanalytic research utilizing stories as the material of the research, and also discuss in detail the procedures utilized to achieve the research aim. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 provide critical insight into the intricacies of leader-subordinate relationships. Chapter 4 provides analysis of subordinates' narratives that demonstrate workers' relationships with the leader as attachment to a symbolic mother, which is similar to Greenleaf's (2002) account of servant leadership. In Chapter 5, my findings illustrate how subordinates construct a symbolic family group, in which relationships and leadership are informal. Such groups possess many features that are similar to the characteristics of servant leadership, such as caring, group cohesion and community building, shared decision making and leadership that aim for consensus. While Chapters 4 and 5 are built around interpretation of subordinates' stories and accounts, the emphasis in Chapter 6 is on the leader's own narratives that demonstrate the construction, production, and maintenance of the leader's identity as a servant leader. My final chapter presents the conclusions from the study in terms of its value to the theory of servant leadership in particular, along with some implications for future research and final reflections on the research process.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

Chapter 1 provided a broad overview of the study. In this chapter I look more intensively at the servant leadership and psychoanalytically-informed leadership literatures. I start by establishing the importance of leadership within organization studies, leading to the need for studies that employ critical approaches to leadership. This brings me into a discussion of servant leadership, starting from Greenleaf's version of the idea and how it impacts on, and appeal to, others, including popular authors and consultants. I then examine the scholarship relating to servant leadership, and identify its main issues, weaknesses and limitations. There is, therefore, an opportunity for researchers to incorporate into their work other points of view, which may allow them to explore the complexity and dynamics of servant leadership. One possibility is the use of informal relationship and leadership practices as well as psychoanalysis, a conceptual framework as yet relatively absent in the servant leadership literature. Discussion relating to a psychoanalytic approach to leadership forms a significant section of the latter part of the literature review. This is followed by a brief concluding section that highlights the main themes of the chapter.

#### **Introduction**

Many of the main themes in organizational studies, such as organizational structure, decision-making channels, hierarchical communication, work teams, and cross-departmental collaboration, involve authority and leadership in some way. Indeed, leadership is one of the most prolific and interdisciplinary research domains in the organizational sciences (Grint, 1997; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985), a fact that bears "testimony to its prominence in our collective efforts to understand and improve organizations" (Meindl et al., 1985, p. 78). People seem to view leadership to be important to the success or failure of every organization (e.g. Avolio & Gardner, 2005;

Bass, 1985; House, 1977). Accordingly, the majority of leadership literature accentuates the idea of leadership as something extraordinary, distinct and special in relation to organizational work in general (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Gronn, 1996, Meindl et al., 1985). Contemporary leadership theories frequently describe the leader in ‘great man’ terms: the leader’s qualities, acts, and accomplishments deliver in a way that is positive for people and organizations (Gronn, 1996). The individual leader, who exhibits superhuman characteristics, has been equated to a Messiah who provides the answers for a world that needs saving (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Barker, 1997).

It is not surprising, then, that the leader or leadership theme has captured the popular imagination. Books (e.g. Collins, 2001; Covey, 1990; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) and articles (e.g. Collins, 2005; Goleman, 2000) have attested to the increasing popularity and significance of these themes. One of the dominant ideas in the popular knowledge of leadership is Greenleaf’s (2002, 2003) version of servant leadership. Greenleaf’s description of leader characteristics has much in common with the great man and trait theories: servant leaders, we are told, are altruistic and noble persons, who can create many positive results for organizations and their members.

When cases of leaders’ dysfunctionality at companies like Enron, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen come into view, I were asked to rethink this romanticization of leadership. In fact, Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) contend that the current discussions of leadership “have drawn attention to the need for studies that employ critical approaches to leadership” (cited in Robinson & Kerr, 2009, p. 877). Early examples of such approaches include Kets de Vries and Miller’s (1984) work which exposed the dysfunctional characteristics of top executives—those who have significant neurotic tendencies that influence their managerial behaviour. Other leadership scholars reveal ‘the shadow side’ of charismatic leaders (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Steyrer, 1998), where the leaders are seen as individuals who are driven by their narcissistic wishes and desires (Gabriel, 2005; Kohut, 1971; Maccoby, 2000); who live in a ‘world of mirrors’; and who are ‘highly-self-serving’ in pursuit of ‘grandiose aims’ (Conger & Kanungo, 1998, p 211).

In viewing the inner dysfunctions of leaders, and the relationship of these dysfunctions to behaviours, proponents of a critical approach to leadership have drawn inspiration from a psychoanalytic approach to leadership (Lindholm, 1988; Robinson & Kerr, 2009; Western, 2008). By using insights from psychoanalysis to extend the analytical range of leadership studies, these authors can describe the phenomenon in a richer and more complex way (e.g. Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Gabriel & Schwartz, 1999; Kernberg, 1979, 1998; Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2004, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, 1985; Zaleznik, 1977). These researchers, then, provide a relevant theoretical basis and rich bedrock of research findings that may contribute to the application of psychoanalysis in leadership studies. Yet, some scholars point out those studies of leadership in the psychoanalytic-informed literature undertaken so far are mostly pathological cases (e.g. Kets de Vries, 1989b; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). This may have generally been the case, but, according to Lapierre (1991), a person could also learn about normal or outstanding people or leaders by using the psychoanalytic point of view, in a similar way to Erikson (1958, 1969) who studied the lives of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. These figures, interestingly, were often described in the popular press as good examples of servant leaders. Let me turn now to the servant leadership literature.

### **Greenleaf's Idea about Servant Leadership**

Most of the contemporary writings about servant leadership, to an extent, acknowledge Greenleaf's ideas (1998, 2002, 2003) as the main source. In his essays, Robert K. Greenleaf, a consultant who is re-telling the story of servant leadership in the modern world, describes servant leaders as exemplary individuals who place the good of others first. In this *others-first* model of leadership, Greenleaf emphasizes that leaders are willing to subjugate their desires and interests to the good of the people. This contrasts with the *me-first* model, where leadership or service potentially becomes a means of manipulation that is ultimately focused on serving the leader's interests, not those of subordinates and organizations.

Greenleaf (2002) conceived the idea of servant leadership at a time when he perceived that large organizations occupied by many me-first managers had come to dominate society. He was dissatisfied with these organizations and managers as they were not serving society well at that time. Greenleaf offered his ideas on servant leadership as the 'solution' to 'the problem', by rearticulating and re-packaging servant leadership as the highest form of leadership that works as a symbolic means of coping with the impersonal and bureaucratic forms of organization and its apparatus. However, Andersen (2009) states that the managers' or (formal) leaders' main objective is to serve the organization's (shareholders') goals (i.e. profits) rather than the subordinates' personal interests.

Greenleaf (2002) proposes that service to subordinates is the essence of servant leadership. Servant leaders' acts of service primarily include: supporting, caring, and defending subordinates (Northouse, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Yukl, 2010). First, servant leaders support and facilitate their subordinates to perform and fulfil their tasks as well as encouraging those individuals' career advancement. Second, services involve caring behaviours wherein the leaders attend to individuals' personal needs and accept them for how and what they are. Such behaviours include listening to subordinates, empathizing with them, and actively engaging in their pain and frustration. Finally, servant leaders put in effort to self-sacrificially defend and protect subordinates from threats and challenges of organizational life, hence, helping individuals to feel secure and safe in the workplace (Graham, 1991; Greenleaf, 2002; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Northouse, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Yukl, 2010).

Greenleaf describes servant leaders as exemplary individuals who can generate many positive outcomes to the society. To be so, the servants have to produce qualities that seem counterintuitive to many concepts of leadership. These qualities derive from a desire to serve which, as Greenleaf argues, was inherent in the individual servants. For Greenleaf (2002), the person "is servant first... it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (p. 27). Daft and Lengel (2000) add that, within the person, "the desire to serve others takes precedence over the desire to be in a formal leadership position" (p. 176). Those being served by the leader, it is presumed, would become

"healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 27). As such, tremendous outcomes are assumed to be the result from the leader's act of service; Greenleaf believes that others would consider the individual leader as a great leader. He writes, "The great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (p. 21).

Such a portrayal of a servant leader seems to be a product of Greenleaf's inspiration by, and identification with, many admired servant leaders from many sources. First of all, in his text, Greenleaf discusses the importance of his father in his own development as a servant leader. Greenleaf said that he was close to his father whom he describes as a man who stood tall "as a model of the true servant" (1998, p. 264). On other occasions, Greenleaf reveals his admiration of Leo, the group's informal leader in Herman Hesse's (1956) *Journey to the East*, as "a person of extraordinary presence" as well as "a great and noble leader" (2002, p. 21). The other sources of inspiration provided in the text came from "a close friendship with several great exemplars as servant-leaders" (2002, p. 262), which are Professor Donald John Cowling and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Finally, although he describes himself as not "a pious Christian" (p. 288), Greenleaf shares how he was influenced by Christian tradition, "the one in which I grew up and which has the greatest symbolic meaning to me now" (p. 331). In the chapter titled: *An inward journey*, Greenleaf (2002) frequently cites the Bible as being at least partly the source of his inspiration in writing about servant leadership.

A few writers believe that Greenleaf's idea of servant leadership emerged mainly from the New Testament (Anderson, 2008; Frick, 2004; Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, & Kakabadse, 2002; Yukl, 2010). The retelling of Leo's character in Hesse's novel, Frick (2004) argues, was only an attempt to provide a more inclusive context of servant leadership. As a result, Greenleaf's writings on servant leadership have been widely accepted in Christian circles. Popular books on Christian leadership that focus on servant leadership and are inspired by Greenleaf have been published recently (e.g. Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; De Pree, 1989, 2001). The same also applies to a few scholars who have

investigated servant leadership from a Christian perspective (e.g. Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Wong, 2003).

Nadesan (1999) considers Greenleaf's writings to be the main source of recent construction of an evangelical view of servant-hood in business organizations. Nevertheless, one may argue that what emerges is an essentially idealistic stance towards a potentially thorny theological problem. According to Wells (2004), Greenleaf's model of servant leadership fails to grasp the richness of Jesus' symbolic act of service. Symbolically, servant leadership in Christianity means that it is man's duty to serve God. It refers to obligatory subjection to the will of the master (God) and absolute obedience to His commands. Yet, Greenleaf's model of servant leadership relies greatly on the individual leader's sense of his or her own adequacy. The servant leaders' influence and power are derived neither from a deity nor divine doctrine, but from the leaders' characteristics or qualities. The call to "serve first" also assumes service to others, the people the leader leads. Accordingly, the discourse of servant leadership that mostly developed from Greenleaf's writings, as Wells argues, has moved away from the biblical roots toward a self-generated individualistic ideal. Servant leaders written about are noble, altruist, and self-sacrificial persons, whose serving behaviours can empower subordinates and boost organizational performance. Greenleaf's idea about servant leadership, then, constructs a model of 'the idealistic leader' that is equated to a Messiah – another version, yet a more feminine interpretation of the heroic leader (Eicher-Catt, 2005; Wells, 2004).

### **Popular Literature on Servant Leadership**

Greenleaf's idea about servant leadership has been gaining popularity with many popular authors, particularly in North America. Nevertheless, "much of the literature is problematic in that it is what might be termed 'popular literature' and offers a fairly one-sided positive view of servant leadership" (Cyril, 2006, p. 30). Popular authors (e.g. Autry, 2001; Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; Covey, 1998; De Pree, 2001; Senge, 1995) promote the idea and then encourage business decision-makers to embrace servant leadership for the purpose of enhancing leadership and personal effectiveness. It is

possible to assume that behind these authors' endorsement of servant leadership is the notion that the idea is attractive enough to "sell" to business communities as it includes three big American themes: religion, self-help and management (Director, 1996; Nadesan, 1999). The implication is that, if business decision-makers employ servant leadership as their managerial style, then they can get the whole dream in one package, which is economic success and spiritual salvation (Director, 1996).

Since proponents and advocates seem to be mainly religiously motivated individuals, it is not surprising if their message is full of religious and spiritual content. For example, Stephen Covey is a devout Mormon, who "had already authored a number of books intended primarily for Mormon readers" (Jackson, 1999, p. 373). Covey (1989) frequently quotes the Bible to illustrate the messages he intends to deliver to his readers. For example he cites Psalms 84: 5: "Search your own heart with all diligence for out of it flow the issues of life", to illustrate that personal renewal must work 'inside-out.' Drawing on a range of religious traditions, Senge (1990) uses religious wordings and figurative comparisons, such as 'born-again', Jesus, and Christianity's 'gift of tongues', as well as Buddhist meditation and Islam's 'awakening'.

In endorsing the idea of servant leadership, the popular press also brings to the fore two other main themes – self help and management. The servant leader is described as an 'ideal' person, someone whom we can admire and measure up to. The servant leader presence in the workplace will only bring positive outcomes to the organization and all members. The organization is then "presented as an imagined community, where members and activities are integrated through shared beliefs, mutuality, consensus; where conflict is minimal, the organization is unified and harmonious" (Clark & Salaman, 1998, p. 155).

In their endorsement of servant leadership, these popular authors pay tribute to the idea as 'the best' approach compared to other leadership approaches. Take for example Peter Senge, who states that Greenleaf's servant leadership "is the most singular and useful statement on leadership I've come across" (cited in Greenleaf, 1998, p. 10). This is

because, according to Stephen Covey, Greenleaf's version of servant leadership is "so enormously inspiring, so uplifting, so ennobling" (cited in Greenleaf, 2002, p. 1). However, as might be expected in the face of such hyperbole, Brumback (1999) poses a question: "Could it possibly deserve such hype?" (p. 807).

### *The Symbolic Archetypal Figure of the Servant*

Greenleaf's idea about servant leadership seems have appealed to, and impacted on popular authors such as Covey (2002) and Senge (1998). Probably for these individuals the idea has evoked "the symbolic archetypal figure of the servant" (Horsman, 2001, p. 42). Therefore, it may convey a powerful and meaningful affect. Jaworski (1996), a business consultant, for example, remembered his emotional experience at the time when he was introduced to Greenleaf's idea: "The very notion of servant leadership was absolutely stunning to me, and I couldn't put it out of my mind. It was as if someone had suddenly cleansed my lens of perception" (p. 58).

The impact and appeal of the symbolic archetypal figure of the servant can be found in many societies and cultures all around the world. For Christians, Jesus is the epitome of the archetype of the all-caring servant (Gabriel, 2010; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Christians, in their prayer to Jesus, can identify themselves with Christ as demonstrated by Pope John Paul II, at the time when he was inaugurated as Bishop of Rome: "Make me a servant. Indeed the servant of your servants" (Weigel, 1999, p. 262). Some other religious leaders, such as Buddha and Muhammad, may also serve as the epitome of the servant to their disciples, and the writings of Buddha and the teachings in the Qur'an endorsed servant leadership values (Horsman, 2001; Sendjaya et al., 2008). The archetype of the servant may also be found in many indigenous cultures throughout the world (Spears, 1995). For nuns and many Indian people, Mother Teresa could function as their symbol of the servant.

In short, in telling of servant leadership, Greenleaf invoked the symbolic power of the archetype of the servant, which may explain the appeal and impact of servant-leadership for many people. In the servant leadership model, Greenleaf offers an ideal of certain

leadership characteristics that are similar to the attributes of the archetype of the servant, with which individuals can identify. In their identification with the idea of servant leadership, people are deemed noble and righteous: possessing qualities like selflessness, caring, humility, altruism, and faith. Identification with servant leadership and the servant leader may, for some people, be a kind of religious experience. For people who are attracted to the idea, they may enthusiastically raise servant leadership to an iconic status (Eicher-Catt, 2005).

### **Academic Literature on Servant Leadership**

Greenleaf's version of servant leadership has gained a reception from scholars that is somewhat different to that of popular authors such as Covey (2002) and Senge (1998). Indeed, the majority of scholars tend to be reluctant to embrace the idea (Johnson, 2009; Yukl, 2010). There are reasons for this. First, as the idea is Christianity-laden, scholars in general are less likely to pay attention to its theology related concepts and theories in leadership studies (Northouse, 2003; Yukl, 2006). Second, many scholars note that Greenleaf's descriptions of servant leadership were based on his experience, not derived from robust research (Farling, Stone & Winston, 1999; Reinke, 2004; Van Dierendonck, 2010), a reasonable observation as, in fact, Greenleaf's idea of servant leadership is derived from his reflections on a character in a novel. Greenleaf did not actually conceive the notion of servant leadership in the same way as Bernard Bass (1985) did for transformational and transactional leadership or Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo (1987) for charismatic leadership. Accordingly, servant leadership has not attracted as much approval from leadership scholars as transformational and charismatic leadership (Ciulla, 1995).

It appears that a number of scholars have attempted to remedy the limitation of Greenleaf's conception of servant leadership and aimed to advance its development as a viable theory in the leadership studies (Farling et al., 1999; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2010). A few of them tried to build particular models to identify the attributes of servant leadership (e.g. Farling et al., 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002). Some

other scholars developed the conceptual frameworks of servant leadership and instruments to measure servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Dennis & Winston, 2003; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya, et al., 2008). As the list of key servant leaders' traits, values and behaviours have increased in length, there is no widely agreed definition, model, and measure of servant leadership to date (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Yukl, 2010), demonstrating the concept's lack of a strong theoretical foundation (Northouse, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Winston, 2004).

Moreover, scholars' lack of enthusiasm in responding to servant leadership may also stem from a perception that servant leadership has little to add to the study of leadership (Yukl, 2010). This is because "the potential benefits of servant leadership are similar to those suggested by theories of supportive and empowering leadership, and by theories of spiritual and authentic leadership" (Yukl, 2010, p. 420). In fact, Valeri (2007) claims that James Burns' version of transformational leadership:

encompassed every notable facet of servant leadership in terms of morality. Indeed, it is fair to say, by way of definition, that Burns' explanation is far more detailed, rational and explicit. It is also possible to argue that Burns' higher values, which he associated with self actualization, would include all of Greenleaf's: becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants. (p. 63)

As a response, a few proponents attempted to highlight the uniqueness of servant leadership from other similar theories of leadership, such as charismatic or transformational leadership (e.g. Parolini, Patterson, & Winston, 2009; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Van Dierendonck, 2010). While ideas of both servant leadership and charismatic leadership are rooted in scripture (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), servant leaders have been described as the most moral and socially responsible leaders (Graham, 1991) that "will play a role in the future leadership of the learning organization" (Bass, 2000, p. 33). Polleys (2002) contended that servant leadership is similar to Burn's (1978) transforming leadership. Yet, it is suggested that, while servant leaders' main priority is

developing subordinates in a spiritual culture and stable environment, transformational leaders focus on organizational objectives to build an empowered culture in a dynamic environment (Humphreys, 2005; Parolini et al., 2009; Smith, Montagno & Kuzmenko, 2004; Stone, et al., 2004).

### **Research on Servant Leadership**

There is a growing interest in the study of servant leadership. To date, however, there is little empirical examination relating to its predicted results (Bass, 2000; Northouse, 2010; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Yukl, 2010). In fact, as Yukl (2010) claims, “most of the evidence about effects of servant leadership is from anecdotal accounts and case studies of historical leaders” (p. 421). Notably, there are only a few research studies that have been published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g. Cerit, 2009; Ehrhart, 2004; Joseph & Winston, 2005; Liden et al., 2008; Mayer et al., 2008; Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). Some other empirical support for the effects of servant leadership is derived from research on similar leadership theories such as LMX theory, ethical leadership, and supportive leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2010; Yukl, 2010). More evidence of the efficacy of servant leadership can be found in non peer-reviewed articles, particularly papers from Regent University and PhD dissertations (Van Dierendonck, 2010). In short, there is a compelling case that further empirical research is needed to provide more evidence as to the value of servant leadership (Northouse, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Yukl, 2010).

As research on servant leadership is in its early phase of development, there are many important areas of servant leadership which lack empirical support or are only partially understood. These areas include how a person becomes a servant and how a servant emerges as a leader (Yukl, 2010). Little evidence can be found regarding the context that may facilitate or limit the emergence of a servant leader as well as the production of servant leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Yukl, 2010). There have been few attempts to examine how subordinates identify with a servant leader and then become servant leaders themselves. Little is known about the affective aspects related to the dynamics and the intricacies of servant leader-subordinate relations in organizational life (Andersen, 2009; Eicher-Catt, 2005). Discussion and empirical

exploration of the potential negative effects that may result from the servant leadership process are also still lacking (Eicher-Catt, 2005; Johnson, 2001, 2009; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Whetstone, 2002). Consequently, until more empirical findings have been produced, our understanding of servant leadership will, it seems, remain very limited (Brumback, 1999; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Northouse, 2010; Winston, 2010).

### **Weaknesses and Limitations of Servant Leadership**

In addition to the issues and concerns discussed above, servant leadership has weaknesses and limitations that have been addressed by a number of scholars (Brumback, 1999; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Johnson, 2001, 2009; Northouse, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Whetstone, 2002; Winston, 2010; Yukl, 2010). Criticisms are built around two themes noted in studies of servant leadership, which are: first, the approach to servant leadership is viewed as too idealistic; and second, the research methods utilized in the study of servant leadership to date are mostly built around inadequate assumptions and approaches.

#### *Idealistic View of Servant Leadership*

One of the main limitations observed is that some scholars continue to see servant leadership in lofty terms (Brumback, 1999; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Whetstone, 2010). The servant leaders and subordinates are seen idealistically and they do not appear to have a 'dark' side. For instance, to some extent, the servant leadership idea presumes the existence of individual leaders who are highly moral persons lacking any shortcomings, and thus they appear saintly (Eicher-Catt, 2005; Korac-Kakabadse et al. 2002; Winston, 2004). The servant leaders written about are presented as self-sacrificially attending to the needs of others. Lapp and Carr (2006) write:

being a servant leader means achieving perfection of life and perfection of work by doing more than what is expected now. It means being and doing to achieve results that cannot yet be fathomed but for ends that one has

faith will better society as a whole, later, by serving one person at a time.  
(p. 56)

The servant leadership academic literature also tends to describe subordinates as well as leader-subordinate relationships very positively. Subordinates are presumed to return the servant leaders' service with loyalty and commitment based on mutual love, trust, and respect (Graham, 1991; Northouse; 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2010). Subordinates of servant leaders are predicted to be empowered, thus they will be effective in their tasks, and then go on to become servant leaders themselves for the benefit of the organization as a whole (Graham, 1991; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Yukl, 2010). According to this view, the dynamic relationship between servant leaders and their subordinates could only produce positive leader-subordinate relations in all ways and at all times (Eicher-Catt, 2005). In this way, servant leadership discourse can be understood as a romanticized narrative. Hence, Whetstone (2002) poses a question: "Is servant leadership unrealistically optimistic, 'too good to be true'?" (p. 390).

The servant leadership approach appears only to look at the 'surface' and tends to oversimplify the ambiguity and complexity of human beings and organizational life (Andersen, 2009; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Whetstone, 2002). The reality of organizational life would of course, to a certain extent, contradict its main presumptions. Organizations are complex and none is perfect; therefore, servant leaders are unlikely to be perceived as consistent in dealing with others and will inevitably fail at satisfying everyone's needs and expectations. And subordinates are fickle, as they have their own emotional and relational desires. One may be aware that organizations are full of individuals who pursue power, doing whatever it takes to meet their own needs and interests. Individuals may be more typical of Machiavellian subordinates who relish intrigue, undertake aggressive actions, and create conflicts or situations that may contribute to the leadership derailment (Kets de Vries, 1988). These complexities, then, can create frustrations, disappointment and deprivation both for servant leaders and subordinates as well as for the organization as a whole. Yet, such a view is hardly found in the servant leadership literature.

It is likely that the literature on servant leadership echoes Greenleaf's construction of the idea. In his writings, Greenleaf interprets Hesse's (1956) novel in such a way that, without the presence of the ideal servant leader (Leo), success is unlikely. While Leo did 'disappear' from the group, Greenleaf does not provide anything other than a positive explanation for this. One then may ask: if Leo is the ideal servant leader and the test of servant leadership is that those helped grow as persons, becoming more autonomous, wiser, freer, and healthier, did Leo's disappearance negate this test? Greenleaf's version and current construction of servant leadership, it could be argued, do not allow for its complexity and potential drawbacks. It may thus be seen that the idea only provides a very minimal description of 'what is servant leadership' (Brumback, 1999; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Whetstone, 2002). With this in view, Winston (2010), one of the main proponents of servant leadership, notes, "with all that we know today about servant leadership, I do not believe that we really 'know' servant leadership" (p. 180).

#### *Inadequate Approaches Used in the Research Method*

Another important theme of limitations noted in the literature is that most research on servant leadership appears to build on inadequate approaches to studying the phenomenon. Three main approaches are observed.

First, while studies of charismatic and transformational leadership are often deployed in business corporations (Conger, 2010; Diaz-Saenz, 2010), research on servant leadership has largely neglected that context as a site of study. Most researchers instead choose to study servant leadership in higher education and religious institutions (e.g. Cerit, 2009; Hale & Fields, 2007; Joseph & Winston, 2005; Winston, 2004). Whilst not inappropriate, it is certainly inadequate to access 'servant leaders' only from these organizations. As serving others is the nature of these organizations' task and their mission is frequently closely aligned with developing people, it is therefore likely to be difficult to differentiate the 'real' servant leaders from the 'pseudo' ones in such contexts. It will be tricky to recognize whether the participants of a study carried out in universities or churches are the type of leader whose desire to serve others is built inherently in their character or

whether their serving behaviours only function as a means to gain adoration from or even to manipulate others.

Probably, the main reason why scholars prefer to use not-for-profit organizations as the site of study is because they find it very difficult to locate corporations that practice (idealistic) servant leadership. Most business decision-makers see the idea of servant leadership as “totally radical and counter-cultural” (Anderson, 2008, p. 2). For instance, the general opinion of business decision-makers about what being a leader entails is that they are served by others, not serving others. Servant leadership may also be seen as counter-productive to the principle of short-run profit maximization: servant leadership may be good for subordinates, but the idea clashes with the concept of organizational efficiency (Andersen, 2009; Anderson, 2008; Giampetro-Mayer et al., 1998; Yukl, 2010). Certain circumstances, such as corporate downsizing, and certain organizational contexts such as prison administration, are deemed inappropriate for servant leadership (Johnson, 2001; Whetstone, 2002; Yukl, 2010). In fact, individuals who embrace servant leadership as their managerial style may be deemed ‘soft’ or even ‘weak’ as managers (Van Dierendonck, 2010; Whetstone, 2002). This is because aspects of servant leadership, such as empathy, stewardship, and community-building are aligned with the stereotypical ‘soft’ women managers (Eicher-Catt, 2005). Managers dislike being viewed as ‘weak’ leaders as it also implies facing a higher risk of being manipulated by strong subordinates (Van Dierendonck, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that “managers and executives have strongly resisted Greenleaf’s ideas – rejecting them as impractical” (DiStefano, 1995, p. 67).

Some managers and organizations may claim that they have implemented servant leadership in their business practices, but Boje (2008) questions whose interests its application may serve. This is because servant leadership can be “used instrumentally as a way to motivate employees to higher levels of identification and commitment... in order to boost performance” (p. 160). Accordingly, the production of servant leadership in the workplace raises concerns about the ethics of those corporations that endorse it. For example:

Servant leadership [was] hailed by Wal-Mart in its 1993, 1994, and 2002 annual reports....[However], in the 2002 Wal-Mart Annual Report, the claim of Servant Leadership appears hypocritical, made in a year of record class action lawsuits against the corporation for various unethical practices. (Boje, 2008, p. 175)

Thus, managers' and organizations' apparent inability or perhaps reluctance to convert the concept of servant leadership into practice generates a consequence for researchers. The list of self reported servant-led corporations exemplified in the literature is limited to a few companies (e.g. Southwest Airline, Synovus Financial, TDI Industries, and Toro) whose names recur in accounts of servant leadership. As the idea has rarely been applied in the business sector, most researchers may prefer not to look at business corporations, but rather look to not-for-profit organizations as the site of study.

Second, while there are very few studies that employ for-profit organizations as the context of the study (e.g. Ehrhart, 2004; Melchar & Bosco, 2010), most of this research (and servant leadership research in general) focuses attention on formal or designated managers in organizations as the study participants (e.g. Cerit, 2009; Ehrhart, 2004; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Washington, Sutton, & Field, 2006). Similar to the argument highlighted in the first point above, I argue that such an approach is improper to use in a study of servant leadership as it will be difficult for researchers to understand and be aware of the hidden motives of formal leaders, when they serve others. There are some formal leaders who might serve others authentically and yet, many of them are typical of what Greenleaf called leaders "who later served out of promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations" (2002, p. 28). Greenleaf claims that they may serve subordinates but they were not servants, since such actions occurred merely in an effort to gain others' adoration (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Perhaps these managers might have also taken advantage of others, by expecting them to return acts of service (Stone et al., 2004). It is more common now to meet a practitioner or manager who declares his or her own managerial style to be that of a servant leader, albeit the person might perform a

different role, remaining in charge and displaying authoritarian tendencies. In fact, most formal leaders are me-first leaders, not others-first. These leaders may have a strong desire to 'use others' as a way to serve their own personal interests (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). It is not impossible that they were appointed to managerial positions as an outcome of participating in political intrigues and being manipulative, at the cost of others, rather than out of the least desire or motive to attend to subordinates' needs and interests. In sum, it appears inappropriate to assume that one can study servant leadership from the behaviours of formal leaders, particularly in the workplaces.

Third, the vast majority of research in servant leadership has been conducted through quantitatively-based surveys that largely concentrate upon the servant leader's traits, values and behaviours as the main causes of predicted subordinates' attitudes and behaviours (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Dennis & Winston, 2003; Sendjaya et al., 2008). Many scholars (Beyer, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Ford, Harding, & Learnmonth, 2008) suggest that this approach of inquiring into leadership tends to be limited in its scope; it could not provide a 'thick' description of the studied phenomenon. It is unlikely that researchers could explore the intricacies of leader-subordinate relations via survey-type studies. The same case applies if researchers attempt to explicate the complexity of the context that influenced the production of servant leadership.

### **Conclusion on the Academic Literature on Servant Leadership**

Greenleaf's version of servant leadership has received attention within and outside the academic domain; however, it has not met with universal approval (Andersen, 2009; DiStefano, 1995; Johnson, 2009; Yukl, 2010). There is a growing interest in the study of servant leadership, yet, its development in the field of leadership studies has been a slow process. There are two main reasons that to a certain extent might have hindered the advancement of the study of servant leadership: first, its idealistic view that highly simplified the complexity of organizational life and the dynamics of human beings; second, the inappropriate approaches used in the research method. Therefore, in order to advance its development through studies of leadership, Whetstone (2002) suggests that

“Servant leadership does require a paradigm shift” (p. 389). Such a paradigm shift is required to include a conceptual framework that takes into consideration the complex and dynamic views of human beings as well as a new way of approaching ‘where to find the practice of servant leadership.’ The former is suggested by the psychodynamic frame of thinking, which is a body of theory that provides the most coherent and complete model of human motivation and its manifestations (Gabriel, 1999; Kets de Vries, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985, Lindholm, 1988). The latter is offered by the substance of informal leadership and relationships (Greenleaf, 2002). In the following sections, I first discuss the importance of studying servant leadership through the informal system, and I then follow this with a discussion about the psychoanalytic approach to leadership.

### **The Substances of Informal Relationships and Leadership Offer a Valuable way of Studying Servant Leadership**

Greenleaf (2002) believes that servant leadership is more likely to operate in the informal relationships and leadership domain of organizations. This is because, as Greenleaf argues, informal leadership reflects the principle of *primus inter pares* – first amongst equals. It was this leadership amongst peers that Greenleaf highly recommended to be put into practice in for-profit organizations, if people wanted to serve others effectively. In fact, as earlier mentioned, an informal leader featured in Herman Hesse’s (1956) story, *Journey to the East*, inspired Greenleaf (2002) to conceive the notion of servant leadership. In addition, Greenleaf believes that the informal relationships establish the kind of environment where servant leadership can flourish. The informal structure, Greenleaf argues, can hold “the formal structure together and makes it function well” (2002, p. 73), and this is why it responds more to servant leadership.

Consistent with some of the established notions of servant leadership, informal leaders emerge as leaders, in some part, because they serve others’ needs (Mann, 1959; Pescosolido, 2001; Smart, 2005). Indeed, having a natural desire to help others appears to be one of the key characteristics of informal leaders. Smart (2005) found informal leaders were not motivated by the need for recognition. Instead, they took the initiative, based on a strong desire, to help others, even when nobody had seen their actions. As the outcome

of this sincere service, they created their own personal influence (Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Yammarino, 1996) and relationship power (Graham, 1991). This influence and power may lead them to become their group's or organization's role model, and then, over time, they emerge as leader (Greenleaf, 2002; Yukl, 2006). As Neubert and Taggar (2004) argue, individuals who offer support and recognition to others in their informal relations can enhance their power and are likely to be accepted as leaders, since supportiveness is considered as a characteristic of leadership. Of course there are other pathways for a person to become the informal leader, but trying to satisfy the needs of others is the most common pattern of the informal leader's emergence. One such path is having a certain role in a group or displaying an outstanding characteristic such as intelligence that helps the group meet its objectives (Mann, 1959). However, Kelleth, Humphrey, and Sleeth (2002) found in their empirical research that it was more likely for individuals to emerge as leaders if they listened and were sensitive to others' voices, rather than having a particular ability or mental capacity.

To conclude, utilizing the substances of informal relationships and leadership could help researchers to investigate and comprehend the dynamics of servant leadership, by bridging the gap between the servant leadership concept and application – particularly in business corporations. The informal system and structure is the domain where relationships that are close, warm and personal are more important than those that are rational, objective and impersonal. It is the place where individuals can show their affectionate feelings, concern, and support toward others. Individuals may also share in the decision making process, and thus contribute to the leadership process and community building. In other words, the informal system is the realm and domain where servant leadership is operated and produced; hence, it offers an effective way of studying servant leadership. After briefly discussing the importance of the informal system to the study of servant leadership, I now turn to the psychoanalytic approach to leadership, a framework that could help me unravel the complexities and intricacies of servant leadership.

## Psychoanalytic Approach to Leadership

### Servant Leadership and Psychoanalysis

A servant leadership approach is less rational than it is emotive and idealistic. It emphasizes the paradox of super-ordinates that 'serve' their subordinates. Such 'irrationality' in the approach to leadership needs to be explicated by a rationale in order to help us better understand what servant leadership is really about. Therefore, in studying servant leadership, researchers need to go deeper than the observable behaviour and motivation. Investigating and comprehending servant leaders' and subordinates' unobserved desires and motivations can be useful to unravel the 'logic' of the 'irrationality' of servant leadership. To be able to do so, I need to turn to psychoanalysis, the science of unknowable motivation and emotion.

One could claim that psychoanalysis, or a psychoanalytic approach, resonates and adds substance to servant leadership. In some parts of his writings on servant leadership, Greenleaf (1998, 2002) mentions the words 'unconscious' and 'psychoanalysis' several times. For example, Greenleaf notes that "every mind, at the unconscious level, has access to every "bit" of information that is or ever was" (2002, p. 36). Greenleaf also writes: "Afterward I speculated on whether there were some deep Freudian implications in the frequent use of the word *real* in referring to the nonacademic world" (2002, p. 212). In addition, there are writings in the psychodynamic literature that concur with Greenleaf's notion of the servant leader, such as Erik Erikson's concept of the *Generative Man* (Browning, 1973). Moore and Gillette (1992) also discuss the notion of servant leadership, using the Jungian archetype. These works, then, suggest that psychoanalysis may represent a potent means by which researchers can explicate servant leadership in a deeper and more dynamic way.

## **The Unconscious**

Psychoanalysis primarily talks about the concept of *unconscious*. It was Sigmund Freud who investigated and explicated the importance of the human unconscious. Freud (1933) then established psychoanalysis “as a specialist science, a branch of psychology – a depth-psychology or psychology of the unconscious” (p. 193). The unconscious mind is not a spiritual entity, it is something normal, ordered and subject to normal scientific enquiry (Gabriel, 1999b). Gabriel notes that Freud “rejected intuition, divination and revelation as sources of knowledge of the unconscious, proposing instead a system of analytic interpretations and constructions for accessing and exploring the unconscious” (1999b, p. 5).

There is an important assumption in psychoanalysis that the human unconscious has a determining and motivating influence on our conscious thoughts, on our emotions, and on our actions. At times, we are unaware of what we are doing. What we are consciously aware of is merely the tip of an iceberg: many of our feelings and thoughts are hidden and inaccessible (Gabriel, 1999b). Indeed, the unconscious is often manufactured by painful or even traumatic experiences as well as forbidden repressed desires. As a result, “we all have a dark side – a side that we don’t know (and don’t want to know)” (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010, p. 383). Human unconscious is also the product of the individual’s fantasies; hence, it can become the foundation of an individual’s creative works, artistic pursuits, and ambitious visions (Gabriel, 1999b, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984).

Psychoanalysis also emphasizes the interplay between the past and the present. The development of the human psyche is significantly influenced by our early (and later) relations with significant others, such as parents, friends, teachers. These relations make a strong imprint on our ‘inner world’; therefore, they will affect our present and future relationship with others (Gabriel, 1997, 1999b; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010; Oglensky, 1995). Certain behaviour patterns learned from childhood are often replicated, influencing our social life and shaping our life-scripts until the day we die.

### **Freud on Leadership**

Freud himself utilized psychoanalysis concepts and theories not only in a clinical context, but also to comprehend other phenomena in wider social contexts, such as group, religion, and society (Gabriel, 1999b; Gould, 1991; Kets de Vries, 1991). The theme of leadership, in particular, is scattered throughout Freud's writings but only investigated fully in 'Group psychology and the analysis of the ego' (Freud, 1921). Freud uses the structured organizations of the army and the Church as examples to explore leader-subordinate relations within groups. Freud found that such relations are emotionally tied by love, which is the reciprocal love between the leader (Christ, the Commander-in-Chief) and subordinates as well as the love among subordinates themselves. Subordinates believe that they are loved equally and will be treated justly by the leader (Czander, 1993; Freud, 1921; Gabriel, 2010).

Freud (1921) posited that subordinates' collective identification with and idealization of the leader are the foundation of leadership, members' shared emotional experience, and group's cohesiveness. Leadership is instituted when subordinates project part of their ego onto the idealized leader and also incorporate the leader and his or her love and admired qualities into their own ego-ideal. Shared emotional experience is established via subordinates' identification with the leader and then with one another. Each subordinate then 'gives up' his or her uniqueness and individuality in order to maintain the group's cohesiveness and harmony (Czander, 1993; Elmes & Gemmill, 1990; Freud, 1921; Gabriel, 2010).

Of course, for Freud, identification was always entwined with the complex oedipal relations between the child and mother and the father, and consequently identification was likely to be unstable and contradictory. Identification, as with any love relationship, could involve individuals' ambivalence, desires of dependency and control, hence, "it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal" (Freud, 1921, p. 61). So while subordinates' identification with the leader may provide a sense of security and identity, such identifications are likely to be fragile and have the

potential to switch to disappointment, frustration, and hatred (Gabriel & Schwartz, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004; Oglensky, 1995).

Who is this leader? Freud proposes that “the needs of the group carry it half-way to meet the leader, yet he too must fit in with it in his personal qualities” (1921, p. 81). First, there is a need for a leader who can fulfil group members’ emotional functioning. Second, Freud also put an emphasis on the importance of the personal attributes, dispositions, and characteristics of the person who can become the leader. Yet, Freud then adds that such a person “need only give an impression of greater force” (p. 129) in order for him or her to emerge as the group’s leader. Thus, for Freud, to be a leader is not only the result of the competence or skills, but it is also about managing subordinates’ perceptions. Indeed, the latter may play a more vital role than the former in the leader’s emergence. The individual leader may not be extraordinary or perfect, but it is the subordinates’ idealization that causes him or her to be viewed by others as extraordinary (Gabriel, 1997, 1999b; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). The person must be endowed with exceptional attributes, as Gabriel (1999b) argues, because only then can the group’s members see him or her as the ‘real’ leader, accepted and legitimated.

### **Psychoanalytic Insights into Leadership**

Psychoanalytic-informed studies can help us better understand the phenomenon of leadership. Inspired by Freud, many scholars attempt to examine and comprehend leadership from a psychoanalysis point of view, in particular they aim to explicate certain dynamics, dilemmas and complex emotional attachments associated with leadership (Erikson, 1958, 1969; Gabriel, 1997, 1999b, 2010; Kernberg, 1979, 1998; Kets de Vries, 1988, 1989a, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, 1985; Zaleznik, 1977; Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1975). These scholars, aligned with Freud, do not view leadership as merely a product of leaders’ personal qualities, but also a product of related aspects such as the subordinates’ dynamics as well as the complexity and intricacy of leader-subordinate relations (Diamond, 1993, Gabriel, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2004; Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995).

### *Leaders and Narcissism*

Narcissism has been extensively utilized in psychoanalytic approaches to leadership, particularly in relation to leaders' identity and behaviour in organizations (e.g. Brown, 1997; Gabriel, 1999b; Kernberg, 1979, 1998; Kets de Vries, 1995, 2004, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, 1985; Kohut, 1971). These studies have made their mark in elucidating how narcissism is an essential element of the personal identity of leaders. Kets de Vries (2004) claims that narcissism "lies at the heart of leadership" (p. 188). Kernberg (1979) explains, "narcissistic personalities are often driven by intense needs for power and prestige to assume positions of authority and leadership, individuals with such characteristics are found rather frequently in top leadership positions" (p. 33). Similarly, Kohut (1971) posits that "certain types of narcissistically fixated personalities with their apparently absolute self-confidence and certainty lend themselves specifically to this role" (p. 316).

The term narcissism was conceived by Freud (1914) from the Greek myth of Narcissus. It is a term used in psychoanalysis in general to refer to an obsession with self, and with self-preservation (Gabriel, 1999b; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). Psychoanalytic insights into leadership often suggest that narcissism is located in the leaders' ego-ideal (Gabriel, 1999b; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). For Freud (1933), ego-ideal is a fantasy about ourselves in which we portray the type of individual that we aspire to become. Ego-ideal is the representation of the person's primal narcissism, and later is constructed through the process of identification and re-identification with significant others, most notably with the parents (Carr, 1998; Chassequet-Smirgel, 1976; Freud, 1914). Our ego-ideal then characterizes our idealized pictures for accomplishment and greatness that can make other people love and admire us (Brown, 1997; Gabriel, 1999b). Albeit it will be extremely difficult to attain to that ideal state, obeying the dictates of our narcissistic ego-ideal can provide satisfaction and secure our sense of identity (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008).

A certain amount of narcissism is important to maintain a healthy sense of our identity. Gabriel (1999b) suggests that a healthy form of narcissism is shown in individuals who can mix self-respect with the capability to express their energy and interest onto objects

of the world. For leaders, narcissism often serves as the individual's driving force to climb the leadership ladder. The quality and intensity of leaders' narcissistic behaviours are vital in their leadership success (Kets de Vries, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985). Maccoby (2000), for example, observes that narcissistic leaders are "gifted and creative strategists who see the big picture and find meaning in the risky challenge of changing the world and leaving behind a legacy" (p. 70). In a similar vein, Kets de Vries (2004, 2006) believes that narcissism offers leaders a foundation for conviction about the righteousness of their cause. The strength of their conviction and identity becomes the source for their subordinates to identify with, and hold on to, which in turn may help the sustenance of leadership (Cluley, 2008; Kets de Vries, 2006).

Psychoanalytic approaches to leadership have also shown us that leaders often exhibit excessive and unhealthy forms of narcissism. Such cases apply when narcissism is not a source for the achievement of high aims, but rather when it feeds on leaders' fantasy of admiration and image (Gabriel, 1999b, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2006). Pullen and Rhodes (2008) describe these leaders as a type of person who has a "gaping abyss between the loved image of the self as beautiful and potent, and the collapse of this image in the eyes of other people" (p. 6). As expected, the result can be highly damaging to leaders as well as to the organization as a whole (Gabriel, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2004, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984).

It is obvious that male-associated narcissistic characteristics are a dominant theme in the psychoanalytic insight into leadership (Ford et al., 2008; Kets de Vries, 1999; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). Masculine attributes such as being self-oriented, rational, dominant, and assertive have been generally applied as the characteristics of leaders across an organization (Lowe, Mills, & Mullen, 2002). In doing so, the linkage between narcissism and gender has been overlooked. However, in an empirical study of the influence of gender differences on leaders' narcissism, Pullen and Rhodes (2008) found four types narcissistic leaders, which are:

the bully, the star performer, the servant, and the victim. While each of these forms is narcissistic in that identity is associated with the defence of a grandiose self-image (ego ideal) through the admiration of others and the love of the self, they achieve this in markedly different, and gendered, ways. (p. 5)

The authors demonstrated that the two feminine types (the servant and the victim) of leaders managed their narcissistic tendencies through the voice of other organizational members. While they were less likely to show aggressiveness toward others, they promoted their narcissism through relations with and to be loved by others. This finding, then, allows us to better understand and comprehend leaders' narcissistic tendencies and behaviours, as it extends the traditional view of leaders' narcissism in the study of leadership.

Introducing feminine narcissistic tendencies and behaviours to leadership means we add another dimension to the leadership world: leaders as managers of emotions (Gabriel, 2010; Lowe et al., 2002). Far from a masculine way of doing leadership, feminine types of leaders underline the intimate, close and warm nature of leader-subordinate relations. In the leadership process, the individual leader forms strong emotional attachments with subordinates, taking subordinates' emotional pulse, stimulating some of those emotions, and driving subordinates to utilize those emotions for collective action (Gabriel, 2010). This leader may also function as subordinates' safety shelter that can contain, absorb or deflect their anxieties and their associated feelings such as fears or anger triggered by threats and dangers in organizational life. In this way, the leader may "make conscious what lies unconscious among followers" (Burns, 1978, p. 40); therefore, together both leader and subordinates can liberate enormous amounts of emotional energy, which can be essential to the realization of leader and subordinates' shared vision (Burns, 1978; Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010).

### *Subordinates and Transference*

In the study of leadership, psychoanalysis informed-scholars take the position that subordinates, like leaders, are neither neutral ‘blank screens’ nor ‘one dimensional’ individuals. They do not merely automatically and uniformly respond to leaders’ behaviours, but rather, they are interactive figures, who have their own emotional and relational desires and wishes (Gabriel, 1997; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010; Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995; Zaleznik, 1965). These studies are aligned with psychoanalysis study in general that highlights the complexity of individuals’ psyche – a territory that involves emotions and desires such as conflict, sexuality, envy, fantasy, aggression, ambition, fear and so forth (Gabriel, 1999, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2006; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010).

Psychoanalytic-informed studies about subordinates have made some notable contributions to understanding individuals’ complex emotional attachments to their leaders (e.g. Baum, 1987; Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Hirschhorn, 1988; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2010; Krantz, 1993; Oglensky, 1995). In doing so, these studies have explored and comprehended the form of emotional desires subordinates look for from their leaders and how they enact that within a particular context. Some scholars investigated the influence of individual’s early experiences with caregivers on their patterns of relationship with a leader in their dyadic attachment (e.g. Baum, 1987; Kets de Vries, 1988; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Krantz, 1993; Zaleznik, 1965). Other scholars highlight the intricacies and contradictions of leader-subordinate relationships in small groups (e.g. Diamond, 1991; Hirschhorn, 1988, 1990; Jaques, 1974; Menzies Lyth, 1960). A few other scholars explored the interaction between certain features and functions of bureaucratic organizations and individuals’ emotional reactions to and utilization of these (e.g. Baum, 1991; Gabriel, 1991, 1993, 1995; Schwartz, 1985).

Most of these studies share the view that subordinates’ emotional ties to the leader cannot be understood apart from their relations with their primary caregivers (most notably with mothers and fathers) as the original authority figures. As Gabriel (1997) argues, “these early relations provide a core of primal political experiences which will forever color our

subsequent relations with authority” (p. 338). Such redirection of unconscious emotions, images, thoughts and experiences that a person had with his or her parents, onto present day figures, such as leaders, is known as transference.

The concept of transference is introduced by Freud (1963) and is commonly used in psychology and psychotherapy. Freud noticed that, during therapy sessions, patients were unconsciously redirecting the feelings, fantasies, and reactions they had toward parental figures in their early lives onto him. Many authors argue that transference is now assumed to be an important feature of most social relationships, including in leader-subordinate interactions (e.g. Gabriel, 1999b; 2010; Kets de Vries, 2004; Lindholm, 1988, Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). In the leadership process, “transference reactions can be acted out in different ways and affect both leaders and followers” (Kets de Vries, 1988, p. 271). In one situation, in the transference process, subordinates may see their leaders as possessing the same superhuman qualities or attributes with which they once endowed parents in their childhood. Such positive transference may yield good team work and productivity. Yet, in another situation, transference may evoke individuals’ emotional conflict with their parents; hence, it can hinder the development of their trust and intimacy with the leaders. The transference dynamics, then, add richness to leader-subordinate relationships (Maccoby, 2004; Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2004, 2006; Oglensky, 1995).

The construction of leaders as subordinates’ symbolic parents through the illusion of transference has been well documented in the psychoanalytic literature of leadership (Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Hodgson, Levinson & Zaleznik, 1965; Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). Empirically, Hodgson et al. (1965) found that subordinates’ fantasy of a leader can be constructed in one of these images: paternal, maternal, and fraternal. This finding receives some support from Gabriel’s (1997) study of subordinates’ fantasies via the substances of stories. Gabriel observes that subordinates enact different fantasies about their leaders, which could briefly be presented as: (i) caring or indifference, (ii) accessibility or distance, (iii) omnipotence or fallibility, and (iv) legitimacy or imposition. Based on these four fantasies, Gabriel summarizes:

The leader may be seen as a reincarnation of the primal mother, restoring the members' narcissism and rewarding them for who they are rather than for what they have achieved. Alternatively, the leader may be envisioned more closely to the Freudian image of father figure, who rewards and punishes, arousing at once fear, loyalty, jealousy, suspicion. (1997, p. 315)

Subordinates' fantasy of the leader as the father surrogate has been widely discussed in the psychoanalytic study of leadership, especially after the publication of Sigmund Freud's *Group psychology and the analysis of the Ego* (Gabriel, 1997). In Freud's theory of leadership, "the leader is essentially the external embodiment of the superego, enforcing social values and controlling the follower's aggressive and sexual impulses" (1921, p. 88). Subordinates' relations with the leader are a manifestation of a projected expression of the longing for the father. This fantasy according to Gabriel "is one of the commonest, if not the commonest fantasy about leaders" (1997, p. 330).

Subordinates' maternal transference to their leader is rarely discussed in the literature, yet a few scholars (e.g. Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Hodgson et al., 1965; Maccoby, 2004) have recognized the value and distinctiveness of that form of transference. The maternal transference differs from paternal transference in that it usually draws on an earlier period of childhood relationship (Maccoby, 2004): the symbolic mother is the mother of primal narcissism. In the maternal fantasy, the leader is viewed as a personification of the good mother, who restores subordinates' narcissism as she respects and accepts them for how and what they are (Gabriel, 1997). The symbolic-mother leaders are the persons that the subordinates feel closest to and most comfortable with. They are figures who neither reprimand nor judge, but provide: they provide their time, wisdom and affection to subordinates. Caring is the main theme found in subordinates' narratives about the symbolic mother leaders (Gabriel, 1997; Maccoby, 2004).

The idea of leader as a symbolic mother actually is not a new theme in the psychoanalytic literature in general. Many authors in the group psychotherapy literature claim that

individuals in their social world, particularly in a group life, fantasize leaders not only as a father figure but also a symbolic mother (Prodgers, 1990; Rosenthal, 1991; Schindler, 1951, 1966). For instance, Schindler (1951) writes, “every family is a group and every group is built on the pattern of a family... The various group members are the brothers and sisters: the group leader, if a man, appears to be the father; while the group as a whole assumes the role of the mother” (p. 10). The author then adds that such transferences may be reversed; that is, the group could be fantasized as father substitute, and the leader as the symbolic mother, whether the leader is a male or a female. In a similar vein, Spotnitz (1961) states, “those group members who relate to me throughout as their father or their mother may transfer their feelings for the other parent onto the group as a whole” (p. 6). Further, Durkin (1989) observes that the leader (therapist) is often idealized and fantasized as the nurturing and life giving mother. Thus, it appears that the idea of symbolic mother leaders has been widely discussed in group psychotherapy literature; however, the idea is only touched on in the psychoanalytic approach to leadership (Gabriel, 1997).

#### *The Influence of Idealization, Projection, and Mirroring in the Leader-Subordinate Relationships*

After discussing the leaders and subordinates individually, now I discuss the complex emotional attachment of leaders and subordinates. The psychoanalytic insight into leadership has shown the importance of idealization, projection, and mirroring in investigating and comprehending the intricacy and dynamism of leader-subordinate relationships (Czander, 1993; Diamond, 1993; Gabriel, 1999b; Kets de Vries, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 2004, 2006; Lindholm, 1988; Shamir, 1991).

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory I regard idealization as a human tendency or unconscious mental mechanism that exaggerates or overvalues some object or part of reality (Laughlin, 1970). The idealization of an object or idea, for example, might involve the subject’s attribution of valued characteristics to the object and an effort to ‘forget’ its multiple and perhaps less appealing features. According to Kets de Vries (2004), idealization is a universal mental phenomenon. Essentially, idealization is “a lingering

striving to recover a state of lost perfection” (Kets de Vries, 1988, p. 271). The contention of lost narcissism originates from the time when, at an early age, illusions of total self-sufficiency and satisfaction pave way for the infant’s awareness of dependence and a state of insignificance. As a means to dispel the state of insignificance and powerlessness, as Kohut (1971) argues, the infant fantasizes a state of oneness with an all-powerful and ideal object. Kohut believes that this childhood fantasy is retained during the lifetime. An image of the omnipotence of early caregivers lives on. Although, at one level of consciousness, people are aware of the futility, some individuals may attempt throughout their lives to recapture this sense of omnipotence, bliss and perfection they experienced in childhood. The fantasy can be fulfilled by projecting onto the admired person, certain ideal qualities. To be able to identify with this ideal object is a way for the individuals to affirm their worthiness and help boost their self esteem and confidence (Kets de Vries, 1988). Of course, as we mature and develop other mental apparatus (e.g. our super-ego), we become more aware of the futility of the pursuit of our own ideals and the tendency to idealization. Nevertheless, we remain always susceptible – particularly in times of crisis – to the seductive power of idealization that promises to secure our identities and perhaps offer a sense of omnipotence and perfection.

Psychoanalytically informed leadership literature recognizes that leader-subordinate relations involve degrees of idealization and narcissism (Brown, 1997; Cluley, 2008; Gabriel, 1997; 1999b; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985; Post, 1986; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). Subordinates, for example, in their idealization transference, may look to leaders as expressions of certain ideals which provide security and support; while leaders may find that their ideals are confirmed through the attention of admiring others (Kets de Vries, 1988; Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995).

What plays a central part in making subordinates so inclined to idealizing a leader is the process of projection (Kets de Vries, 1988). In the dictionary of psychoanalysis, Rycroft (1995) defines projection as “the process in which specific impulses, wishes, aspects of the self or internal objects are imagined to be located in some object external to oneself” (p. 139). Popper and Zakkai (1994) elaborate this by claiming that projection not only

describes an individual's defence mechanism against his or her unwanted qualities, but it also works as a channel for the individual to express the ideas and wishes they cannot attain in reality, hence, he or she projects them on to the admired others such as leaders.

In organizational life, the dynamics of idealization and projection are more likely to be enacted during difficult times (Kets de Vries, 1988; Maccoby, 2004). In those situations, individuals tend to be driven by irrational emotions as they experience a sense of lack of control, ambiguity, and increased dependency needs. Subordinates then look to a leader to understand and deal with the phenomena that cannot be explained. In other words, subordinates seek protection, comfort, love, and adoration from this admired individual (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Kets de Vries, 1988; Maccoby, 2004). In this way, the leader is the subordinates' projected being as the person who serves as a prime outlet for a subordinate's projection process (Kets de Vries, 1988; Oglensky, 1995); and if at some point, a group is leaderless, then the group members are more likely to 'create' such an individual (Bion, 1959). Through the projection process, the leader becomes the 'container' of subordinates' anxieties and feelings of fear and powerlessness, and also subordinates' ideal target, assuming the responsibility of all the problems in the workplace (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Kets de Vries, 1988). When the leader contains and mirrors subordinates' projection materials, then, it can help subordinates attain or regain a sense of control over their environment (Gemmill, 1986; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Kets de Vries, 1988). In their identification with the leader, subordinates experience a sense of security and comfort and receive a considerable boost to their self-esteem (Kets de Vries, 1988; Popper & Zakkai, 1994). The result is that often subordinates endow the person with the same superhuman qualities that once they attributed to their parents in their early lives, thus, seeing the leader through the lens of idealization (Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004).

Idealization potentially can bring benefits, both to the subordinates and other organization members. Provided that there is a continuation of good and nurturing relationship where the subordinate's self-esteem is affirmed, then the individual subordinate will be able to build up a healthy sense of self (Kohut, 1971). It is thus not surprising to see subordinates

willing to do their very best to please the leader. Subordinates may generate their commitment and even a sense of duty to emulate the leader and then maintain the tradition that he or she started, which is reinforcing the group's values – subordinates start to identify with each other based on their identification with the leader. Collective effort and group cohesion are the result (Czander, 1993; Freud, 1921; Gabriel, 1999b, 2010; Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2004; Oglensky, 1995).

Leaders will gain benefits, at least for a while, from subordinates' idealization. Of course a relationship with subordinates who admire, respect, and at times ingratiate themselves can be very satisfying (Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2004). Indeed, through subordinates' idealization leaders can experience a sense of powerfulness and self-aggrandizement. Hence, subordinates may become an important source of promoting leaders' ego-ideal as they serve as the foundation of leaders' narcissism (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). As a consequence, there exists a state of mutual idealization, whereby leaders and subordinates are understood to admire each other (Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2004).

In idealizing subordinates, leaders often mirror individuals' desires and expectations. The notion of mirroring was introduced by Kohut (1971), originally to illustrate the response of parents as they actively and positively respond to the infant's acts. In leader-subordinate relationships, a leader often sensitively mirrors to subordinates narcissistic needs for self-confirmation from and merger with an idealized figure. In the mirroring process, this leader then is more likely to see him- or herself as he or she is perceived by the subordinates and to feel he or she needs to act to match what is projected and expected by the subordinates. The dynamic of this process can be collusive; particularly when subordinates are keen to make the leader the mirror of what they expect and fantasize to see, and the leader does not mind being their mirror as he or she finds that being the object of subordinates' admiration brings so much pleasure. As a consequence, a community of mutual admiration between leader and subordinates is created (Czander, 1993, Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2004).

Nevertheless, maintaining an idealization can be very difficult. As Gabriel and Schwartz (1999) note, “none of us are perfect, and an attempt to maintain the fiction of our perfection can easily lead to dysfunctional consequences, when the appearances of perfection can no longer be sustained” (p. 68). In other words, failure to maintain the idealization is always tempered with the possibility, or actuality, of frustration and perhaps even a sense of deprivation and failure.

The same dynamic applies in leader-subordinate mutual adulation. In attributing certain ideas and desires to the leader, subordinates create (exaggerated) role expectations about the appropriate leader’s behaviour. This certainly will create a sense of the boundaries of what is (or is not) acceptable from the behaviour of the leader. Subordinates also expect the leader to recognize these ‘rules of the game’ and make it the main source of guidance of his or her own behaviour (Kets de Vries, 1988). This leader then becomes the subordinates’ projected being and as such serves subordinates’ ‘ego expansion’ (Popper & Zakkai, 1994). The person is likely to be more tolerant of subordinates, sometimes at the cost of the group’s or their own resources. Indeed, some subordinates may see in this an opportunity to manipulate the leader to address their own needs and desires. Yet, over time, the individual leader will be unlikely to be perceived as consistent in dealing with others and will inevitably fail at satisfying subordinates’ exaggerated needs and expectations. It will be extremely difficult too for subordinates to sustain the leader’s idealization of them as no one is perfect. The leader’s and the subordinates’ failures, then, can create frustrations for both parties, turning idealization into disappointment, deprivation, and anger (Gabriel & Schwartz, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1988, 1989a, 2004; Oglensky, 1995).

Idealizing transference also conveys the ever-present possibility of other consequences for subordinates. If, as Oglensky (1995) claims, qualities attributed to the superior are too perfectionist, then the subordinate may feel he or she cannot possibly emulate the superior. As a consequence, the subordinate may consider him- or herself inferior in comparison to the ideal that leader has symbolized, leading to a blow to the subordinate’s self-esteem, which may hamper his or her work efforts. Alternatively, if the idealizing

transference becomes the primary means for a subordinate's self-affirmation, then this relationship can lead to destructive bondage because it is based on excessive dependency. If this is the case, then the subordinates would be vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by the leader (Oglensky, 1995).

While certain dysfunctional outcomes can occur in the maintenance of idealization, people may continue to hold firm to such idealization. Psychoanalysis is well aware that people tend to hold on to their own ideals (Feldman, 1989; Freud, 1908). Once an idea or object has been idealized, then people seek to protect and sustain such idealization (Feldman, 1989). As Freud writes: "...whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man to give up than a pleasure which he has once experienced" (1908, p. 145). Leadership, of course, can provide an example of how people hold on to idealization. As being idealized by subordinates can be very satisfying for leaders because it gratifies their narcissistic desires, leaders often tend to cling to their own ideal such as a certain style of leadership. The process of maintaining such idealization can also produce dysfunctional effects, yet the individual leaders may utilize a set of defence mechanisms such as denial or rationalization, that allow them to distort reality, leading to the sustenance of leadership idealization.

### **Synthesis and Argument for the Study**

Current construction and study of servant leadership not only presents several concerns and issues regarding its theological content and its value to the study of leadership in general, but also provides a very narrow description about 'what is servant leadership' (Winston, 2010). Such a description is a product of superficial formulation and inadequate approaches to studying servant leadership. Hence, richer descriptions of servant leadership are called for.

This study aims to explore a possible richer explanation of servant leadership. To do this, I will use the substances of informal relationship and leadership drawn from group relations, which should enable me to study the practice of servant leadership within a

business corporation as strongly suggested by Greenleaf. The psychoanalytic frame of thinking will help me unravel the complexities and dynamics of human beings and human relations in the servant leadership process within the above context.

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the origin of servant leadership idea in the modern world. I then provided the response from others to Greenleaf's version of servant leadership within and outside the academic domain. The issues and concerns relating to servant leadership are also discussed. Such limitations invite the utilization, in the study of servant leadership, of informal relationships and leadership substance as well as a psychoanalysis frame of thinking. I also demonstrated the rationale for utilizing informal relationships and leadership substances for the study of servant leadership. In the last section, I illustrated insights from the psychoanalytic approach to leadership in understanding and comprehending the complexity and dynamism of the leadership process and its actors. The following chapter explores the methodology that I employ to guide my research as I seek to achieve the research aim.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Research Methodology**

The purpose of the current study is to utilize a psychoanalytic frame of thinking to better understand the complexity and dynamics of servant leadership, drawing on accounts of a group's informal relationships and leadership. In this chapter, I describe in detail the process of the research and the procedures utilized to achieve the research aim. This chapter commences with an explanation of the philosophical underpinnings that informed my methodological position and research strategies: specifically, psychoanalytic research and its application in the field of organization and leadership studies. Two research strategies are then described: using stories as materials for study, and using a case study design. This is followed by a detailed description of the research design including the site of the study, site access, the participants, the interview process, the ethical considerations, and the role of the researcher. The final part of this chapter deals with the process of using psychoanalytic interpretation for the collected stories and accounts.

#### **The Philosophical Underpinnings of Psychoanalysis Research**

The practice of research, including this study, inevitably involves asking questions about 'the nature of knowledge and of reality'. Every researcher is encouraged to reflect on the adoption of a certain theory of knowledge, thus it is important to be clear about one's epistemological stance as it can help the researcher to defend the research's claims as well as inform the research strategies used (Alexandrov, 2009; Creswell, 2003).

Every knowledge claim raises essential questions such as: 'how we gain knowledge', 'how we know that our knowledge is proper', and 'what are the weaknesses of such knowledge'. When applied to psychoanalysis such questions raise issues in regard to the validity and evidence of its theories and propositions, as well as to methodology (Gabriel, 1999b; Hunt & McCollom, 1994). Such questions have created almost constant and

passionate debate known as the 'Freud Wars' (Forester, 1997; Frosh, 1987, 1997; Gabriel, 1999b; Grunbaum, 1984; Popper, 1965).

Most of the criticisms of psychoanalysis are responses to Freud's claim about the position of psychoanalysis as scientific knowledge. Freud at times presented his 'project' in rationalistic, empiricist, and objectivist terms; therefore, for some scholars this places psychoanalysis within the same positivistic epistemology of natural sciences such as physics and medicine (Gabriel, 1999b). Popper (1965), along with Frank Cioffi (1970), for example, views psychoanalysis as a pseudo science, because, as a discipline, psychoanalysis cannot provide a set of tests or evidence that would falsify its theories and propositions. Adolf Grunbaum (1984) adds that clinical materials are epistemologically contaminated, therefore, psychoanalytic propositions and theories cannot be validated scientifically. Hence, Grunbaum asserts, "all of Freud's clinical arguments for his cornerstone theory of repression should be deemed to be fundamentally flawed (p. xii).

According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), "there has been no lack of efforts to make psychoanalysis an 'objective' science which would be subject to strict demands for evidence" (p. 129). Many proponents of psychoanalysis have provided interesting arguments to fend off criticisms for being 'unscientific'. For instance, Cosin et al. (1982) contend that Popper's and Cioffi's argument was built on obsolete principles of scientific knowledge. The current advancement of debates in the philosophy of science makes Popper's falsification an inappropriate criterion to distinguish proper science from pseudo science. It is now considered unrealistic for a new theory to have to be submitted to falsification requirements as the time taken in refuting and dismantling the theory to adhere to principles such as: 'no ad hoc sub-explanations', 'no inconsistencies between standards of proof and standing of theories', and 'no contamination of observation by theory' would be too long (Gabriel, 1999b, p. 48). To follow such principles, Gabriel notes, would only detain (or even discontinue) the development of a new theory. Furthermore, John Forrester (1997), along with Robinson (1993), Wollheim (1993) and Gardner (1995), provides some counter-claims against Grunbaum's critique on psychoanalysis. In fact, Fischer and Greenberg (1996), in their effort to defend

psychoanalysis as a science, found evidence to validate some of the psychoanalytic theories and propositions.

Nevertheless, Gabriel (1999b) contends that “to defend psychoanalysis as a natural science does it little justice” (p. 49). Whilst at the outset Freud tried to ‘present’ his work as a ‘hard’ science, before he died he asserted that he needed to put a halt to such a view. In his ‘Postscript to “An Autobiographical Study”’ Freud writes:

After a lifelong detour over the natural sciences, medicine, and psychotherapy, my interests returned to those cultural problems which had once captivated the youth who had barely awakened to deeper thought. These interests had centered on ‘the events of the history of man, the mutual influences between man’s nature, the development of culture, and those residues of prehistoric events of which religion is the foremost representation... studies which originate in psychoanalysis but go beyond it. (cited in Gabriel, 1999b, p. 49)

For Freud, psychoanalysis operates radically differently to models inspired by the positivistic approach (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Gabriel, 1999b). Psychoanalysis, in contrast to empiricist approaches (e.g. behaviourism, experimentalism), does not operate with observable behaviours, but rather with the participant’s utterances. These utterances are viewed as text that can be endowed with meaning through interpretation (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Psychoanalysis also adheres to particular methods to validate its interpretations, which are different from those of positivistic models of scientific theory (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Gabriel, 1999b).

Therefore, as Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) argue, “psychoanalysis can never be a discipline in the style of natural science” (p. 129), and psychoanalysis can only be located in the *interpretative tradition*. Thus, psychoanalysis is viewed as a sense-making device that can help us unmask the hidden meaning from the phenomena being studied. This is because psychoanalysis provides us with a method of accessing unconscious processes at

work in the psyche as well as understanding the intricacies of unconscious motivation and its manifestation in human life (Gabriel, 1999b). In this respect, psychoanalysis works differently in interpreting an individual's acts and experiences if compared to other modes of interpretation (such as rhetorical analysis, semiotic analysis, and narrative analysis) as psychoanalytic interpretations enable one to "go beyond 'innocent interpretations' and probe for self-deceptions and double meanings" (Gabriel, 1999b, p. 51). According to Ricoeur, such interpretations mean "the systematic exercise of suspicion" (1970, p. 32), hence interpretivism can be seen as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Ricoeur, 1974). Ricoeur (1974) mentions Freud, Marx and Nietzsche as "protagonists of suspicion who rip away masks and pose the novel problem of the lie of consciousness and consciousness as a lie"(p. 99). Consciousness for each of these three figures is viewed as deceptive. The aim is, therefore, to offer a systematic way to be suspicious: to examine, decipher, and reveal what might be conceived to be 'false-consciousness'. In particular, Freud, or psychoanalysis, confronts the 'guile' of consciousness without referring to the act of lying. In this respect, human experiences and acts are seen not to be transparent in themselves; feelings and words may mask depth realities. Hence, Gabriel contends:

At the level of human experience, unlike the realm of natural science, truth and lies are not opposites, one may be lying while telling the truth and telling the truth while lying. A true science of meaning is not reducible to the consciousness of meaning, but is concerned with the systematic understanding of the movements, distortions, and metamorphoses of meaning as it moves in and out of consciousness. (1999b, p. 52)

Gabriel argues that, as a consequence, psychoanalysis researchers do not work along the same lines as a 'typical' researcher adopting humanistic traditions in qualitative research. For the latter, human experience is often accepted at its face value. In contrast, research utilizing psychoanalytic perspectives doubts or mistrusts experience. Psychoanalytic researchers view experience as a source of data that has been contaminated by unconscious processes and elements, therefore, it cannot be taken as it is. To unravel and

decipher the unconscious meanings that have tainted the conscious meanings, the researcher then employs the interpretive work. Gabriel claims that, as a result of this suspicion and interpretation, psychoanalytic research has produced many important and vital contributions in many different areas across the social sciences (e.g. sociology, linguistics, culture). As a consequence, the concept of the unconscious has become “an indispensable concept for most human sciences” (1999b, p. 54).

### **Psychoanalytic Research into Organization**

Central to the understanding of my research is the notion that psychoanalysis theories, concepts and methods are not only utilized in a clinical context, but they are also applied to a wider social context (Amado, 1995; Gould, 1991; Kets de Vries, 1991). This wider application is relevant because, essentially, psychoanalysis is a method of examining and interpreting unconscious meanings (Amado, 1995; Diamond, 1993). Indeed, it was Freud himself who started this wider work by applying his methodology to the understanding of group, religion, and society (Gould, 1991; Kets de Vries, 1991).

In *Group psychology and the analysis of the Ego*, for example, Freud links his ideas to the study of group behaviour, which enables him to unravel certain dynamic aspects that occur between leaders and followers. According to Gould (1991), such study has influenced many scholars and practitioners to pursue this line of thought and to have made important contributions to the body of literature in organization and leadership studies. Many (if not most) of the advancements in the literature have come from the work of consultation in psychoanalytic research into organizations. In such research, the consultants as researchers not only try to understand what is going on, but they also examine the problem, pursue the solution and offer an answer to that problem. Many of these types of research activity stem from the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations whose key figures drew heavily on Melanie Klein’s second generation appropriation of Freud’s work in her Object Relations theory such as Wilfred Bion, Elliott Jaques, and Isabel Menzies Lyth (Czander, 1993; Diamond, 1993; Gabriel, 1999b, Gould, 1991).

Bion's (1959) seminal study of relatively small groups, which illustrates how unconscious processes inhibit and jeopardize the group and its members in the achievement of its primary task, contributed influential insights theoretically and methodologically. Firstly, one outcome of this study, well known as 'basic assumption group' theory, was a prominent theory of the mental functioning of groups. Secondly, Bion's experiments of working with the group setting, in contrast to the individual settings used by Freud in his clinical works, constituted a new tradition of socially oriented psychoanalytic approach to facilitating social change known as the Tavistock method (Gabriel, 1999b). Nevertheless, these early works of Tavistock were viewed as somewhat esoteric (Atkins, Kellner, & Linklater, 1997) as they were considered rather detached from mainstream organization studies which utilized non-psychoanalytic approaches (Gabriel, 1999b; Gould, 1991).

Elliot Jaques (1952, 1974), who built on Bion's group discussion method and developed social consultancy practices, aimed to investigate and solve social problems through collaborative work with the client. In his famous study at a factory, Jaques found out how workers collectively utilized defences against anxiety at the organizational level. While Jaques' works were considered as rather esoteric theorizing (Atkins et al., 1997), yet, he offered an essential discovery known as 'social defence systems'. Support for Jaques' finding of social defences is to be found in Izabel Menzies Lyth's (1960) study in a hospital, where she illustrates why and how nurses organize their work as mechanisms against anxiety as part of organizational life. Menzies Lyth used a rather different method than Bion's and Jaques' as she interviewed and observed organizational members individually in addition to the group's discussion. She suggested, therefore, that her approach was more similar to a form of individual psychoanalysis. In addition, Menzies Lyth adopted a 'socio-psychological' perspective in her work through integration of other, non-psychoanalytic traditions such as Lewin's (1951) field theory and systems theory into her psychoanalytic (Object Relations) framework (Lawlor, 2009).

Bion's, Jaques', and Menzies Lyth's classic works on consultation in psychoanalytic research inspired many contemporary practitioners of organizational psychoanalysis (e.g. Hirschhorn, 1988; Hirschhorn & Barnet, 1993; Krantz, 1985; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). These practitioners then explored the utility of Tavistock's and Klein's Object Relations approach to illuminate the complex unconscious and conscious emotional dynamics in multi-layered systems of the organization. Rather than focus at system level, a number of consultants explored the application of different frameworks of psychoanalysis to explain organizational issues at the individual level. For example, Levinson (1982), and Levinson and Rosenthal (1984) utilized psychoanalytic ego psychology to examine the role of CEOs in organizations. Another example can be found in Baum's (1987) study which looked at the effect of the underlying psychological structure of bureaucracy on organizational members using Erik Erikson's (1968) developmental framework. It is important to note that a number of researchers have attempted to make a connection between these practitioners' works. Otto Kernberg (1979, 1998), for instance, made an effort to integrate object relations approach and classical viewpoints, and Michael Diamond (1993), focusing explicitly on examining group dynamics, combined object relations theory with self psychology perspective, which analyzes individuals in organizations (Anderson & White, 2002).

It is also important to note that the above approaches of consultant work have integrated many concepts and theories from mainstream organization studies into their psychoanalytic framework (Atkins et al., 1997; Gabriel, 1999). In doing so, both approaches (individual and systems) not only helped to solve the problems of the researchers' clients, but they have also made significant contributions to mainstream organization studies (Atkins et al., 1997, Diamond, 1993; Gabriel, 1999b; Hunt & McCollom, 1994). As a result, there is a growing interest from other practitioners and scholars in making use of the psychoanalytic approach to better understand the unconscious and conscious dimensions of organizational life (Anderson & White, 2002; Atkins et al., 1997). Yet, Gabriel (1999b) suggests that it is important for the consultants and practitioners of organizational psychoanalysis not to "undermine the purity of the clinical paradigm" (p. 257) in their works. This is because there are:

marked differences in the culture of psychoanalytic clinical practice compared to that of organizational consultation. The core clinical modes in psychoanalysis are the processes that result in healing and transformation. In the organizational sphere an emphasis on result or outcome is the prevailing norm – among practitioner as well as clients. What this means, in effect, is that in organizational work a more pragmatic attitude prevails, with little concern about process or the ‘purity’ of the intervention. (Gould, 1991, p. 26)

We should bear on mind that the consultant’s aim is to provide ‘results’ for a fee. In their work, as Gabriel (1999b) notes, consultants, including practitioners of organizational psychoanalysis, are more likely to suppress the pursuit of truth in order to be able to offer a solution to the problem. Such solution can be affected by many factors, including personal and organizational, which in turn can contaminate the process of discovering the truth (Gabriel, 1999b). Accordingly, Gould observes:

The psychoanalytically oriented organizational practitioner usually feels free to do whatever seems to work, using many sorts of nonpsychoanalytic techniques, strategies, and interventions, as well as invoking many nonpsychoanalytic viewpoints (open systems theory, family systems theory, communication theory, a variety of sociological and social psychology viewpoints, and so on). (1991, p. 26)

Hunt and McCollom (1994) warn that, when consultants or practitioners prioritize the pursuit of ‘solution’ rather than the pursuit of ‘truth’, they may limit the use of the interpretive model, the hallmark of psychoanalysis research, in their consultation work. For example, according to Levinson (1991), there are consultants or practitioners who prefer to utilize questionnaires or surveys as their main method of collecting data rather than using unstructured interviews and observations. The inefficacy of utilizing formal surveys in the psychoanalytic oriented work has been recognized: Hirschhorn (1988)

points out that the application of such a tool often serves as the consultant's defence mechanism "to avoid the anxiety of directly experiencing the client system" (p. 243). Furthermore, some other consultants employed structured and semi-structured interviews (e.g. Baum, 1987, 1990; Kets de Vries, Miller, & Noel, 1993) in the process of collecting data, yet, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue, such methods do not follow psychoanalysis' tenet of free association. These forms of interview instead work like question-and-answer, "where the interviewer sets the agenda and in principle remains in control of what information is produced" (Hollway & Jefferson 2000, p. 37). In contrast, the application of the principle of free association in the unstructured interview encourages the interviewee to say whatever ideas come into his or her mind, hence, the interviewer can elicit the type of narrative "that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to unconscious logic" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 37).

Finally, the limitation of adopting an interpretive model and stance can also be seen in how practitioners interpret their data. As Gould mentions above, there are many consultants who "feel free to do whatever seems to work" in their attempt to provide (quick) solutions to the client's problems. Of course, Gould does not suggest that psychoanalytic research into organizations is not prepared to engage with non-psychoanalytic traditions. Indeed, as Gabriel (1999b) points out, such an approach could invite "the criticism of reductionism and esoteric theorizing" (p. 253). In fact, Gabriel suggests that psychoanalysis researchers can learn from many different areas in the organizational and leadership studies, and then integrate their concepts and theories (such as organizational culture, organizational structure and bureaucracy, as well as leadership theory) into their psychoanalytic approach. While the psychoanalytic researcher only wants to examine the unconscious phenomena that the other traditions do not want to or are unwilling to probe, both the psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic traditions utilize the same approach of reasoning and arguing in the research process (Gabriel, 1999b). For Gabriel, "this approach is consistent with the view of Freud, who denied that psychoanalysis has a unique *Weltanschauung* [world view] of its own" (1999b, p. 253). Psychoanalysis, Freud notes, "as a specialist science, a branch of psychology – a depth-psychology or psychology of the unconscious – is quite unfit to construct a

Weltanschauung of its own: it must accept the scientific one” (cited in Gabriel, 1999b, p. 5).

Yiannis Gabriel along with Adrian Carr, Burkard Sievers, Howard Schwartz, and Theodor Adorno represent academic researchers who have used psychoanalytic insights and have conducted psychoanalytic research into organizations. Interestingly, whilst such researchers constitute only a minority in numbers when compared with practitioners or consultants in the area, the former, nevertheless, have made an influential contribution to the body of literature on psychoanalytic approach to organization and leadership studies. They have advanced the field with regard to the theory of ‘authoritarian personality’ (Adorno et al, 1950), ‘organization ideal’ (Schwartz, 1990) as well as many issues related to the intricacies of leader-follower relations (Carr & Lapp, 2006; Gabriel, 1997, 1999, 2000). In fact, as Gabriel (1997) argues, psychoanalytic approaches to organization studies have made important contributions to the study of leadership in general. For instance, psychoanalysis “enhances our comprehension of organizational symbolism.” This is because psychoanalytic “provides some of the most powerful keys into human motivation, emphasizing the complexity, plasticity, and mobility of human desire and its manifestations” (Gabriel, 1999b, p. 318). Gabriel points out that psychoanalytic approach also offers:

a model of as well as a vocabulary for the mental personality, fragmented, at odds with itself and with the world at large, wicked and yet profoundly moral, savage, and yet irreversibly civilized, which is uniquely attuned to the paradoxes of organizational life and especially the contradictions of leader-follower relations. (1999b, p. 318)

It is important to note that prominent psychoanalytic organization theorists such as Adrian Carr, Howard Schwartz, and Yiannis Gabriel have consistently drawn from classical Freudian approach applied at the individual level. According to Gabriel (1999b), this is because a Freudian approach offers a more robust theoretical framework in comparison to other competing approaches of depth psychology. Since the unit of

analysis for these academic researchers is the individual organizational member, then there is a concern from others about the appropriateness of using a Freudian approach to study a group or an even larger system (e.g. Tubert-Oklander, 2006; Wollheim, 1971). Yet, Fromm (1963) argues that we should not limit Freud's theories and concepts to an individual level, but also utilize them in a wider context. Indeed, Fromm notes:

It is one of the essential accomplishments of psychoanalysis that it has done away with the false distinction between social psychology and individual psychology... Freud emphasized that there is no individual psychology of man isolated from his social environment, because an isolated man does not exist. (1963, p. 1)

As I attempt to locate my research in the academic domain, I draw most particularly on Gabriel's (1997, 1999b, 2000, 2010) Freudian psychoanalytic research into organization and leadership. This is because Gabriel's approach maintains the purity of the clinical paradigm. His methodology is built based on psychoanalysis premises such as: the requirement to view both participants and researcher as individuals driven by unconscious processes and fantasies; utilization of the principle of 'free association' in the process of collecting data (stories) via one-on-one unstructured interviews; and the assumption of an interpretive stance in the process of analyzing the collected stories and narratives in order to unravel and decipher their layers, especially the unconscious one. This approach guides my research as I seek to achieve the research aim, which is to explore and unravel the complexity and dynamics of servant leadership as reflected in the group's informal relations.

### **Research Strategies: Using Stories as Materials for Study**

The utilization of stories in this research has some merit. First, as Gabriel (1999b, 2000) observes, organizational stories and storytelling have been widely discussed and have made considerable contributions to organizational studies. In fact, as the study of language and discourse becomes more important in organization studies, organizational

theorists are now more likely to use stories (in addition to jokes and myths) as their research data sources (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2004). Accordingly, organizational stories have been extensively employed by academic researchers to study organization phenomena through related themes such as leadership and organizational culture (Gabriel, 1998, 2000). For example, there were a number of studies, using an ethnographic method, aimed at examining the meanings and symbolism of organizational stories for members (e.g. Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993; Meek, 1988). In these studies, stories were treated as features of organizational culture. Yet, in many other studies, researchers have made use of the story: as a medium of organizational communication and learning (e.g. Boje, 1994; Martin, 1982); a form of political domination and opposition (e.g. Collinson, 1994; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Gabriel, 1995); performance (Boje, 1991, Mangham, 1995); and narrative construction (Mahler, 1988; Martin, 1990).

Similarly, psychoanalytic research into organizations views stories as valuable and important data sources. This is because, in such research, organizational stories are treated as manifest materials of organizational unconscious processes (Bowles, 1990; Gabriel, 1991, 1997, 2000; Stein, 1994). In this view, according to Gabriel, stories work in a similar way to dreams in the psychoanalytic frame of thinking:

Stories, like dreams, are products of psychological work, texts which emerge out of the engagement of unconscious desires with organisational life... Displacement and condensation, both trademarks of unconsciousness processes which are so common in dreams, are equally common in workplace fantasies where characters, events, places, and times become almost easily transposable as in dreams. (Gabriel, 1995, p. 495)

Therefore, by collecting and interpreting stories from within a particular organization, researchers may have gained access to the implicit and irrational realities of organizational life (Gabriel, 1999b; 2000). Stories are “symbolic reconstructions of events” (Gabriel, 1991, p. 427), hence, organizational unconscious material could be

represented by stories. “By shrouding a point in symbolic terms, stories are able to evade censors, both, internal and external, and express views and feelings which may be unacceptable in straight talk” (1999b, p. 271). Accordingly, psychoanalysis treats organizational stories as the expression of members’ unconscious desires and fantasies. Through interpretive analysis of such stories, researchers then can decipher and unravel their unconscious meanings. For instance, in the study of leadership, stories can be used as a means to examine and analyze leaders’ unconscious or hidden motivations and how these influence leaders’ interactions and relations with others. This is because, in telling stories to others, storytellers (e.g. leaders) place themselves and others into certain roles and characters, “offering vital insights into their emotional attachment to their organizations, their peers, subordinates and superordinates” (Gabriel, 1999b, p. 271). By using psychoanalytic interpretation, researchers can unmask and unravel the meaning of leaders’ and subordinates actions and experiences, and bring to the surface their unconscious motivations and desires. Thus, using stories in organizational and leadership research is a valid and effective way of undertaking psychoanalytic research into organization and leadership phenomena (Gabriel, 1999b, 2000).

### **Identifying Stories**

Stories, as mentioned earlier, have been utilized by organizational researchers to examine many organizational phenomena and related themes. Yet, different organizational theorists define stories differently. Boje (1991), for example, identifies a story as “an oral or written performance involving two or more individuals interpreting past or anticipated experience” (p. 111). In this view, story is described loosely as akin to narrative. Nevertheless, I share Gabriel’s (2000) differentiation of stories from narrative, as the former is classified as a sub-set of the latter. Stories are more complex than narratives as they have particular features – namely plots and characters. The plot, also known as the story-line, is the thread which weaves its way around events, characters and places and holds the story together (Polkinghorne, 1988). Moreover, the story must also contain certain characters (e.g. as a hero or a victim), which provide important insight into members’ emotional investment in the organization as well as other group or organizational members (Gabriel, 1999). People often identify themselves with one or

more characters or roles in the stories that relate to their own lives, such as a parental figure, a friend or lover, a sibling, and so on (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000). The storyteller also casts other people into a range of different roles or characters (Gabriel, 2000).

In order to enhance meaning, Czarniawska (2004) contends, a storyteller frequently emplots a story with the help of classical rhetorical tropes (figurative expressions), such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. In addition, a storyteller can utilize other narrative devices to generate more meaning in the story, namely “poetic tropes” (Gabriel, 2000). Indeed, Gabriel found that these tropes can be very useful in supporting a researcher’s psychoanalytic interpretation of stories. By analyzing storyteller use of poetic tropes, researchers can explicate “how and why poetic interpretation works—why people [storytellers] believe a story to be true, why they espouse it with fervour, why they may be unconcerned about factual accuracy” (Gabriel, 2000, p. 56).

Poetic tropes consist of eight attributes: attribution of motive, attribution of causal connections, attribution of responsibility, attribution of unity, attribution of fixed qualities, attribution of emotion, attribution of agency and attribution of providential significance (Gabriel, 2000, p. 36). The attribution of motive is one of the most powerful interpretive devices in the sense that the storyteller constructs an event or incident as a motivated event. In many cases, Gabriel found that a story also contains an attribution of the unconscious motive to a particular agent or character. The attribution of causal connections is associated to the attribution of (unconscious) motive, because it outlines the causes and effects of actions, events or incidents in the story. Related to the attribution of causal connections is the attribution of responsibility, where blame and credit are allocated to characters or actions. Furthermore, attribution of unity is a mechanism to treat a group of people as being ‘of a type’; whilst the attribution of fixed qualities is used to infuse a certain ‘label’ or ‘stereotype’ into particular characters or groups. Storytellers at times also infuse emotional characteristics of actions through attribution of emotions into the narrative. Lastly, the attribution of agency in a story reverses the passive and inactive character or action into an intended and conscious one;

while the attribution of agency helps the storyteller to view the event or situation as having been intervened in or controlled by a Higher Being to restore justice and order or achieve a specific result. When it works, it can provide the symbolic mechanism in turning vulnerability from weakness into strength, helplessness into control (Gabriel, 2000).

Finally and most importantly, stories need to be differentiated from other forms of narratives such as opinions, reports, and proto-stories. This is because stories are depositories of meanings, as they are “emotionally and symbolically charged narratives” (Gabriel, 1999b, p. 271). While reports can have a certain plot and character, they tend to focus on facts rather than the meaning of the events. Quite differently, opinions can have some symbolic material or meaning; however, they do not have strong plot or characters. Proto-stories or terse-stories (Boje, 1991) could have emotional and symbolical material, yet their plot is rudimentary and not complete.

### **Using Unstructured Interview Method to Collect Stories**

In this study I have employed a loosely-structured interview method advocated by Gabriel (1999, 2000), enabling me to collect relevant stories as the material for the study. This type of interview involves asking open-ended questions, and seeking to elicit stories from the participants. Loosely-structured interviews have the advantage of providing data in greater depth, as compared to the structured approach (Creswell, 1998). For example, in this research they fit the purpose of the study, which is to explore, uncover, and describe the dynamics of servant leadership within the group’s relations.

Loosely-structured interviews, according to Kvale (1999), originally stem from psychoanalytically informed interviews. The interviews I carried out capitalize on the approach based on the principle of ‘free association’ in which the participant is encouraged to talk freely about his or her experiences (Kvale, 1999). In following this principle, I attempted to elicit participant’s stories and accounts that are not constructed based on conscious mechanisms, but instead work to unconscious mechanisms, in which

“the associations follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 37).

Like Gabriel, my own interviews with participants required me to adopt a ‘fellow-traveller’ stance on the narrative and thus share “its emotional tone, seeking to expand it, enrich it” (1999b, p. 481). In keeping with established psychoanalytic techniques, I deliberately avoided posing ‘why’ questions, and instead followed up the participant’s narratives by using his or her own words and phrasing without offering the interviewer’s own interpretation and judgment during the interview process (Gabriel, 2000; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Kvale, 1999). In doing so, I aimed to stimulate the story further and penetrate deeper into its meaning, thus producing quality stories (Frosh & Young, 2008; Gabriel, 1999b, 2000). Later in this chapter I elaborate on details of the actual interview process.

### **Research Strategies: Using a Case Study Design**

Following the example of other researchers who have undertaken psychoanalytically oriented studies of organization and leadership (Gabriel, 1991, 1997; Kets de Vries, 1989a, 1996; Oglensky, 1995; Schwartz, 1987, 1989), my research uses the case study method. Like those earlier studies, my cases will be built on narratives from collected stories and accounts of people who constitute leadership, leaders and/or followers.

While case study research can be either single or multiple, psychoanalysis appears not particularly suited to examining a very large number of case studies as it will be very difficult to examine the phenomena being studied in-depth as well as to corroborate the interpretation of meanings of such phenomena (Gabriel, 1999b). Hence, according to Gabriel, it is more appropriate for psychoanalytic research to utilize only a small number or even a single case study. The single case study enables us to intensively examine the complexity and dynamics of leader-follower relations, and as such it helps us to demonstrate how psychoanalytic informed concepts and theories of leadership illustrate

the richness of the themes and meanings of the narrative that are important for understanding the object of the study.

My research is based on a single case study of a small group. The group comprises a supervisor and subordinates who operate within a multinational cleaning service provider – Servus Company – in one of its branches in New Zealand. This single case design enables me to access the accounts of several people and delve more deeply into the leadership phenomenon as it is experienced and enacted by the group’s members within the particular cleaning service organization, thus providing potential for a richer, more nuanced understanding. Additionally, my research is conducted in the context of the small group, a context that has been widely adopted in the psychoanalytic research, largely because: “psychoanalysts in general [have] focused more on examining small groups and the psychodynamics involved” (Volkan, 2007, p. 8). As a consequence, I do not have any intention to generalize the findings as a leadership study should address the importance of the specific setting within which it belongs (Bryman, Stephens, & Campo, 1996).

## **Research Process**

### **The Site of the Study**

In exploring the dynamics of informal leadership to better understand servant leadership in one organization, my first challenge was to find a local for-profit organization that met certain key criteria, and whose management was open to my research undertaking. Location of the study was a primary concern. I needed ready access to the business in order to carry out the fieldwork. I also wanted to collect stories from participants (group members) within a large, complex organization, as a bureaucracy was likely to have formal hierarchy of authority, and was also more likely to be experiencing turbulent times: within this context, storytelling is more frequent (Gabriel, 1999b; Peters & Austin, 1985). These are the places “where stories and interpretations are shared with great frequency to understand the unfolding dynamics” (Boje, 1991, p. 124). Within such environments a great many interesting stories are created (Gabriel, 1991). Yet, the most

important thing that such context can provide for this research is perhaps its ‘capability’ to trigger the emergence of servant leaders within the informal relationship. This is because the formal organizational life within big hierarchical organizations tends to ignore members’ feelings and emotions, therefore, encouraging members to enact informal relationships to claim human supremacy over impersonal bureaucracy and its apparatus (Gabriel, 1999b). It is within informal relationship and structure, that servant leadership can flourish (Greenleaf, 2002). Since the informal leader in this context demonstrates the principle of *primus inter pares* – first amongst equals –the leader in such a context is similar to a servant leader. The requirement to focus on a large organization near my place of residence meant that I was somewhat restricted in choice by the limited range of such organizations represented in a medium-sized New Zealand provincial city (population 75,000).

To sum up, the context of informal relationship and leadership within a big, locally represented corporation is the site from which I aimed to collect stories relevant to the aim of this research. I identified a range of such organizations in this provincial city and its surrounds, and chose the Servus Company – a multinational cleaning service provider. An important consideration was that cleaning service workers represent the class of people that Greenleaf (2002) called as “the least privileged in society” (p. 27). Given that there is a significant possibility that a servant leader operates in such a community of people (Greenleaf, 2002), it could provide a good indicator of the servant leader’s existence. Moreover, at the time of this research, Servus was one of the biggest cleaning service providers in this country and the company was experiencing a very difficult time. Servus had just lost a few of their important clients. In fact, the company was in the process of renegotiating contracts with some of its main clients. To lose such important and big clients would be a major loss for the company as it would reduce by more than half its yearly revenues. This situation within Servus Company thus fits another key criterion, which is that the company would be experiencing turbulent times.

## Access

In the process of approaching the corporation, I had fudge my research into a more palatable form of a study of *workers' helping behaviour and caring characteristics in the workplace*, as such practical interest would more likely be accommodated by the company's decision makers (Gabriel, 1999b). Access to conduct my research in one of Servus' branches in a chosen New Zealand provincial city was granted by one of the area managers. I sent a formal letter regarding the possibility of carrying out research with a group of cleaners in Servus Company. This manager then allowed me to interview a particular small group of cleaners, consisting of eight workers and one supervisor. Members of this group, according to the manager, fitted with my study's criteria, as their helping behaviour and caring characteristics had been well recognized by him and others. I had met some members of the group before as two of them – Susan (the group's supervisor) and Phoebe – were the people who had trained my wife for a few days just after she was hired by the manager the previous year. My short acquaintance with them, and my wife's stories about these two workers, confirmed the manager's perception of them.

In the local branch studied, Servus Company employs approximately 200 workers, most of whom, at the time of the field work, were part-timer workers. The structure of the branch is quite hierarchical, with the general manager at the apex. The general manager is responsible for all management duties, yet his main task is to generate revenue (find more clients) for the company. When the study was carried out, reporting to the general manager were two area managers who had responsibility for the services they provided to clients. Each area manager was assisted by the site supervisors. Whilst there were cleaners who worked on their own, many important clients (big corporations, universities, and government institutions) were served by small groups of cleaning service workers – each of them was coordinated by the group's supervisor.

## **The Participants**

Prior to the main data collection, I conducted six pilot interviews (Gabriel, 1999b) with my wife and her friends who worked as cleaners, in addition to my colleagues who were postgraduate students. My wife and her friends were also employed by Servus Company, but they worked at different sites.

Access was given by the manager to interview all of the group's members, but I was only 'able' to interview six out of the nine potential participants. It was not regarded as appropriate for me to interview one of the other three workers, who was described by others as 'a bit slow'. I regarded the participation of the other two (Chandler and Kay) as potentially valuable for the research. However, Susan, the group's supervisor, and the other cleaners, did not want them involved, the grounds for this being somewhat unclear. Primarily, they were considered as new workers; therefore, it was felt that they did not know much about the company and particularly about the group and its members. Thus co-workers considered that they would provide limited value for the research. When I suggested that it was important to have them as participants, Susan, the supervisor, informed me that these two workers were not willing to participate in this research.

Of the six research participants, five were women and one was a man. All participants were cleaners, representing the lower level of employee in the cleaning service company, and one woman was the group's supervisor. At the time of researching, these workers worked at a large educational institution – this being the same place where the company's branch office was operated. They were aged between 30 and 67 years. The length of service of participants ranged from three to 14 years. The fieldwork for the study took place between early May 2009 and the end of July 2009.

## **The Interview Process**

Twelve interviews were carried out with six workers, so each participant was interviewed twice. The duration of each interview varied from 50 to 60 minutes. This is consistent with the duration recommended by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). The first interview was

aimed to elicit stories about the group's relations, particularly members' informal relations; hence, it was initiated through questions such as: "Tell me a story about the people you work with," "Is there any incident (or story) when a person helps another member out of his or her problem?" "Can you tell me any incident or event when you (or another person) had a positive experience with other group members?" Levinson (1972) suggests that, in initiating interviews with such questions, researchers can elicit stories and accounts about workers' informal helping and caring relationship with other group members as well as workers' dependency relationship with their informal leadership. The second interview functioned as "a check in various ways" as well as "to seek further evidence to test... emergent hunches and provisional hypotheses" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 43) and "to make adjustments of interpretations when necessary" (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006, p. 209). In addition to those 12 prearranged and scheduled interviews, a substantial number of additional informal interviews and observations were made.

Realizing the importance of creating a good rapport with the participants, I mentioned that my wife was also a cleaner who worked for Servus and that she had been trained by Susan and Phoebe a year ago. In addition to that, I also asked each of the participants to choose their preferred location for the interview in the hope that this would help the participant feel comfortable and at ease or at least to not become threatened by this interview process. Some of them preferred the company's common room where no other people could interrupt at a certain moment, while some others chose the client organization's cafeteria, which was quiet at the time of research. Offering participants choice about the location of the interview may have helped enhance my chances of establishing a good rapport with each of them and producing quality data as such an approach can 'encourage' participants to talk more freely (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 1991). Informed consent forms were also distributed to participants before I started the first interview, and all of the potential participants returned the forms. Since every moment of each interview is very important and because any one moment might provide important clues, signs, and pieces of evidence, I used two audio-recorders to record the conversation. Of course permission to turn on the tape recorder was requested once rapport had been established and discussion was under way.

Interviews were preceded by a preliminary discussion about the nature and purpose of the research, which was framed as *workers' helping behaviour and caring characteristics in the workplace*. Prior to the interviews I also explained my interest as interviewer which was to elicit as many stories as possible in relation to the topic. I thought it important to let the participants think about these aspects for a moment, and then encouraged each of them to contribute by providing information that he or she felt was important to discussion of the topic (Gabriel, 1999b; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Participants were also able to share any other ideas that they liked or wanted to talk about, even if these materials were not relevant to the topic. By enabling this, I hoped to help them feel comfortable and unthreatened and to talk 'freely' (Kvale, 1999) about their informal relations and other aspects of the organizational life, which in turn would allow me to elicit many stories (Gabriel, 2000) about the dynamics and intricacies of servant leadership in the group's life.

It was important from the start to allow the interviews to be as unstructured as possible (Gabriel, 1999b; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) and let the participants be in charge of the direction of the interview sessions. As the interviewer, I played the role of 'fellow-traveller' on narrative (Gabriel, 1999b). In other words I was a prompter and active listener without offering my own interpretations and judgments during the interview process (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Kvale, 1999). Themes and plots brought by the participant were also encouraged and further discussed, with the help of paraphrasing and participants' own words or probes regarding their working experiences. I tried to remain actively engaged, "holding attentively to what emerged without irritably seeking to order and understand it and simply encouraging participants to speak on or around the topic under study". This was intended to provide me with important benefits "in terms of quality of narrative data that is produced" (Frosh & Young, 2008, p. 114).

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to consider if there was anything else that they considered significant, that had not been discussed in the interview. They were also welcome to contact me by phone if they remembered something that they

wanted to include in the interview material. This material can be significant because it could guide the interviewer toward significant unconscious meaning that has been evoked in the previous interview session (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

The result was production of a fairly broad spectrum of accounts and a number of highly memorable stories of group members' relations and other aspects of organizational life. Yet, these types of narratives only contributed a very small portion of the total interview material. There was a lot of interview material that was not translated into transcripts, given that the emphasis was on the content and the meanings of what was said rather than on the quantity of the material (Kvale, 1996). Otherwise, translating, handling, over-viewing and analyzing all of the interview materials would be too time-consuming as well as tend to suppress the depth of the meaning of the texts and, perhaps, as Kvale (1996) observes, lead to "a superficial product, unfinished due to external time constraints" (p. 179).

### **The Ethical Considerations**

Conducting research on human subjects requires ethics to be considered at each phase of the research process. Two important issues related to studying human beings were at the forefront of my consideration: (i) informed consent and (ii) protection of participants from harm. In doing so, the researcher can ensure that participants are willing to be involved in the research voluntarily. Participants also understand the nature of the research as well as the risk that may exist in participating in such research. As such, the risk involved should not be bigger than the benefits that participants may gain from their participation in the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

These issues were addressed and the study approved by the Massey University Research Ethics Office on April 27, 2009. As mentioned before, informed participant consent (Appendix) was distributed to each participant, informing the participants about the study, including the procedures for data collection and reporting. Participants were assured of their rights of confidentiality, and informed of their right to withdraw from the study either before, during or after the interview without any negative consequences. No one

withdrew. All participants have been anonymised by changing their actual names in this thesis, although their roles are given such as cleaner or supervisor. Pseudonyms used for the six main participants are Susan, Anita, Rachel, Phoebe, Monica, and Joey. Pseudonyms are also used for other organizational members mentioned in this study. The pseudonym for the corporation was Servus Company, and the manager was given the pseudonym, Brendon. Participants were informed that interview sessions would be tape-recorded. Participants were given the opportunity to read transcripts and other related materials for my dissertation, as well as the chance to add or retract any content they felt uncomfortable with being included as part of the research.

Through the psychoanalytically informed interview, the method of interview used in this research, participants can be encouraged to ‘talk freely’ about their lived experience. At times, they may reveal deeper emotions that arrive at a level of closeness and intimacy that requires the trust of the interviewer or researcher (Hatch, 2002). This kind of information that is shared in the interview sessions could be very personal, therefore, I am fully aware of the need to be respectful of such information and to honour the trust the participants have ‘granted’ me.

According to De Vaus (2001), there are some issues that may emerge in relation to the collected data such as how researchers manage the interview data in terms of ‘protecting’ and retaining them. In view of this, the author suggests two practical guidelines in order to deal with these issues: first, the researchers are recommended to retain the data up to 10 years; second, the researchers need to ‘protect’ the data from others who might use it for other intentions – researchers are not allowed to share it with others not related with the research. This thesis follows De Vaus’ suggestions about the procedures around the collected data.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

In a psychoanalytic based approach to research, the role taken up by the researcher is a critical part of the research. In this study, I adopt the role of a researcher, in which I was required to reflect, identify and carefully characterize the feelings and reactions that were

produced in the research process, particularly how it influenced my own. As Berg (1988) informs us, “just as the examination of counter transferences is an integral part of psychoanalytic practice, the examination of the researcher’s reactions to the research relationship should be an integral part of field research” (p. 226).

Such examination of personal feelings, anxieties, reflections and any emerging hypotheses throughout the research process (Berg, 1988), especially during data collection and analysis periods, can yield some additional data and bring some benefits for the researcher as it can add richness to the research outcomes (Gabriel, 1999b). Therefore, each experience should be treated as potentially relevant to the interpretation of data. Yet, assumptions, hypothesis, and interpretation that emerge from the research process cannot be accepted at face value as they have been tainted by unconscious materials (Gabriel, 1999). These materials are the products of transference and counter-transference processes of the research relationship, which are affected and influenced by the researcher’s subjectivity in the interpretation of data. Therefore, the process of unlocking and unravelling such materials can assist the researcher to enhance the objectivity of data interpretation (Berg, 1988; Gabriel, 1999b; Hirschhorn, 1988; Hunt, 1989). Accordingly, instead of ignoring or denying of the researcher’s subjectivity, the psychoanalytic approach to research presumes the inevitable subjectivity in the researcher part as the instrument of the research. The researcher’s role and experience are treated as a credible additional source of data.

Of course, one may wonder about the credibility of such data in illustrating the participant’s experience and the studied phenomena. How can I distinguish, for example, the feelings and responses that affected the subjectivity of my research role due to anxieties and wishes that emerged from my limited psychoanalytic research experience as well as my socio-historical background? “After all, one sees what one is trained to see” (Steffy & Grimes, 1986, p. 325). Given that there is no sound procedure to recognize such ‘contamination,’ I rely most immediately on self reflection and knowledge to unravel such material. As Parker (2009) argues, “the attempt to delve inside the mind of a research participant is matched by the attempt by the researcher to delve inside their own

mind in order to bring out any ‘biases’ or ‘prejudices’ they might have” (p. 65). I am also assisted by the thinking and exchange from both of my research supervisors and peer review colleagues (ISPSO 2011 symposium participants and two journal editors) who were able to stimulate the thinking and reflection that helped me unlock various ‘biases’ that belong to my own ‘inner theatre’.

### **Reflexivity in the Research Process**

Gabriel (1999b, p. 251) writes:

psychoanalysis research into organizations is an uneven, evolving, dynamic process. It proceeds on several fronts at once; developments along these fronts are not always consistent or compatible. Advances on some fronts can be seen as reversals on others, since they call into question fundamental assumptions, typologies or theories.

The same process applied to my research. While the three months of on-site data collection went reasonably smoothly with no major problems and difficulties, the entire research process was a period of great intensity, and the minor setbacks, achievements, and challenges of the research work were keenly felt. Perhaps this was the consequence of a number of things combined: the unfamiliar situation, anxiety about the success of eliciting ‘good’ stories, and the challenge of analyzing and interpreting such stories. The process of writing the anxieties, worries, fears, and so forth was one of the methods employed for emerging from the grip of an emotional reaction into a consideration of appropriate action. This research journal, then, functions as a means for limiting the unconscious dynamics of researcher issues that played out.

In self-reflection, I started the journey as a Christian who brought my early utopian ideals of servant leadership, but the research process then helped me to question and test such idealization. While, at the beginning of the analysis phase, I was ‘blind’ to the ‘bad things’ about servant leadership, I now ‘see’ that servant leadership is really ‘too good to

be true.’ Taking a psychoanalytic frame of thinking helped open my eyes about the myth of servant leadership. In this way, the interplay of idealization and devaluation is not only central in my interpretation of servant leadership, but it also plays a part in the entire process of my research.

This study allowed me to recognize three forms of idealization in terms of the approach to doing research. The first idealization, which was my initially approach to doing research, is based on the belief that there is one truth, and knowledge of the world is objective. It is therefore the job of the researchers as the ‘expert’ to explore such knowledge. The second idealization, as applied in this study, is about listening to others and then seeking the layers of meanings associated with the stories research participants told. Researchers who adopt the third form of idealization seek to reveal and expose the underlying trends in this world and then aim to improve it and hope to create a new social structure.

I now see that, as a ‘traditional’ researcher, who for years held onto the first form of idealization, I was ‘unaware’ of the richness and depth of servant leadership. Only by devaluing that research approach and finding a substitute in the second form as a new idealized object, could I better understand servant leadership. By listening to, collecting, and interpreting stories from others, I have gained access to the informal and emotional realities of organizational life that, to some extent, display the idealized characteristics of servant leadership. Through psychoanalytic interpretation and application of Gabriel’s (2000) poetic tropes I investigated the layers of meanings of such realities, enabling me to unravel the dynamics and the complex processes of servant leadership. As part of my idealization of this approach, I now believe that the utilization of a psychoanalytic frame of thinking, organizational stories, and Gabriel’s poetic tropes, can provide a new avenue for researching servant leadership, and my study illustrates this.

In relation to the fall of the ideal and perfect image of servant leaders, in my future research of servant leadership I will not determine to seek these ‘ideal’ figures as the respondents of my study. I am, rather, determined to inquire about ‘an imperfect’

individual who is recognized by a group of employees as a person who cares and conveys concern about others in their informal relationships and leadership. Perhaps more important insights can be obtained if we can locate such a person and group. Further insights might also be gained through longitudinal studies that operate in different layers and types of organizations, where different threats, challenges as well as individual defence mechanisms may play a part in the production of servant leadership within such contexts. Yet, Whetstone (2002) warns us that servant leadership could be ineffective in some contexts (e.g. jail).

Colleagues who idealize the third form of doing research (that seeks to improve or create a new social order) may not be interested in the production of servant leadership in this study, but may be more inclined to expose cleaner-management relations and more broadly related aspects. In doing so, they may, for example, call for augmentation of the union's role in cleaning service providers, the increase of cleaners' wages and contract security, and so forth. By voicing concerns about cleaners' lives within and outside organizations, these researchers may hope that better lives of cleaners can be created in the future.

Psychoanalytically informed scholars might wonder whether such concerns (voicing improvement for cleaner's lives) are a displacement of my unconscious thoughts and feelings toward others (third type researchers). These scholars might consider that I have become my respondents' projected being who might attempt to mirror cleaners' unconscious wish, which is an expectation that I would act in a manner that could help them deal with the adversity of life. This may or may not be the case. I empathetically listened to workers' stories. However, when I first met them, I was emphatic that, as a researcher, I wanted only to know about their informal relationships at work, not anything else. During the interview and observation period, I did not offer any of them particular favours; yet my body language may have been interpreted differently by any one of them, hence triggering some psychodynamics processes (transference, projection and counter-transference) between us that might drive some of them to have exaggerated expectations of me.

This kind of reflection throughout the research process has helped me to be constantly vigilant about the interplay of transference and counter-transference between the researchers and researched. It also yields some additional data that adds richness to the research outcomes. The awareness of ‘bad things’ in servant leadership is one example, and the utilization of Divine figure idealization as a defence mechanism is another example. For me, however, the most important outcome from the entire research process is the change to me. The research process allowed me to dig deeper into my own internal world and dynamics, hence it helped me develop a clearer, more flexible, sense of who I am and how I shall live.

### **Using Psychoanalytic Interpretation for the Collected Stories and Accounts**

Gabriel’s (1991, 1995, 1997, 1999b, 2000) interpretive works on stories provide a relevant theoretical basis on which to interpret and analyze the phenomena under study. In addition to that, the approach I use here follows the works of other authors whose psychoanalytic interest in organizations seeks understanding of leader-member relationship through the tenets of Freudian psychoanalytic approach (Cluley, 2008; Kets de Vries, 1988, 1989a, 2004; Oglensky, 1995; Schwartz, 1990). Gabriel’s and other authors’ works have proved the importance of psychoanalytic concepts and theories, and demonstrated their application in the interpretation process by which unravelling and unmasking the intricacies and dynamics of leader-follower relations takes place. Their works show the importance that unconscious elements of human actions and emotions offer to the study of leadership (Gabriel, 1999b).

Psychoanalytic interpretation is fundamental in those works and other psychoanalysis research (Gabriel, 1999b; Kets de Vries, 1991, 2006; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, 1987). A psychoanalytic interpretation is a process of searching and tapping the elements of unconscious and emotional significance, and sifting these from the conscious ones.

The latter are usually distorted and tainted with the former. Accordingly, psychoanalytic researchers do not accept the face value of ‘experience’; rather they tend to be suspicious of experience. Researchers, therefore, in their attempt to understand the meanings of the collected stories and accounts do not merely report such narratives, but need to suspiciously look at the different clues and signs that can lead to the ‘truth’ in the narratives. Gabriel informs us that our suspicions as researchers need to be grounded on two principles in the process of interpretation, namely: “the truthfulness of each story, each narrative, we encounter,” and, more importantly, “the meaning of the narrative, the motives of the narrator, and our own motives, as listeners and interpreters” (1999, p. 251). This process of ‘systematic exercise of suspicion’ (Ricoeur, 1970), as discussed earlier, surely includes the researcher’s own subjectivity in the construction of meaning of the narrative (Gabriel, 1999). As a consequence, Gabriel asks the researcher to continuously reflect on their subjectivity in the interpretation process as it may produce ‘biases’ to the meaning of the narratives. By doing so, the researcher can provide strong and valid interpretation (Frosh & Emerson, 2005; Gabriel, 1999b; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987).

In addition to self-reflection, as Gabriel (1999b) suggests, there are four corroborating mechanisms that can help researchers strengthen their psychoanalytic interpretation of the collected stories and accounts of the studied phenomena. The first mechanism of corroboration is about how a researcher achieved the internal consistency of the narrative interpretation. Interpretations of meanings derived from understandings of the parts need to be consistent with the meanings interpreted from the whole. A researcher can also strengthen his or her interpretation by applying the second mechanism, in which particular results from interpretation are supported by many clues and signs from the text that point to the same direction or outcomes. The interpretation of narratives can also be corroborated, thirdly, by demonstrating some evidence and clues that can work as refutation to such interpretation. Finally, the fourth corroboration technique demonstrates that strong interpretation of a certain theme can include, explain, or surpass the other possible interpretations of such a theme.

All of these corroboration techniques can strengthen the psychoanalytic interpretation works, yet one should bear in mind that interpretation involves dialogue, in which “interpretation is a dynamic, iterative and interactive phenomenon that may bring insights but rarely provides any final, unitary 'solutions’” (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987, p. 238). Hence, in the process of corroborating interpretations, Gabriel suggests the researcher “continuously ask not only ‘Is there any other way I could make sense of this story?’, but also ‘Why is this particular interpretation so satisfying to me?’” (1999b, p. 272).

One may argue that others can interpret the collected stories and narratives in many other ways, such as using a Marxist model or a sociological analysis. However, I share Charles Lindholm’s (1988) sentiment that psychoanalytic concepts and theories “provide the most coherent and complete model of human motivation” (p. 13). This approach thus allows me to interpret the psychological aspects of servant leadership process that may be hidden (e.g. the leader’s unconscious motivation that drives the person to serve his or her subordinates) behind common sense assumptions. Psychoanalytic interpretation, then, offers me a more effective way of drawing inferences about the intricacies of servant leadership out of otherwise inexplicable phenomena.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter focused on the process and procedures of the research. First, I described the philosophical underpinnings that inform my methodological stance and my research strategies that derive from Gabriel’s (1991, 1995, 1997, 1999b, 2000) methodology of using organizational stories and case study design in his psychoanalytic informed research. These two research strategies were then described, followed by a detailed description of the research process as well as the application of psychoanalytic interpretation for the collected stories and narratives. The following chapters will present the collected stories and narratives as well as the psychoanalytic interpretation of such materials.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **The Symbolic Mother Leader**

This chapter is built on interpretation of narratives supplied by participants who at the time of researching worked as cleaners in a small group in a multinational cleaning service company. A combination of poetic tropes and psychoanalytic concepts are utilized to interpret subordinates' narratives about their relationship with other organization members. I include analysis of interviews with workers whose attachment to their supervisor can be successfully interpreted as attachment to a symbolic mother-leader. This type of leader, whose main objective is to care about, serve, and support their followers, has been popularly recognized as possessing the key characteristics of servant leaders (Bass, 2000; Greenleaf, 1998, 2002, 2003; Northouse, 2010; Yukl, 2010).

To provide the necessary background and context, the chapter commences with workers' narratives in which they apparently view the organization and its managers in terms of the impersonal and malevolent agent. This is followed by psychoanalytic interpretation of workers' narratives and accounts of their supervisor, demonstrating how the supervisor's (leader's) acts and deeds resonate with workers' deep wishes, enabling them to deal with the adversity and injustice of working life. This kind of leader reconstructs the mother symbolism in workers' psychic life that works as followers' wish fulfilment as well as a psychological means of enhancing their narcissism and self-worth (Gabriel, 1997). This in turn leads to workers' idealization of Susan, which not only brings with it some potential benefits, but also some potential drawbacks both to the individual subordinate and the organization as a whole.

#### **Workers' View of the Organization's Managers**

Cleaning service workers in general come from one of the most vulnerable and stigmatized sections of the population (Herod & Aquiar, 2006; Rainbird, 2007). Most of

them endure poor wages, low job security, and often experience their work as low status and demeaning. Such circumstances also applied to all of my participants. For them, this cleaning company, like many other cleaning organizations, was not generally a pleasant place in which to live or work. Most of the cleaners in the study complained about their precarious life in this organization. Problems were part of the day-to-day organizational life as they started their work (e.g. cleaning toilets, collecting rubbish, vacuuming, and dusting) at four in the morning. Some of them believed that the “toilet is the worst job ever,” yet, “the pay we get for the work we do is not enough”. Nonetheless, the most important source of workers’ discontent in the workplace was their treatment by other people. All reported that other workers, particularly office workers (managers), treated them as ‘insignificant beings’. Instead of care and attention, cleaners had to deal with impersonality, uncaring attitudes and indifference, all qualities of the bureaucratic organization and its apparatus. Despite being a unique and important individual in his or her own family, each cleaner found themselves consigned by the organization to the status of cog in the machine – unimportant, easily dispensable and replaceable (Gabriel, 1999a). Phoebe, a New Zealand born Pakeha woman, who had worked more than six years as a full time worker in this company, told how managers (and the organization) treated workers unfairly in the ‘Stolen Money’ story which follows.

### Stolen Money Story

I think probably the biggest thing that probably went wrong here was when we were saving money for going out. And we saved about 500 dollars, and keeping it in um the petty cash tin in office down here. And somebody stole it! Everybody was very very upset! You know we worked really hard to get it... And I think, when that money went missing, everybody just sort of gave up, just about said nah, you know, forget it... But it was, yeah, we never found out where it went. That’s the only thing that still stands out in my mind. It was never really investigated properly you know... It’s kind of annoying to think that if something like that was to go missing out of a different department, about it security’d be involved, police’d be involved. Everybody would be jumpin’ up and down

and do something about it. But it seems like, because it was the cleaners' money, umm, nobody wanted to look into it, nobody did anything about it. It kinda seemed very unfair! We had Gary Potts here at the time who was fishing to get security in. And I think it was probably one of the big bosses down here said "no", I don't know why. A lot of people sort of wondering, "What was going on?" and "Why?", you know.

The story illustrates one of the most unforgettable incidents that the cleaners in my study experienced in their organizational lives. For them, 500 dollars is a significant amount of money, which took a long period of time (over a half year) to collect. More importantly, the money was intended to fund their 'Christmas Dinner' event, a symbol of their equality with other workers from different companies. While other organizations usually fund and organize their yearly Christmas event with their own employees, Servus does not traditionally arrange such an event for its workers. Therefore, the workers decided to organize a Christmas event drawing on their own initiative and resources. By doing so, they felt they were equal with and similar to other 'normal' workers who celebrate Christmas together. Accordingly, when the workers became aware that the money was missing, they became very angry, as such an incident obliterated their fantasy of being equal with other workers.

It seems that the anger was magnified when they realized that nobody cared about the loss of the money and its impact on the workers. The incident was not investigated properly by the building security officer and the cleaners' managers. Cleaners were well aware that a very different treatment could be expected if, for example, clients lost any of their property. Everyone would then be involved and try to resolve the problem. Thus, how managers and security officers dealt with the missing money problem seemed, to the cleaners, very unfair.

Accordingly, the 'stolen money' story reveals one of the important poetic tropes – attribution of workers' motive (Gabriel, 2000) – which is a desire or wish to be treated fairly or equally. Workers considered themselves an important part of the organization,

having served the organization for years and provided a valuable contribution to the company and its customers, which in turn contributed to those organizations' profits for years. Specifically, cleaners help create a good working environment for clients. One of the participants pointed out: "not everybody likes to clean the toilets but somebody got to do it... so it is us who do it!" Simply, the workers wanted people to acknowledge their worth and value. They wanted to be treated as an important party – not as 'a different society', a group of people that is not important in the community, or, as Rachel called it, "a black sheep in the family."

Therefore, the story also uncovers a stereotype – an attribution of fixed qualities (Gabriel, 2000), about cleaners. In this stereotype, cleaners are seen as an 'unimportant entity'—the lower class of society. Thus, the label of 'unimportant class of people' acts as a full signifier of the cleaners and their qualities. These qualities may range from feeling unwanted to total 'rejection'. One important means of attributing fixed qualities involves the juxtaposition of two groups whose qualities are meant to be exact opposites of each other. In this case, the entire class of people (except the cleaners) is treated as an important entity, a higher class. Clients, for example, are honourable people. If clients have a problem, then police, building security officers, and other parties would become involved and do something about it. However, a different story would apply if the cleaners have a problem: no one wants to think about it. No one wants to investigate the missing money. The managers and the organization seem not even to care about it. Thus, this description shows one important poetic use of opposition is the opposition of important and unimportant – one group is devalued and diminished in opposition to ones that are constructed as self-evidently important and valuable classes of people (Gabriel, 2000).

As a result, the teller of this story cast herself and other cleaners in the group in the role of victims (as they suffered because of the incident and the stereotype), a role associated with lack of recognition and respect from others, especially from the managers and the organization. In fact, for cleaners in this organization, victimization was at the core of their experience. It was not surprising, then, to see cleaners blame others as the

malevolent agent, especially the managers for doing ‘nothing’ and not treating them equally. It was the managers who were deemed responsible for cleaners’ suffering and many other ‘bad’ experiences. The uncaring managers were blamed for undermining their pride and self-esteem. The workers were not merely hurt, they were also angry. This anger came from injured pride and narcissism (Gabriel, 1997; Hirschhorn, 1988). But there seemed to be nothing cleaners could do about it. Therefore, workers were more likely to suppress their anger and try to forget the incident. They just pretended that ‘nothing’ had happened, which they might do it as part of their ‘survival’ tactic in this company. This is reflected in the claim: “everybody just sort of gave up and, you know, said: ‘forget it!’” Hence, the story also reveals how the workers dealt passively with any conflict they felt they had with the organization and its managers. Interpreting this, they may have felt as if they had little right to speak and limited alternative options. Against the powerful managers, the workers found themselves faced with forces over which they had no control. Bureaucracy and its managers were far beyond their power and strength, as there is always an asymmetry in power – embedded in the hierarchical nature of authority relationships (Gabriel, 2000; Oglensky, 1995).

Workers may succeed in repressing their feeling of anger, yet, that feeling does not disappear but rather seeks to be manifested in various outlets (Gabriel, 1999b). One possible outlet for such emotion is through a story. This is because a story can provide a ‘royal road’ for emotional discharge that resonates with the person and group’s symbolic world (Gabriel, 2000) – a world “in which desires, anxieties and emotions find expressions in highly irrational constructions” (Gabriel, 1995, p. 477). Similarly, in this case, in constructing this story, the repressed angry feeling was expressed and manifested as cleaners accused one (or all) of the managers of being the thief. Such an accusation can be inferred from a reconstruction of the incident by a couple of the cleaners. Consider the following information. Phoebe, as the person in-charge of collecting workers’ money every week, would save it in locked petty-cash tin in the office, in the payroll staff room. Cleaners considered the payroll staff member as a woman with integrity. Only four persons had legitimate access to the petty cash – the payroll staff member and all of the (three) managers. At the time the money went missing, the payroll staff member was not

in the office because she was on leave. Thus, from this perspective, there is a (strong) possibility that the workers have suspected one (or more) of the managers to be the thief. Perhaps, in their fantasy, the workers believed the managers were envious of the workers' Christmas party, or even felt upset because the cleaners did not invite them to such an important event. By stealing workers' money, as the accusation went, managers could sabotage the end-of-year party, and thus be able to dispel their feeling of envy since no one in Servus would be able to enjoy the Christmas dinner. Therefore, by providing an opportunity for the storyteller (cleaners) to accuse management as the thief whose aim was to sabotage cleaners' Christmas Dinner, the story functioned as an outlet for releasing the cleaners' repressed angry feelings.

In reading the text of such a story, it is not difficult to sense the anger in addition to other emotions such as sadness and pity. Yet, interestingly, the story was shared excitedly and passionately by the storyteller. Then, one may ask: Why is such a story so meaningful when shared with other people? Is the story charged by other emotional and symbolic meaning – in addition to releasing the repressed angry feelings? Is there any wish-fulfilment and consolation offered by this story? Since the main theme of the story is about injustice, it is possible to consider that the process of re-telling this story gave pleasure, in terms of moral satisfaction, to the storyteller. She had experienced injustice and through the story such injustice could be shared with other people (audience). The process of narrating then satisfied the storyteller and fulfilled her deep wish and desire as the story brought injustice to light (Gabriel, 2000). As the storyteller may have been aware that this story would be recounted to a wider audience, she might also have wished and hoped that justice would be delivered one day by some outside force. Accordingly, the process of storytelling excited the storyteller as it not only provided satisfaction at 'voicing' the management malevolence, but it also functioned as an agency of aspiration. By providing hope for the cleaners, the process of re-telling the story might help them tolerate the frustration, disappointment and helplessness caused by their managers' impersonality and malevolence.

In turn, the story also reveals the workers' powerlessness and helplessness in dealing with organizational hardship and difficulties. In such situations, subordinates experience lack of control, ambiguity, and increased dependency needs. The cleaners, who felt weak, unwanted, and rejected, then, started to doubt their self-esteem and identity. For them, identity in this organizational life was a status that was always in question. In response to the threat of identity devaluation with its associated anxiety and sense of helplessness, individual workers may employ various defence mechanisms to cope with the situation (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Diamond & Adams, 1999; Laughlin, 1970).

Yet, the psychoanalytic insights into leadership suggest that subordinates often utilize idealization transference onto an admired person or a role model as a powerful way to dispel their state of insignificance and powerlessness (Gabriel, 1999b; Kets de Vries, 1988, 1993, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). Such idealization allows the subordinates to identify with the admired person's qualities or characteristics, hence it works as a way to affirm their worthiness and help boost their self esteem and confidence (Baum, 1991; Gabriel, 1999b; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004). In this case, the cleaners' need of idealizing transference onto an admired person is confirmed by Susan – the group's supervisor, which is the topic that I will turn to now. More specifically, in the following section, I will discuss how cleaners viewed Susan as an admired person, an ideal object who echoed workers' wishes and desires in a way that gave each cleaner a healthy sense of narcissistic self-esteem and self-confidence that could help the cleaners deal with the hardship and bitterness of organizational life.

### **Workers' View of Susan**

In this section, I provide a story and a range of accounts that illustrate workers' view of their supervisor (Susan). Susan, the leader here focused upon, had extensive experience in the cleaning service industry. At the time of the research, Susan, a Maori woman, was 67 years old and nearing retirement. Susan had eight subordinates and reported to an area manager (Brendon). In this study, I differentiate 'leader' and 'manager': the word 'leader' refers to an admired person who is idealized by people, and is therefore treated

by them as endowed with supernatural power or characteristics. On the other hand, the word ‘manager(s)’ is described simply as people in authority who perform certain administrative functions in the organization (Gabriel, 2010; Krantz & Gilmore, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977). In this section, I will demonstrate how Susan became the group’s leader.

### **Susan as the Symbolic Mother**

Cleaners’ accounts about Susan convey a totally different story to their narratives about the organization and its managers. Far from being typical of the managers, Susan represented something different to the workers. In this section, I will show how cleaning service workers’ accounts reveal an important psychoanalytic assumption that subordinates’ relations with their supervisor are built based on, and bear a similarity to, primitive relations (Gabriel, 1997; Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995), particularly, those from early childhood with a ‘good’ mother.

In the following accounts, Anita (Extract 1) and Monica (Extract 2) spontaneously talk of their supervisor (Susan) as their symbolic mother at work. Both Anita and Monica are Fijian New Zealanders. Anita had been working in this company for six years as a full-time worker, while Monica was a part-time worker, who had three years’ working experience.

#### Extract 1

Susan, you know, she’s like our mother to us. I mean, the way that she’s always treats us... If there is anything, if there is somebody comes and needs help and asks her “if I can go and finish work earlier,” then she will understand and say “okay” and “you can go now.” She will understand. If Brendon [one of the managers] asks about me then she said, “Oh, she’s gone. She’s having a problem.” She’ll say something a bit about it. If you have a problem, family problem or what sort of problem, she will ask about it and understand that. If they [workers] need help or seek any advice, they just go to Susan because just like I said, she’s the mother!

### Extract 2

She's very... like I'm comfortable with her. I'm not, like, scared to talk to her... I respect her. She's a supervisor, but at the same time, I can go and to talk to her about anything. If I have any concern I'm going to talk to her, cause I know she will do something about it... She's like a mother figure. You know you feel comfortable to her, because she's almost like your mother. You know what I mean? Because she listens to you. Because sometimes she asks, "Are you alright?" When she sees you feeling tired, "Oh are you tired?" She'll ask. So she's concerned, she cares... I always tell people, you know, my supervisor is the best!

Monica and Anita's accounts reveal one of the primary tropes, the attribution of emotion to their supervisor in positive terms, especially the caring aspects of the leader. Monica mentions: "I'm comfortable with her," "I respect her," and "She's concerned, she cares." Additionally, Anita states: "if you have a problem," then "she will ask about it and understand that." These accounts emphasize that Susan, as the group's leader, personally not only cared about workers' work, but was also concerned about their private lives. For cleaners, Susan as the group's supervisor neither reprimanded nor judged, but provided; she listened and gave her time, her wisdom and affection to the workers; she was close to them, since she was the person they went to with their problems; and workers were very comfortable communicating with her.

Accordingly, workers' narratives express their gratitude for being treated with consideration, care, and respect. As such, workers re-lived many positive feelings, memories, and wishes that they had had in the early period of their lives with their first love objects, mostly their mothers (Gabriel, 1997; Maccoby, 2004). Through the *transference* process, they directed these affections toward Susan, since she had been really concerned for them and willing to offer support and recognition on many different occasions, just like their mothers had in the past. In the inner life of the cleaners, Susan

filled the primal mother role (Gabriel, 1997). Consequently, the workers saw Susan as their symbolic mother, a giver of unconditional love and support.

In the psychoanalytic approach to leadership, Chassequet-Smirgel (1976) was one of the first authors to suggest that “some leaders do not function psychically as father substitutes in the manner Freud envisaged, but as reincarnation of the primal mother” (cited in Gabriel, 1997, p. 323). The leader as a mother substitute is the person that the subordinates feel close to and comfortable with. She is a figure who gives them love and showers them with support and care. It is not surprising to see caring as a central feature of followers’ accounts of their maternal transference (Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Maccoby, 2004).

Following Kohut’s (1985) typology, Gabriel (1997) suggests that the symbolic mother leader is similar to the charismatic leader, but Lindholm (1988) argues that the discourse of charismatic leadership in the leadership literature in general is more closely aligned to Freud’s symbolic father leader. I, however, contend that the more appropriate term to use as a description of the followers’ maternal fantasy of their leader is Greenleaf’s (2002, 2003) fantasy of servant leader: showing the centrality of attributes such as care, support, and recognition in followers’ accounts about their leader. This type of leadership, when the leader put followers’ well being and development as his or her main objective, has been recognized in the leadership literature as the key characteristic of servant leadership (Bass, 2000; Northouse, 2010; Yukl, 2010). I suspend further discussion of servant leadership in this chapter, as I will discuss it in more detail in Chapter 7.

### **Susan’s Serving Behaviours Fulfil Workers’ Wishes and Desires**

Workers’ narratives not only show their view of Susan as the symbolic mother, but also demonstrate how Susan’s acts, behaviours, and presence, work as individuals’ wish-fulfilment of their unconscious motives. In the following story, Joey’s account provides a narrative that illustrates the fulfilment of this wish by Susan in a particular incident. Joey was a Maori man in his fifties, a part-time worker who had worked in the Servus

Company for approximately nine years. In the 'Lost Key' story, Joey shares his unforgettable moment when Susan 'saved' him from a very difficult situation.

### Lost Key Story

It's like when I lost the key [to a particular client's building]. Susan was... I knew I got Susan into trouble... I was with Susan looking for, and then I went on my deliveries. And then Brendon [the manager] called me. And then I went to the office with Susan, and he was more, like, growling at her than me. And I was the one that lost it. And then I... you feel bad because she never said, she just like... "yep, yep, yep." You see what I mean? She took all the blame! And Brendon was telling her off and he didn't tell me off, you know. I was kind... oh, I felt real bad because it's like she took all the blame... That's a good boss! And then after we come out, I apologized. And she said, "Don't worry Joey. It's alright." See, and you know, it was my fault! You know, sign of a good boss. So, that's why I like doing, you know, if she asks me doing then I say yeah.

The first time when Joey realized that he had lost a key to a client's building, he did not report the incident to Brendon (the manager) and the building security officer as he was afraid of being punished by the manager after making such a careless mistake. Yet, when his effort to find the key was fruitless, he was worried and the fear was intensified. Hence, Joey reported this incident to Susan the following day when they started work early in the morning. When both of them were unable to find the lost key, they preferred to report the incident 'only' to the security staff in the hope that the manager would not become aware of the situation. In this view, the story demonstrates the workers' resistance to company surveillance of every aspect of organizational life. Consequently, one can infer that there were many practices within the group that were hidden from the managers. For workers, such practices often provide a sense of autonomy that symbolizes their (little) freedom from the organization's or managers' control (Gabriel, 1999b).

Unfortunately, either the security officer or the client must have reported this to the manager (Brendon) since such notification was part of the contractual agreement between the client and the service provider (Servus), though Susan may not have been aware of this. The security officer or the client then called Brendon and asked him to resolve the issue immediately as it entailed a considerable security risk for the client. Brendon was more likely to see the incident as a problem as he was aware that neither Joey nor Susan had told him about this before; therefore, both of them had broken one of the company's rules or procedures. Brendon, as these workers' super-ordinate, may have seen it as an insult to his authority and pride, given that being ignored or undermined by subordinates is one type of insult (Gabriel, 1998). Hence, driven by a (constant) fear of losing power over his subordinates and the corresponding emotions of shame and anger, Brendon contacted Joey in the middle of doing his job and asked him to come to the office right away. This scenario, then, provides a rich, emotion-laden context for the story's opening scene.

When the manager called him, while he was doing deliveries of cleaning supplies to clients' sites, Joey sensed some anger in the manager's voice. Immediately, Joey visualized some consequences that he might face. He was, however, certain that Brendon would not fire him, as there was a procedure that needed to be complied with to carry out such an action. Despite this, there were other possible consequences that were undesirable to Joey. He was well aware of the possibility of getting fewer work hours after the incident, which would affect his family's financial situation. Perhaps Joey fantasized some other consequences that might come as punishment for the mistake. Brendon, for instance, could relocate him to other sites, which would surely force Joey out of his comfort zone as he needed to adapt to a new situation (a new team, supervisor, and client). As he preferred none of these options, Joey responded to the situation with stress and anxiety which were exacerbated by his sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. Consequently, this situation reactivated his feelings of infantile helplessness in the face of threats from others or the environment (Czander, 1993; Kets de Vries, 1993; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Oglensky, 1995). Joey had no control over or power to 'solve' the problem. There was nothing he could do about it other than only

rely on his supervisor as the last source of protection. At that time, he might have sent some signals of discomfort and fear, projecting his feelings of helplessness onto Susan. Joey may have desired a sensitive response from her to buffer the intense feelings of fear and anxiety (Oglensky, 1995). Joey needed a rescuer; he needed his (symbolic) mother once again.

From Joey's description, I am aware that, as the workers' symbolic mother, Susan did what she had to. She saved Joey like a mother who could overcome her fear to save her child from a burning house. The manager's anger, then, was rightly targeted at Susan rather than Joey. Joey's psychic discomfort with its associated anxiety and fear was suddenly discharged and turned into a surprise. As a result, Joey offers an example of a different type of Gabriel's (2000) poetic trope – an attribution of blame and credit. Joey as the narrator attributes credit to Susan as a hero, when she protects him from potential anger and punishment. This story provides a rare case in organizational life, since most organizational stories reveal some blame from the leader to his or her subordinates through scapegoating (Gabriel, 2000). However, in this narrative, when Joey realized that Susan did not assign blame to him, he then presented the episode as the moment of Susan's triumph over a 'test of character', wherein Susan did not seek her self-interest but rather showed self-sacrifice. This is a story of a great deed, with the quality of noble sacrifice (Grint, 2010). Susan is then seen as a different kind of 'boss' in comparison to those (leaders) who get easily blamed and then scapegoat their subordinates to cope with difficult situations (Gabriel, 2000). Seeing Susan 'pass' the test, Joey then cast her in the role of a hero, who saved his day from the potential disaster when he made a serious mistake. In the end, Joey does not become the victim, because Susan actively 'covers' all of the consequences that may come from what he did. Had the circumstances been different, Joey would have been in big trouble, since losing a key presented a big security risk. Therefore, in this narrative, Joey describes another role for Susan besides that of care giver. This alternative role is that of the symbolic mother who protects her symbolic child and assures his security (Gabriel, 1997).

The story reveals another important feature of Susan's act for Joey as she not only protected him from the manager's wrath and punishment, but also shows that she cares enough for him. When Joey sees Susan self-sacrificially put her job at risk in order to save him, he interprets such action as an act of love. Susan treats him as an important human being, so, he feels respected. That is why Joey describes Susan as a "good boss", from which it may be inferred 'a good boss is a good leader.' Susan is the leader that Joey has wished for as she sensitively responds to his wish to be viewed as an important person; and to his desire to feel secure from a hostile and threatening environment (Gabriel, 1997).

The same case also applies to other group members. When workers relate with Susan, they experience a totally different situation and treatment in comparison to their relations with other parties (e.g. managers or clients). As discussed earlier, most of the cleaning service workers consciously and unconsciously felt themselves inferior. Evidence of this came through the repeated theme that the "toilet is the worst job ever." The job was seen to lack dignity, leading to lowered self-esteem and self-confidence. Additionally, far from treating them as 'people, others at times treated cleaners as 'insignificant beings'. Hence, for cleaners at Servus, their sense of identity only related to indignity, rejection, and denial, leading to a sense of devaluation and low self-esteem (Diamond & Adams, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1988). Workers respond to this workplace stress anxiously and defensively (Diamond & Adams, 1999). As a means to defend their identity as well as to avoid psychic pain and discomfort, workers then seek a way to feel important again. They seek to recapture the perfection they once had in the early years of life in which they experienced a world full of love and felt a relative sense of omnipotence (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Diamond & Adams, 1999, Gabriel, 1999b, Kets de Vries, 1988, 1989a).

Now, in their current work situation, Susan represents something different, something that they have longed for. Susan accepts them just the way they are. She cares about them and is willing to offer support to each of them. Susan loves them and treats them with respect. Each worker then establishes Susan as his or her ideal or primary object (Cluley, 2008; Freud, 1921; Gabriel, 1999b) – the surrogate for the lost perfection of early

childhood in which the person was his or her own ideal. As the ideal, Susan offers the opportunity to each worker to ‘merge’ and to be identified with her. As a consequence, the cleaners might cease to think of themselves as inferior individuals. Indeed, they might feel important and special as they experience the existence of love, appreciation and pride.

Accordingly, in Susan, Joey and other cleaners find a superior’s power soothing. Susan is a leader that cleaners wish for. Cleaners, then, are willing to follow Susan, the caregiver, as a role model and put her into a leadership role within the group. This leadership role can be associated with or be set apart from a position of formal authority (Day, 2000). Furthermore, as each of them places their ideals onto Susan, the group’s relationships and cohesiveness are established (Czander, 1993; Freud, 1921; Gabriel, 2010). Members’ relationships with Susan and with one another are primarily affectionate, based on trust, allowing the relationship to become one of mutuality. Group members are more likely to listen to Susan; they are willing to work with and support her. People who feel enriched by her presence know that Susan is the only authority that deserves their loyalty, commitment, and leadership legitimacy.

In view of this, the ‘Lost Key’ story also conveys another important attribution – an attribution of a fixed quality. The leader, Susan, who once performed a heroic and selfless deed by protecting Joey and shouldering all the blame, will be labelled as a good or even great leader afterward. Consequently, for Joey (and other cleaners), the label ‘great leader’ acts as a full signifier of Susan and her qualities (Gabriel, 2000). In this respect, workers fantasize Susan as better than she really is by projecting all the perfections that constructed their own ego-ideal onto Susan (Gabriel, 1997; Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). Indeed, through this lens of idealization, workers may see Susan as the ‘great mother’ who offers unconditional acceptance, protection, and the icon of selfless, all-sustaining, life-giving mother-love (Gabriel, 1997)

### **Workers' Idealization of Susan**

In this section, I will provide subordinates' accounts of their idealizing transference to Susan. Such a mechanism can provide many positive outcomes both to the individual subordinate and the organization as a whole. However, as no one can sustain idealization in the long run, thus idealization inevitably brings with it the possibility of creating negative consequences. Let me first demonstrate an example of idealized narrative as shown in Phoebe's account (Extract 3).

#### Extract 3

If I had a problem with work or something like that I always talk to Susan. Yeah, we always, she'd be the first person, you know, I'd go through... Well she's one of those people that, you know, you can talk to about anything. And it's never going about any further. You know, you can always talk to Susan and it's in confidence. You know? Last year was a really bad year, personally, and I have a lot of things that you know were going on outside of work. And, mmm, Susan just talked me through so much of it, um, just listening really, and just being a shoulder. So, yeah, she's a pretty amazing person. And as a supervisor I think she takes it to a really... she's a kind of supervisor that everybody wants, because she cares about her workers, on all levels. And she's somebody you can trust and talk to. Everybody loves Susan.

First of all, Phoebe's account not only demonstrates the idealization narrative, but it also shows another worker's wish-fulfilment: having a mother as her closest friend. Phoebe states that with Susan, she can talk about anything. She can share her deepest secrets, issues or concerns with Susan without any fear that it will go any further. Phoebe views Susan as her best friend, who listens to her, gives some support but not judgment. Hence, from this narrative, I can see that it is a wish-fulfilment for Phoebe to have a leader who treats her equally, just like a friend. She is the person that Phoebe feels close to and comfortable with. She is the person that Phoebe can trust. Subsequently, Phoebe idealizes Susan as "pretty amazing person" with whom "you can talk about anything." She also

illustrates Susan as “a kind of supervisor that everybody wants” since she is a good supervisor (in terms of performance) and “cares about the workers.” In addition, in her account, Phoebe also emphasizes that she loves Susan and implies that this fantasy is shared with other workers (“everybody loves Susan”). According to Gabriel (1997), “this is a typical psychological process of idealization, which imbues the whole narrative” (p. 321). Simply, there is no single negative word or comment in Phoebe’s account about Susan.

The psychoanalytic insights into leadership suggest that subordinates’ idealizing transference to their leader can produce various positive outcomes, both for the group and organization as well as the individual subordinate (Gabriel, 1997; Kets de Vries, 1988, 1993, 2004; Maccoby, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). On the condition that each subordinate recognizes that through this projection fantasies are being met, the subordinate may continue to work hard, to the obvious benefit of the organization as a whole (Maccoby, 2004). Subordinates, based on their identification with Susan’s caring and serving behaviours, serve one another and develop good teamwork; increased group productivity and satisfaction are the result. Moreover, provided that there is a continuation of good and nurturing relationship where the worker’s self-esteem is affirmed, then the person can build up a healthy sense of self (Kohut, 1971). This is evident with Rachel, who spoke, in her ensuing account, of her “personal change”, which she believed was evident from her years of working with Susan (Extract 4). Rachel was a thirty-two year old New Zealand-born Pakeha woman, who had been working for this company more than three years as a part-time worker. At the time of researching, she had just started a new relationship with a male worker in the group.

#### Extract 4

And being here with Susan and the team has been really good for me. It’s been a positive thing. It’s shown me that there’s more in life than what I have been through, you know. And there are better things out there. And, since I’ve been in a new relationship, it shows me there’s been more to life than what I had. You know, there’s been more opportunity, there’s

been...you can be yourself around a person. You don't have to do what that person says. You know you can, and I've got more confident, got more self-esteem being with this team than I've ever had in my entire life. Yeah, since I've been with Susan, I've had that, but before then, no, you'll be lucky if you ever talk one word from me. Yeah, you'd be lucky. I won't talk to you at all. I'd just have my headphones on and I'd walk past you and won't say nothing. I'd go do my job and go home. The more I was away with people, the better I was. But since I've been with Susan, it's shown me that there are people out there that care. They are different. People not caring for you at all. So to me, they more family to me than anything else. Even they don't talk to each other, that's how I feel, because they treat you like a person. You can talk to them if you having a bad day. And, like, you know you can't do that to any member of your family and that's hard because noone cared. Noone had the time for you so I've learned and got a lot of, you know, skills and stuff since I've been here with Susan. Yeah, life is changed for me! Since being here and having a new relationship, things, for me, have changed dramatically! Yeah, now you can have an opinion, you don't have to be careful of what you say, you know, you just can be yourself, be... you know, do what you want. You don't have to always keep thinking there's someone coming behind you, to tell you what to do. Yeah, being here, you could just basically relax. You can relax and you can trust them and what you say. You can have that confidence to talk and be open about if you got complaints or something to say. So, in this environment, a lot of changes have been made, which is good to my sake (laughs).

Rachel has been exhausted with all of the negativity in her life, tired of having many conflicts with others. She feels worn out and unable to constantly deal with troubles. Deep down inside, she wishes to get away from this kind of life and starts to fantasize a new and a better one. Susan's acts and behaviours then become a wish fulfilment to her conscious and unconscious motives. Susan as the symbolic mother 'mirrors' the worker,

responding aptly to Rachel's emotional feelings and desires, rewarding and accepting her for who she is, rather than for what she has achieved. Moreover, personal changes and empowerment become the products of feeling valued, respected and loved, and Rachel starts to see the world differently, learning new things and growing as a person.

For Rachel, Susan functions as her change agent in this workplace, whose acts and behaviours are in line with the discourse of 'leader as therapist' (Western, 2008) and 'leader as the manager of emotions' (Gabriel, 2010). The individual leader, in this discourse, brings the best out of the subordinates by 'diagnosing' and intervening in their unconscious and conscious desires and emotions, through listening, caring and supporting. The leader's role, from this point of view, is to manage subordinates' subjectivities by utilizing her highly developed people skills (e.g. communication skills, sensitivity, and empathy) in leader-subordinate relationships. The leader deals with workers' emotions carefully, mostly via one-on-one counselling or coaching (Gabriel, 2010; Western, 2008). In doing so, the leader helps "make conscious what lies unconscious among followers" (Burns, 1978, p. 40), and could potentially facilitate the individual subordinate's self-healing and sense of empowerment (Kets de Vries, 2004). Similarly, the above account shows how Susan's caring and loving behaviours intervene to ameliorate Rachel's emotional pain and narcissistic injuries, and then help facilitate Rachel's sense of personal growth and development.

Accordingly, Rachel's account presents an episode as having been engineered by a superior intelligence in order to achieve a particular end, which is to change Rachel's life dramatically. What did appear from Rachel's account was that she had experienced some sense of change, which she may have perceived as having triggered the healing self. Such a sense of relief, when experienced dramatically, could be identified as 'salvation'. Thus, Rachel may see Susan as a figure of the awaited saviour, a messiah. Susan becomes a messiah, who, once born, is set to guide her life of negativity onto a more positive path. For Rachel, Susan turns out to be a superior agency at work which ensures that justice is done in Rachel's life. This kind of intervention is what Gabriel (2000) calls an attribution of a providential significance.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, idealization brings with it the ever-present possibility of other negative consequences. This is because in the long run no one can maintain the idealization with its associate unrealistic expectations. Nobody is perfect, and “essentially, a leader cannot be ‘all things to all people’ or all things to all organizational contexts and situations” (Western, 2008, p. 113). On the other hand, we should bear in mind that, as subordinates, we are likely to be fickle as we wrestle not simply with particular idealizations but with other emotional and relational wishes and desires. The differences in leader’s expectations of subordinates and vice versa may generate a gap that only leads to failures of maintaining the illusion of idealization. These failures, then, create frustrations for both leader and subordinates, turning idealization into disappointment and anger. One of the workers, Monica, shares an example in the following account:

Extract 5

Maybe, like, because I’ve heard of Anita. She got upset with Susan one time. Because she said, oh, because Susan keeps changing, Susan told Anita something, I don’t know, I can’t remember. But, she changed her idea, her mind, and then she didn’t tell Anita. She forgot. So, Anita said to me, “Oh, she keeps changing her ideas” you know. Yeah, just to please somebody else, you know. So, Anita: “Oh, you know, but she told me this, but she told somebody else something else!” Because she wants to be nice, you know, to everybody!

Monica’s account not only shows Susan’s failure in meeting the subordinate’s needs, but also illustrates that subordinate’s dependency on Susan. As Anita (and other subordinates) relies on Susan for love, support, and recognition, she consciously and unconsciously expects Susan to be constantly able to provide such affection and attention to her. Anita may only look to Susan for the reinstatement of her sense of identity and self-esteem. If Anita does not gain Susan’s love or attention, then she loses herself. Yet, the above account shows Susan’s inconsistency in dealing with all workers, and

inevitably, she fails to satisfy Anita's (exaggerated) needs and expectations. As a result, Anita was disappointed and angry. In fact, the appearance of Susan's perfection from Anita's point of view may no longer be sustained, turning idealization into devaluation. In other cases, the failure to maintain the illusion of idealization may provide conditions for betrayal and lead to dysfunctional consequences both for leader and subordinates (Gabriel & Schwartz, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004; Krantz, 2006; Oglensky, 1995), as I illustrate in more detail in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, idealization can also bring with it another potential negative consequence for both the organization and its members. In idealizing Susan, workers see her as larger than life, incorporate her ideal qualities, and then experience the sense of importance and omnipotence (Kets de Vries, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). Such experiences evoke the person's memories of earliest childhood in which he or she experiences a world full of love and a sense of importance confirmed by a supporting primary caregiver's (mostly the mother) sensitive responsiveness. From this perspective, the mother turns out to be enslaved to the child; and the child turns into the mother's master: 'her majesty the baby' (Shamir, 1991).

The same case may apply to cleaners in this study in their idealizing transference to Susan. Having experienced the state of importance as the product of the idealization mechanism, the workers might now view Susan as their 'subordinate' functioning to meet their needs and interests. Knowing that Susan would tolerate and forgive them when they made 'mistakes,' and that she would 'be there' to 'cover' their actions and mistakes, the workers frequently did things based on an assumption that nothing was more important than themselves (e.g. their interests, needs, feelings and moods). A few workers mentioned how some of the fellow cleaners did many 'bad' practices as a means of adjustment to their personal circumstances. Such practices were hidden from the managers yet tolerated by Susan. Indeed, workers were well aware that, if managers knew or find out about these practices, Susan would protect them from managers' anger and punishment as shown in Joey's case ('Lost Key' story). In fact, when in a 'bad mood', some workers quite regularly bungled their work and enjoyed some protection

from Susan. In other cases, workers used ‘short-cuts’ in their work, bent the corporate rules or procedures through such practices as taking longer and more frequent breaks than they were supposed to, came late to work, and engaged in some ‘fiddles’ (e.g. petty pilfering), seemingly with discretion and impunity. These practices then may demonstrate the expression of the individual subordinate’s need of autonomy and sense of control, which may represent a little arena of negotiation where the person can put his or her personal stamp on work (Gabriel, 1999a).

Many of these practices were only shared among the group’s members; yet Susan knew most of the practices and she was considered as part of them. Perhaps she not only tolerated those practices, but may also (indirectly) have encouraged them. Hence, such a situation also conveys an important reality about the conflict of Susan’s role as the group’s supervisor and the group’s leader. By ‘allowing’ these practices to exist, the workers saw how Susan preferred to prioritize workers’ interests rather than management interests, rules or objectives. In fact, such a condition may have been interpreted by the workers as confirmation of Susan’s servility to them and affirming her role as their ‘subordinate’. In this view, the symbolic mother then becomes ‘enslaved’ to her symbolic children; and the symbolic children become the symbolic mother’s master. Of course, most of these practices have the potential to cripple the group’s and organization’s productivity and goals.

Yet, on the other hand, we know that Joey’s story also demonstrates a situation where the manager discovered one of these practices, leaving Susan as the scapegoat and the only person that bore the consequence. Given that Joey’s story was not the only case where Susan paid the price for her servility to the workers, this servility often caused her to feel burdened as she needed to ‘cover up’ questionable practices and protect the subordinates from the associated consequences. Phoebe reports:

Extract 6

Yeah, she [Susan] got a lot on her shoulder, I guess. She’s responsible for a lot here. That will go smoothly as long as everybody is doing what they

should (laugh). If somebody hasn't been sort of doing what they should be then they all fall on Susan's shoulder.

Accordingly, albeit the cleaners' idealization of Susan had the potential to do good as shown in the accounts of Joey, Phoebe and Rachel, it could also do damage. The damage is both to the leader (Susan) and those who make leadership possible – the followers. In fact, given that idealization of the leader can also create tension among layers in the organizational hierarchy, the results of this are potentially dire for the leader, the managers and the organization as well as for the team members themselves – a topic that I will elaborate further in the following chapter.

## **Chapter Summary**

The chapter was built on interpretation of stories and accounts supplied by participants who worked as cleaners in a small team in a multinational cleaning service company. A combination of poetic tropes and psychoanalytic concepts were utilized to interpret workers' narratives about their relationship with other organizational members.

In this chapter, in particular, I demonstrated how workers' symbolic relationship with Susan, the group's leader, helped them tolerate the hardships of working life – mostly caused by the organization's managers, viewed as the impersonal and malevolent agents. Having Susan as the team leader, whose acts and behaviours echoed the cleaners' sense of importance and worthiness, helped build and shore up the workers' identities. Nevertheless, my analysis showed the instability of the cleaners' idealization of, and identification with, Susan. This is because such mechanisms inevitably create a double-edged sword, for they are not only able to help subordinates to bolster their identities, but also bring the threat of many possible negative consequences.

In the next chapter, I demonstrate how workers construct their work group into a symbolic family group. Such group construction, psychoanalytically speaking, stems from individuals' identification with their leader as well as with other fellow workers. In

this environment, workers transform work relations into informal relationship and informal leadership, which share many features of servant leadership.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Symbolic Family Group

*I look forward to come to work ... Not because I love cleaning or anything, you know. Nobody loves cleaning! But I like the people I work with. And I like being together with everybody... I missed everybody if I didn't come to work.*

In Chapter 4, I demonstrate psychoanalytic and poetic trope interpretation of cleaners' narratives about their attachment to Susan, which can be understood as attachment to a symbolic mother-leader. The cleaners' stories and accounts demonstrate their idealization of Susan, whose acts and behaviours resonated with their wishes and desires. Since caring is the main feature of subordinates' idealized accounts of their leader, I suggest that this symbolic mother-leader is similar to the Greenleaf's (1998, 2002, 2003) fantasy of the servant leader.

In this chapter, I explore another object of subordinate idealization: the symbolic family group. Such a group, according to the psychoanalysis frame of thinking, is a by-product of the process of identification: first, with Susan (the group leader); and second, with co-workers. In this symbolic family group, relationships and leadership are informal, which reflect many important characteristics of servant leadership, such as personal and close relationships, community building, the principle of *primus inter pares*, a shared decision making process that aims for consensus, and dispersed leadership.

The chapter commences with cleaners' descriptions of their group as the symbolic family. I then highlight how such group construction transforms the group mechanism into informal relationships and leadership. This is followed by a discussion of how such a group functions as the group's holding environment that can provide many benefits for members' empowerment and team-work. The final two sections of the chapter discuss the converse effects, with their associated consequences, that such a group may bring to its

members (workers' rivalries and conflicts) and other organizational members (the devaluation of managers – viewed as bad symbolic father) in a wider context.

### **The Group as the Symbolic Family**

Cleaning service workers in this study often called their work team a 'family.' In such an environment workers feel close with one another and gain satisfaction for their social and intimacy needs. Caring, harmony, and collective cohesiveness are idealized qualities; yet, individuality, conflicts and competition are suppressed. In this view, the group as a 'family' refers to notions of mutuality between each group member as well as a sense of loyalty and belonging. It is also a metaphor, as Casey (1999) suggests, that "actively evokes pre-industrial romantic images of kinship bonding and shared struggles against adversity" (p. 162).

Cleaners' accounts also reveal the relations of this symbolic family with their real family. Anita, for example, may have viewed the group as a compensation for her geographically distanced husband and children. For Joey, Monica, and Phoebe, the symbolic family seemed to function as an extended or re-enactment of their own families. Yet, for Rachel, it worked as a surrogate for her apparently 'dysfunctional' family. Rachel shares:

#### Extract 1

They're [Susan and the other team members] good... You know, they're supporting of me and my kids and all the stuff that I've been went through. At least when I'm coming to work, you know that you have a friend to talk to. But at home, like, if you go and visit your family, there is nothing, you know. All they have bad things, you know... So, they're [the team members] probably like more family to me because I've nothing to do with my [real] family.

In this symbolic family, the members often organized various ‘family’ activities. The cleaners celebrated birthdays. They also visited members who were sick. The cleaners shared food every Friday morning. Monica, one of the workers, reports: “we have our Friday, we have morning tea together. We bring something like a plate from home. We bake a cake, we come and put it together on the table and we all eat.” Cleaners also reported that they arranged and participated in non-work outings and social events. For instance, as mentioned in the previous chapter, they organized a Christmas Dinner event every year. Monica described the previous year’s event: “We get our food and eat... and they have the band going. People just singing, the band - it’s good, you know, because everybody was close.”

It seemed that the cleaners had established a community, where close relationships and cohesion were found in the group. From this perspective, what cleaning service workers shared about their symbolic family group is consistent with a psychoanalytic view of a group. Such a view puts identification as the cornerstone of a group’s creation and processes as they are built on members’ shared identification with the leader and with other fellow workers. Freud writes:

A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego. (1921, p. 61)

The same dynamic also applied to the group in this study. Based on their identification with Susan (the group’s leader), cleaners identified with one another by virtue of a common quality (e.g. love, care, and tenderness). In doing so, each worker adopted Susan as their own ego-ideal, then ‘gave up’ himself or herself within the group’s common identity and emotion. In groups, relations and cohesion are established as each member becomes emotionally attached and subordinate to the group’s identity. Conflicts and competition are suppressed, making collectively-oriented life possible (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990). Extracts from workers’ accounts variously claim that “the whole team is good, all of them you know,” “we work as a team here,” “we do have a good teamwork.”

These claims reinforce the notion that there is a mutual identification and cohesiveness between members in this symbolic family group.

### **The Symbolic Family Group Enact Informal Relationships and Leadership**

When the workers constructed the group as a family-like community, they enacted informal relationships and leadership (Baum, 1991; Casey, 1999; Gabriel, 1999a; Kets de Vries, 2004). This is because such a community is structured and defined mainly by the emotional element of its members drawn from their identification with, in this case, Susan. The group's emotional structure then replaces many features of Weberian bureaucracy. Personal and close relationships subsume rational and impersonal ones. Bureaucratic characteristics such as individualism and autonomy are substituted by qualities like caring, cohesion, and loyalty (Baum, 1991). Instead of aggression or competition, the cleaners are encouraged to demonstrate characteristics such as nurturance and cooperation with one another.

Such group relations are quite un-hierarchical as they are managed by family-style authority relations (Baum, 1991; Casey, 1999). A few workers shared how Susan utilized 'loose' control supervision, rather than bureaucratic overregulation and control. Therefore, hierarchical authority was less visible in this group than informal and distributed leadership (Casey, 1999; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Kets de Vries, 2004). A few of the workers mentioned how the group's decision making process and leadership was shared among group members. For example, Monica reported: "Most of the time, I would say 99% of the time, we solve the problem. Like Susan and us, we all sit and try to solve the problem." Monica proudly shared how Susan encouraged every member to be involved in the decision making process. Susan was not the one who dominated the process. She was not directive. In fact, Susan tended to persuade other members, rather than coerce compliance. Anita and Rachel commented how Susan asked for and listened to each member's opinions, feedback and suggestions. Susan also encouraged the group to aim at consensus. In addition, cleaners shared that Susan provided the opportunity for

every worker to become the coordinator of the group's events or activities. One instance of this practice of distributed leadership is illustrated in the 'Stolen Money' story, when Phoebe was trusted by Susan to become the coordinator of the group's yearly Christmas Party Dinner. Such members, who serve the group and other members, according to Greenleaf (2002, 2003), potentially can and may aspire to become servant leaders themselves.

It is obvious that this form of informal relationships and leadership demonstrates many features of servant leadership. Characteristics like personal and close relationships, caring, group cohesion and community building, shared decision making and leadership, and the principle of consensus, are well recognized by many authors as important characteristics of servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Prosser, 2010; Spears, 1995; Yukl, 2010). In fact, this informal system and structure is in line with the principle of 'primus inter pares' – first among equals (Greenleaf, 2002). This team of cleaners was a team of equals with a 'primus'. Susan was the primus (first) in this group because she was the common ego-ideal of the family-group: she was the first to serve, to care about, and to support the group's members. Susan was the group's role model, providing the common substance that holds the group together. The group's members identified with each other through their identification with Susan. The group's members internalized the leader's caring and loving qualities toward themselves, and then each individual attempted to facilitate positive interactions and a caring relationship among one another. Every member was encouraged and facilitated to be the group's coordinator and to serve the group and its members' needs and desires. Together, Susan and other group members built a community in which they could serve one another through a constructive interpersonal relationship and team effort.

However, as the organization's formal hierarchical authority seemed to be softened within the work team, there were some consequences that came with it. For instance, cleaners could negotiate assignments and performance evaluations with Susan, by means of appealing to family harmony and loyalty. Thus, Susan was expected to be more 'tolerant' with subordinates' circumstances than other managers might be. For example,

there were 'bad' practices that were 'allowed' by Susan yet hidden from the managers. Practices such as using 'short-cuts' in work, taking longer and more frequent breaks than they were allowed to, were undertaken with impunity or without discovery by the managers. Yet, if managers had 'discovered' such practices, they may have felt unhappy or angry about it as Susan and the team members would have been more likely not to submit to corporate procedures or control (Baum, 1991; Gabriel, 1999a). As a consequence, managers may continue to tighten control and take action against workers. Nevertheless, for workers, the construction of informal relationships and leadership in their symbolic family provides a number of psychic benefits and at times helps get their work done (Baum, 1991). Kets de Vries (2004) affirms this: "When employees feel a sense of belonging in the workplace, trust and mutual respect flourish, people are prepared to help others, the culture becomes cohesive, and goal-directedness thrives" (p. 198). I now turn to a discussion of how the group's symbolic family brought with it many positive effects for cleaners (see 'The Symbolic Family Group as a Good Holding Environment' section). This is followed by a discussion of its converse effects both for the group's members ('Members' Rivalries and Conflicts' section) and other organizational members ('The Devaluation of Managers – Viewed as a Symbolic Father' section).

### **The Symbolic Family Group as a Good Holding Environment**

The symbolic family seems to bring a number of psychic benefits to the workers. This is because, for workers, the group offers a scenario of love. Workers commonly share views such as: "it's nice here... everybody is close," "the team is good, all of them," "I like this team... it's a really good team to be with, you know." Workers reported that, in this group, every member was viewed as a valuable and important person. Individuals were encouraged to share their own personal successes and problems, and freely did so as there was a strong acceptance of personalities, behaviours and weaknesses. Workers utilized positive language and interpersonal politeness between each other. Interpersonal conflicts and competition were often suppressed. Members were close and cared about each other. Thus, just like the symbolic mother leader (Chapter 4), the group became members'

idealized and admired object that constituted individuals' surrogate narcissistic satisfaction (Gabriel, 1999b). Phoebe captured the sentiment of other workers when she described the group through the lens of idealization:

### Extract 2

It's a really good atmosphere here and it's a really nice place to work...  
Everybody want to work here (laughs)... This probably one of the best  
sites to work on.

As an ideal object, the group provides a source to be identified with. The group's identity becomes the individual member's identity as the individual incorporates the admired aspects (e.g. collective love and strength) of the group into his or her ego-ideal. Such identification allows the person to experience a considerable boost to his or her identity, which in turn encourages each of them to perform to his or her best in terms of collective effort and team loyalty. Workers reported: "We look after each other," "We work as a team here," "We will work together to cover anybody who's away." Moreover, by identifying with the group's identity, the members can also experience a feeling of relative omnipotence. This is because members view the group as a powerful object, and being a member in such a group enhances workers' sense of powerfulness – workers experience themselves as better, bigger and greater, than they really are (Diamond, 1991). Hence, it is not difficult to observe that cleaners in this group were endowed with narcissistic self-esteem and experienced a sense of community, enjoyment and meaning (Kets de Vries, 2004). Next, one of the workers, Phoebe, shares her delight in being a member of this symbolic family group:

### Extract 3

I look forward to coming to work ... Not because I love cleaning or anything, you know. Nobody loves cleaning! But I like the people I work with. And I like being together with everybody... I would miss everybody if I didn't come to work.

The desire to come to work might have arisen because Phoebe (and other cleaners) fantasized the group as the place where all members were united, bonded by mutual interaction and the virtues of love and care. For Phoebe, the group was viewed as a kind of 'heaven' where phenomena like conflict, adversity, and difficult predicaments do not exist. Accordingly, by joining and participating in such a group, Phoebe (and other members) incorporated the illusion of the group's collective emotion, power, and love; leading to her increased enthusiasm and sense of meaning and importance.

Winnicott (1965) may consider that this symbolic family group functions as a good holding environment for its members. The concept of a holding environment at first was intended to describe the mother-infant relationship as the first and most critical object relationship that can facilitate the infant's identity development. Yet, many authors have also used this metaphor to symbolize other objects such as families, work groups, and organizations relating to their social structure capability of providing a variety of resources and adequate psychological space for their members (Diamond, 1991; Diamond & Adams, 1999). An object, then, is considered a 'good' holding environment because it can provide a safe enough space that can support individual personal development and empowerment, and also reinforce members' affiliation with one and another (Diamond, 1991; Diamond & Adams, 1999; Van Buskirk & McGrath, 1999).

Rachel shared the efficacy of this family-group as a good holding environment for her development: "I've got more confident, got more self-esteem being with this team than I've ever had in my entire life... To me it's a good thing to be in this team". For Rachel, the group is the place that "you just can be yourself." Susan and other team members treated her as a 'person'. They listened to her and ask her opinion. They cared about Rachel and her problems and circumstances. Rachel also highlighted another feature of the group as a good holding environment. For Rachel, the group was a secure emotional environment that 'allowed' her to express vulnerability as well as discharge her anger resulting from interpersonal conflicts and problems, through its displacement to the group (Casey, 1999; Diamond & Adams, 1999). For example, the group tolerated her

‘immaturity’ and irritating behaviour such as her outburst, without becoming affected by such an outburst, and helped Rachel to regain her composure. Thus, the group became a safe emotional shelter and space that contained Rachel’s aggression and the anxieties triggered by difficult situations in the organizational life (Baum, 1991; Diamond & Adams, 1999; Van Buskirk & McGrath, 1999). Rachel spoke of her personal change, which she believed was a consequence of her involvement with the group.

Furthermore, such an environment could offer another benefit for Rachel (and other members) as members’ mutual identification and interactions became the basis of close friendships (Baum, 1991). In the following account, Rachel describes how she and Margaret became best-friends after only a short period of time:

#### Extract 4

Margaret, she’s really good to me. She used to come over home. You can talk to her about anything, private things to her, you know. If anything goes wrong in your relationship, she will always be there... I’ve only known her for eight months or six months since I’ve been here, and that’s like I’ve known her for years... Me and Margaret just got on straight away. She used to come and help at night at site. If she was phoned at night, she’ll go and help you.

It seems that these two members of the group not only developed a close friendship, but the strong relationship they developed shares many similarities with a positive sibling relationship in the family constellation. Such a sibling relationship has been recognized in the psychoanalysis literature as the product of a child’s identification with his or her good enough parent (Meskill, 2001). In other words, siblings care about each other because they realize that their mother cares and has also been concerned about them. By doing this, they hope they will not lose the goodness and love of the parents, so that over time they develop positive interactions with one another. The same dynamic may also apply to the workers in this study. Such positive sibling-like relationships, as discussed earlier in this chapter, seem to have been constructed based on their identification with Susan – the

group's symbolic good-mother-leader. Each worker then made an effort to build positive interactions and form warm 'sibling' relationships with other fellow workers. As a result, there were many 'twinships' in this group. In addition to Rachel's and Margaret's twinship, there was also that of Phoebe and Susan, as illustrated in Extract 4 in the previous chapter. Anita, for another example, was also very close to Gladys (another group member who had already resigned from the company at the time of the study) and both of them flatted together.

Twinship, is a concept used by Kohut (1971) to describe a phenomenon where the representation of self is projected into the object which stimulates "a sense of wholeness" for the subject in the presence of the other, and creates a close attachment between the two of them. In the workplace, twinship can bring with it many potential benefits both to the individual and the organization as a whole. For example, this kind of 'merger' between the subject and object can build good teamwork as each person commits to place himself or herself in the fellow worker's 'shoes'. When one person faces a problem, the other person can be his or her 'shoulder,' and may do many things to boost the other's morale and spirit. Each person in the twinship can also become the other's mentor or coach which may facilitate their personal and professional development (Diamond & Adams, 1999).

In this section, I have demonstrated benefits that the symbolic family group can offer to its members in its informal relationships and leadership. These benefits share many similarities with the potential benefits of servant leadership. Outcomes like followers' personal development and empowerment, as well as good teamwork and cohesion, have been presumed by many proponents of servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008). Yet, since the literature on servant leadership tends to idealize the idea, such literature lacks discussion of the potential negative effects of servant leadership – the issue to which I now turn in the following two sections.

## **Members' Rivalries and Conflicts**

In contrast to the good holding environment, as mentioned earlier, the symbolic family-group may prompt members' conflicts or competition, which shares many similarities with sibling rivalry themes in the family constellation. At times, sibling-like workers compete with one another to get the leader's love and attention, which in turn creates conflicts among them. All of them want to be the leader's favourite symbolic child. The differences between a group leader's acts and members' expectations may easily evoke members' feelings of envy and competitiveness toward one another. However, such feelings tend to be silenced as members do not want to jeopardize the group's harmony and cohesion (Diamond & Adams, 1999; Elmes & Gemmill, 1990). Members are also aware of the dangers of acting aggressively toward each other as such behaviours may potentially cost them their chance at being the leader's favourite (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990).

In line with that thinking, in this study, a cleaner may struggle to compete with colleagues for drawing Susan's attention and love. This is because every cleaner wants to be Susan's special symbolic son or daughter. Each of them wants Susan's recognition and admiration of his or her uniqueness, importance, and greatness compared to others who share similar relationships with Susan – the group's leader. Yet, due to limitations in Susan's ability to provide constant and equal treatment, love, and care to each of them, members' rivalry and conflicts will inevitably occur. This is illustrated in Monica's account about an incident when Chandler (a group member who I did not interview) did not trust her to buy a lottery ticket.

### Extract 5

We put [NZ\$] 2.50 each. And our first Lotto ticket, I bought it. You know, everybody put it together and then I go buy the ticket. And then the next week, Kay, she said to us, because Chandler had left, he'd gone, finish. And then Kay said to us, oh, Chandler don't trust me to buy the ticket. That's what Chandler told Kay, you know, that he thought I might run

away with the money or something. And then Susan, I could see Susan was very upset with Chandler because Susan said, “Oh, because all of us, we trust each other.” And, you know, Chandler doesn’t trust any of us. So, that’s not good. So, I saw Susan, she was upset. I was upset too, but Susan was... you know, Susan said this was not good.

Monica’s account reveals one poetic trope: an attribution of agency, as she considers Chandler’s distrust of her as an aggressive and purposeful action toward her. Monica may deem such an action as a threat to her illusion of being Susan’s special ‘daughter.’ This is because, first, Monica might see Chandler’s act as a sign of competition for Susan’s love and attention. Second, albeit she did not do anything wrong, Monica may fear that Susan will be influenced by Chandler’s allegation and hate Monica as a result. To lose Susan’s love is a blow for Monica. Yet, there is nothing she can do to respond to Chandler’s aggressive act as she does not want to jeopardize the group’s harmony. Thus, when Monica realizes that Susan is on her side (“I saw Susan, she was upset”; “Susan said this was not good”) Monica feels relieved as she considers she has won the competition. In the end, Monica is the one who has the last laugh, as she has reclaimed her position as Susan’s favourite.

On the other hand, Chandler’s distrust of Monica perhaps was driven by his feelings of envy and competitiveness in seeing Monica’s closeness with Susan on numerous occasions. Chandler may have desired more attention from Susan, or at least, he might have expected Susan to treat each group member equally. According to Freud, “Members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader” (cited in Elmes & Gemmill, 1990, p. 37). To a certain extent, Chandler may previously have had some experience of being Susan’s favourite, but that that was likely not the case more recently. Chandler perhaps had repressed his feelings of envy and jealousy for a while, but the account above to a certain extent hints at the expression of such feelings.

Moreover, the account reveals an important poetic trope: attribution of blame. Conscious and unconsciously, Monica and Susan may blame Chandler for de-establishing the group's harmony and cohesion. Both Monica and Susan may feel that Chandler's distrust of Monica can put at risk the belief that the group is like a family as well as the illusion of group harmony and unity. For Monica and Susan (and Kay), Chandler is a dissenter who raises doubt about the members' collective frame of reference (trusting each other) and challenges the illusion of Susan's fairness and wisdom as the group leader (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990). It is not surprising then to see Susan respond to such a challenge with anger. As a consequence, it is not impossible that, after that incident, Monica, Susan and other members will attempt to isolate Chandler from the 'family' (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990).

For Monica and Chandler in particular, this incident may only demonstrate a small portion of their rivalries enacted in a 'trivial' workplace situation as members see differences in the leader's treatment (perceived or actual) of them and their fellows, which does not match their expectations. Both of them seemed to have developed more intense rivalries and conflicts. This is illustrated by Monica as she shares how she was disappointed with Susan because of Susan's 'softness' and unjust treatment of Chandler in the following 'Too Nice' story.

#### Too Nice Story

You know, sometimes it's not good to be too nice because other people see, then they use it... Because she's too nice to, like, those other two workers, Kay and Chandler. They start at 5 o'clock. Susan starts early [4 o'clock], they start late. So, Susan has a break at about half past six, her coffee break. So, these two, they think they can have a break too. So they're going... they join Susan with a cup of coffee. But they only have four [working] hours. Susan has eight. The rest of us more. So, you know, Susan's too nice, Susan can't tell them because she's too nice [to say] that "Oh you two are not suppose to be drinking coffee with me" or something,

you know. So, that's the only, you know, because some of us, we don't do that, you know.

In the story, Monica describes Susan as having an issue with being 'too nice'. Susan does not exert control or punish behaviour that the other cleaners see as unacceptable. Susan did not reprimand Chandler and Kay (another group member who I did not interview), who took advantage of her 'softness.' According to New Zealand's Employment Relations Act, as of 1 April 2009 (which is the applied rule at the time of this study), workers are only entitled to take a break if they have worked more than two hours (Department of Labour, 2009). These two individuals did not follow the 2 hour rule about taking a break. Instead, they had their break after they had only worked for one and half hours (05.00am - 6.30am). Monica (and other team members), then, considered Chandler's and Kay's actions in this account as a violation of the rule. When Monica saw Susan as the supervisor take no action, she judged her to be ineffective at managing discipline. Susan was too soft, permissive, and not a strong disciplinarian leader. Accordingly, Monica learnt that Susan was not only ideal, but she is also not all-powerful. Monica's idealized image of Susan turned into devaluation. In fact, Susan may become a target of various amounts of Monica's and other members' overt and covert aggression. In this case, Monica blamed Susan, the symbolic mother, for her failure to meet Monica's expectations of seeing Susan take action against ill-disciplined workers. In this situation, the story reveals a valuable poetic trope in the leader-subordinate relationship, which is an attribution of blame from a subordinate to the leader.

Furthermore, the 'Too Nice' story shows us a splitting mechanism – in terms of gender roles. From the text, Monica characterizes Susan as too nice, permissive, and not a strong disciplinarian. This is a general stereotype that is frequently levelled at women (leaders) in a patriarchal society (Fondas, 1997). Accordingly, the story reveals the attribution of fixed qualities (Gabriel, 2000), such as that the all women are typically (too) soft, nurturing, people oriented and emotional. In other words, women are seen to be weak and permissive leaders. On the other hand, men are assumed to be more dominant, assertive, and impersonal (Gemmill & Schaible, 1991). Men are strong leaders. This poetical

mechanism, as Gabriel (2000) claims, is essential as an interpretive device: a leader who cannot enforce the rule with his or her worker on one occasion can be treated as a 'soft' or weak leader on every subsequent occasion. Thus, after the incident the label 'soft' or 'too nice' acts as a signifier of Susan and her qualities as a leader (Gabriel, 2000).

In the case of splitting gender roles, the story reveals how the worker utilizes the split-off point between the good and bad as 'hard' and 'soft' (Gemmill & Schaible 1991), which "reflects the culture's unconscious practice of sexual asymmetry, particularly its denigration of the feminine" (Fondas, 1997, p. 273). As Fondas argues, people tend to consider the 'soft' approach as ineffective in certain situations and often describe it as not good enough if compared to a 'hard' (more masculine) approach, especially in the workplace and leadership context. Additionally, feminist studies in the field of leadership point out that the view of a 'good' leader is consistently associated with male qualities, including: power, objectivity, lack of emotionality, and strength (Lowe, Mills, & Mullen, 2002). Monica, who might be drawing on such assumptions, may wish Susan would learn to utilize a hard approach and dispense with her soft style in order to function well as the group's leader. Monica would thus expect Susan to take some action against the two undisciplined workers. Susan was asked to be more aggressive and punitive. 'Unfortunately', Susan failed to live up to Monica's expectation and, as a consequence, Monica blamed Susan for her 'inability' to perform such an action.

Such an interpretation can provide a link to the narrator's attribution of motives. This is because Monica's expressed blame of Susan is a by-product of Monica's wish to be treated equally by the leader. As mentioned earlier, in all groups, members hold on to an illusion that the group's leader is treating each of them equally and justly (Freud, 1921). If Susan as the superior asks Monica to obey the company's rules, then Susan must enforce these rules with Chandler and Kay as well. For Monica, Susan as the group leader has to treat and love every member equally. Nevertheless, as Freud (1921) observes, the wish of being treated equally is a reaction formation against feelings of envy about not being the leader's favorite. In this case, the need to be treated justly by the leader was a mask for Monica's feeling of envy of Susan's 'special treatment' towards

Chandler and Kay. By providing such treatment, Susan shows to Monica and other group members that Chandler and Kay are the leader's favorite; the rest are not. While Monica and other workers must comply with the rules, Chandler and Kay violate them with impunity. Susan's treatment of Chandler and Kay disrupts Monica's fantasy of being Susan's special symbolic child, therefore, evoking her feeling of envy for not holding that position.

Monica's feeling of envy may be part of a series of intense competitions between her and Chandler to obtain Susan's love. We may recall these two workers' rivalry in the previous account (extract 5). Monica may not be aware of this motive, or might even deny it. Accordingly, her story demonstrates an important primary trope: the attribution of unconscious motive. The story suggests that Monica did not openly confront her feelings of envy as she might have understood that such aggressive action can jeopardise not only "the illusion of group harmony but also losing the competition for being the leader's favorite in the group" (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990, p. 37). Hence, Monica employed a 'reaction formation' of egalitarian ideology as her defence mechanism, in which she positioned every group member as an equal with each of them having the same rights and responsibilities (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990). If Monica could not become the leader's favorite, then, she wished noone to be the favorite (Freud, 1960). If someone appeared to be the favorite, then Monica could at least spoil that person's enjoyment of being special. Thus, Monica expected Susan to enforce the rules equally for everyone. If Susan could not do that, then she should not have applied the rule at all to the group: as a result, all of the cleaners would have been able to have their break time with Susan, and noone would have assumed the position of the leader's favorite and received 'special' treatment from her.

When Susan failed to meet her expectations, Monica got upset with Susan. However, Monica did not express her aggression directly to Susan as she did not want to take the risk of losing Susan's love. Monica's anger and aggressive emotion were instead displaced to Chandler and Kay. Subsequently, it is possible that Monica (and other members of the group) might try to isolate or ignore Chandler and Kay, the source of

Monica's envy and rivalry, which in turn would lead to the creation of a sub-group (Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Monica and other workers utilize the primitive defence of splitting, as manifested interpersonally by a process of polarization. Through splitting, simplified and crude dichotomies are created, such as "in-group and out-group" (Morrison, Greene, & Tischler, 1985, p. 602). These workers "split" the world into those who are with them (Monica and other workers) and those who are against them (Chandler and Kay). This is exemplified in a number of instances in the story – "for you two," "the rest of us," "We, don't do that," "two of them". In this situation, the workers defend themselves against self disintegration by a psychic splitting of self and others into 'all-good' and 'all-bad' images. Monica and other workers then incorporate 'all-good' qualities into themselves as in-group, as in the claim "because some of us, we don't do that you know". They also project 'all-bad' images onto the out-group's members (Chandler and Kay). This splitting may consequently lead to unhealthy rivalry and competition that distract the group and its members from work efforts and undermines the group's productivity.

My experience of collecting data may add additional support with regard to the group's splitting. As mentioned in Chapter 3, I did not get 'permission' from Susan and other participants to interview Chandler and Kay, the reasons for this being somewhat unclear. Firstly, Susan and others mentioned that Chandler and Kay were new members; therefore, they would have provided limited benefit to my study. Chandler in particular had been part of the work group for just three months. Yet, when I asserted the potentiality that these two workers may bring to my research, Susan and other workers informed me that Chandler and Kay were not willing to participate in this study. This relates to the workers' perception that the group had 'split', as well as to Susan's anger towards Chandler because of his distrust to Monica (Extract 4). Thus it is not impossible that the reason why Susan and other participants did not 'allow' me to interview Chandler and Kay is because these two workers are not part of the inner group of this symbolic family. Chandler and Kay may have been viewed by other members as 'enemies', who could have harmed the group and its members. For example, the group's members may have feared the possibility of Chandler and Kay speaking to the outsiders of 'bad' things

about the inner group members (particularly regarding their hidden practices). Accordingly, Susan and other members provided me no chance to interview these two workers.

### **The Devaluation of Managers – Viewed as Bad Symbolic Father**

Monica's (and other group members) and Chandler's rivalries were quite intense at times, however, as mentioned earlier, members' envy and aggressive acts towards one another were likely to be silenced. Psychoanalysis recognizes one mechanism of defending against feelings of envy and competitiveness is for group members to displace these feelings onto external groups (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990). That dynamic applied to workers in this study, as they externalized their envy and competition onto other groups, particularly the organization's managers. Thus, the workers saw managers as holding feelings of envy and competitiveness towards their group and its members. We may recall one of the interpretations of the 'Stolen Money' story that showed how workers might have accused the managers as the thieves who wanted to sabotage their Christmas party because of their envy of the workers. In this situation, another splitting happened in a wider context as the workers split off their group from the managers. From a Kleinian perspective, the split-off shows how workers managed their ambivalent emotions by separating the world into two camps: 'good' and 'bad'. Workers then attributed themselves/their symbolic family group with all of the 'good' qualities, while all of the 'bad' characteristics are projected onto the managers.

As the consequence, managers are seen as "bad bosses" who possess many 'negative' qualities. In workers' perceptions, managers are impersonal, rejecting figures who only care for, and pursue, their selfish interests – see "that the job is done" – and separate themselves physically and psychologically from the workers. Accordingly, workers may construct the managers collectively as an unemotional, neglectful but powerful entity, one that might occupy the same unconscious space as that of the primal father (Gabriel, 1997). In this situation, people in authority have triggered workers' paternal transference (Baum, 1991; Maccoby, 2004). This idea is in line with Maccoby's (2004) observation

that the hierarchical structure of organizations has a tendency to prompt members' paternal transference. In fact, Schwartz (1996) argues that, in this kind of organization, the manager is often viewed as the symbolic father of the workplace.

When the workers view the managers as the symbolic father whilst also seeing Susan as the symbolic mother (Chapter 4), then there is a co-existence of maternal and paternal transference processes that can split the organization and its members. An example of a splitting narrative is shown in the following account from Rachel.

#### Extract 6

She's really good, Susan. She's really good to talk to. She listens if you got problems. She listens, not like the other bosses. They're never around to talk to... They don't really help you out or they don't really talk much to you... They're really bad bosses. They just yell at you and tell you what to do and tell you how to do the job. They don't actually let you do the job. So, you've got some that just don't care about how you're feeling. If you got complaints, they don't care you know... They won't help you if you're down. It's just all about them. It's like: "I'm the boss and you listen to me!"... Some treat you like how they wanna be treated, and some just treat you like just another number that they can get rid of it. At the end of the day you're nothing. You just a number. But with Susan, she treats all of her team the same... And a lot of these bosses, if you got complaints, they just don't wanna know. They'll say "I'll sort it". And at the end of the day, it doesn't get sorted anyway. They just don't bother. I had a trouble with my night boss, and it's still getting sorted!

This mechanism of splitting can endanger the organizational functioning. First, such splitting encourages the workers' devaluation mechanism toward their managers, which in turn can generate tensions and problems between layers in the organization, a point I later elaborate on. Second, although workers' idealization transference to Susan can

produce various positive outcomes, it can also trigger circumstances that turn into anxiety-ridden predicaments (as discussed in Chapter 4).

In the devaluation mechanism, as mentioned earlier, managers are viewed as the personification of all negative characteristics. Cleaners in this study commonly see their managers as untrustworthy, uncaring and selfish figures. Consequently, workers often undermine managers' legitimacy. Workers do not 'listen' to the managers, in fact they are often suspicious of managers' policy and decisions. Workers' loss of faith in the organization is a by-product of their loss of faith in the managers. As a consequence, emotional distancing and disidentification dominate workers' relationship with managers and the organization as a whole; often providing the condition for workers' lack of cooperation and resistance. As part of this, there are many practices within the group that are hidden from the managers – as illustrated in Chapter 4.

These hidden practices may cripple the work effort. For instance, when managers are aware of such practices (one example can be found in Joey's 'Lost Key' story in Chapter 4), they may feel, consciously or unconsciously, that they live in a workplace where nobody can be trusted, where one must be on guard and in charge. These managers may unconsciously fear their subordinates' independence. As Gabriel (2000) suggests, "independent subordinates may be viewed as a threat because they arouse old memories of lost competitions, rivalry, and hostility" (p. 47). Consequently, to cover up their fears, managers continue to tighten control and take actions against workers' practices. These actions are in turn regarded by workers as 'restrictive practices', which may prompt bitter confrontations between managers and workers. At the heart of the conflict is the notion that the managers will be seen as controlling figures or 'bad' bosses by the workers, while the workers will be perceived as uncooperative and undisciplined employees by the managers (Gabriel, 2000).

In fact, driven by the perpetual fear of losing control of their subordinates', the managers of the cleaning company tend to blame Susan as she is likely to meet workers' needs and interests rather than the organization's objectives and goals. Management may consider

Susan's actions as resistance or subversion. We may recall how one of the managers blamed Susan at the time when he found out about the lost key incident (Chapter 4). From this point of view, Susan serves a scapegoat function, given that she becomes the container for managers' projections of fear of losing control and power. Indeed, the scapegoating mechanism may enable managers "to escape personal responsibility for what has taken place by sealing off the examination of their own blocking behaviour that would be necessary for an improved functioning" (Gemmill, 1986, p. 46). In other cases, managers might blame workers for poor performance, and their lack of ability and effort to achieve corporate (and clients') objectives.

Moreover, to a certain extent, workers may consider that managers are envious of the caring and warm relations between the group's members and Susan. Consequently, workers perceive that managers may wish to sabotage such a relationship. One example of perceived managers' envy and competitiveness towards workers is shown in the 'Stolen Money' story (Chapter 4). Another example is illustrated by Monica, who reveals an incident where the managers attempted to keep the workers away from their symbolic mother:

#### Extract 7

One time they brought her [Susan], Phoebe, and Anita to go up [to another client's site] and exchanged somebody else to come down here ... You know, we won't be happy if she has gone, you know, the rest of us...  
Yeah, the rest of us are gonna be left behind.

This account not only provides support for workers' allegation that their managers felt envious of them, but it also reveals workers' helplessness in dealing with powerful managers. There is a helpless tone in this account as Monica (and other workers) did not know what they would do were the managers to displace Susan and other 'senior' group members (Phoebe and Anita) and move them to another client's site. While managers cancelled such a plan, it nevertheless evoked workers' childhood memories of separation. The anxiety triggered can be exacerbated if in fact the worker depends on the symbolic

mother for virtually everything. Perhaps this incident was not the managers' first trial of separating workers or even thwarting Susan-worker relationships. In response to such a situation, workers tend to become anxious and defensive (Baum, 1991; Czander, 1993; Diamond & Adams, 1999). As the result, this engenders further conflict between workers and managers, which in turn only produces further anxiety-ridden predicaments for the workers and may damage the group's and organization's functioning and productivity (Baum, 1991; Casey, 1999; Czander, 1993; Oglensky, 1995).

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have illustrated how workers create a symbolic family group. Such a group is built mainly based on the process of identification as suggested by the psychoanalytic frame of thinking. The primary features of such a group are informal relationships and leadership, which shares many similarities with many aspects of servant leadership. I also have shown how such a symbolic family group not only serves as the workers' ideal object that can, through identification, boost self esteem and identity, but also functions as a good holding environment that can support members' developmental space. Yet, in the final section, I have demonstrated some adverse effects that the symbolic family group can bring, which may endanger organizational functioning as well as create further anxiety-ridden predicaments for the cleaners.

Chapters 4 and 5 were mainly built on interpretation of subordinates' narratives about their relationships with the group's leader, the managers, and with one another. The following chapter is primarily centred on the story and accounts of the leader (Susan) whose main objective is to care about, protect, and serve her subordinates.

## CHAPTER 6

### **The Powerful and Powerless Servant Leader**

In Chapter 4, I discussed subordinates' complex emotional attachment with their symbolic mother leader. This type of leader, whose desires and wishes are to care for and serve her subordinates, reflects Greenleaf's (2002, 2003) version of a servant leader. In Chapter 5, I demonstrated workers' construction of a symbolic family group that shares many important features (e.g. personal and close relationship, community building, shared decision making and leadership) of servant leadership. This chapter is built around the narratives of the leader (Susan), whose view of herself can be interpreted as a fantasy of being a powerful servant leader. Such an identity places subordinates as her main object for provision of narcissistic gratification.

Greenleaf's (2002, 2003) version of servant leadership seems to put emphasis on two important characteristics of great servant leaders: the individual inherent desire to be a servant, and the resiliency of the servant leader in dealing with the complexity of work relations. Greenleaf argues that, at its core, the critical aspect of servant leadership is serving, not leading. For the servant leader, the servant's disposition is the most essential factor, since a great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his or her greatness. Such greatness can be achieved because the servant leader is resilient to the threats and ambiguities of organizational life. The person is "more likely to persevere" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 28) and to keep the faith in servant leadership in the face of those threats and challenges. So one may ask: "How can such a servant leader remain intact and resilient despite their vulnerability and sensitivity to narcissistic injury, hence, sustains the idealization of servant leadership?" This chapter attempts to shed some light about the construction of the servant's disposition within the leader, the production of her identity as a servant leader, as well as the maintenance of such identity against threats posed to her efforts to practice as a servant leader.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I provide Susan's description of her identity and why such identity is enacted. Next comes a discussion of how Susan's identity was constructed in her ego-ideal, followed by a brief discussion about the enactment of Susan's identity. I then present a story and narratives that illustrate the intricacy of producing and maintaining such an identity in leader-subordinate relationships, leading to the experience of being betrayed. This section also includes a discussion of how Susan was assisted by the intervention of a superhuman figure to help her recover from her 'fall', as a result of which she sustains her identity as a powerful servant leader and the production of servant leadership in general.

### **Susan's Desire to be a Powerful Servant Leader**

When describing herself, Susan talks persistently and with obvious conviction about herself as being her subordinates' caregiver and protector: "I look after my own workers," "I protect my workers," "all the workers know that I put my job on the line". It is her desire to attend to subordinates' wishes and security in this workplace. In fact, Susan is willing to take risks along the way to serve and protect what she calls: "my own workers." In other words, Susan portrays her identity as a powerful leader who can serve and protect subordinates from hardship and difficulties in organizational life.

Yet, the expression of such identity seems to be enacted as a defence against the condition of being a cleaner that often negates her sense of identity. As a cleaner, Susan more or less experiences the same situation as her subordinates as discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Susan reports how she is treated with indifference by the impersonal and uncaring managers. The same situation also applies when she deals with arrogant and 'difficult' clients. Susan shares:

#### Extract 1

We're here to please the client you know. We can't go and argue with the client. Because we got a job to do. So, you have to put your smiley face

[on]... and have to be really patient with the client... It's like sometimes the client does not appreciate the cleaners... they just take things for granted... You can do a perfect job and don't get thank you, nothing! And as soon as you slipped up, like we missed a rubbish bin, "oh, you didn't empty my rubbish bin!" But they won't praise you when you've done a good job. So, sometimes it's a little bit thankless, a thankless job!

Having an identity as a cleaner seems insufficient for Susan in terms of endowing a positive sense of self and presenting high self-esteem. For Susan, being a cleaner then becomes an anti-identity (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006), or a 'not-me' position (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Against the threat to identity, a person can unconsciously employ certain defence mechanisms to allay the anxiety and cope with the situation. In Susan's case, she tends to resort to her ego-ideal, which contains an image of identity as a powerful servant leader who can 'exercise servant leadership no matter what.' In resorting to this 'wished for' ego-ideal fantasy, Susan can experience a sense of hope and power, and it works as her shelter against the depreciation of the self and frustration of being a cleaner (Alford, 1988; Feldman, 1989).

According to Freud (1933), the ego-ideal is the fantasy about oneself that portrays the model of the person that one aspires to become. In other words, the ego-ideal characterizes the person's idealized images for achievement and greatness that can make the world love him or her (Brown, 1997; Gabriel, 1999b) Albeit he or she "can never reach this ideal state, journeying towards it both keeps the fantasy alive and provides people with a sense of hope and power" (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008, p. 48).

Similarly, the dynamics and complexity of organizational life may restrain and inhibit Susan's desire to deliver service to her workers. In this workplace, Susan is unlikely to be continuously consistent in dealing with subordinates and may fail to satisfy their exaggerated desires and expectations. We may recall Monica's account (Extract 6, Chapter 4) that shares Anita's view of Susan's 'inability' to satisfy Anita's expectations. In the 'Too Nice' story (Chapter 5), Monica was disappointed by Susan's 'failure' to

administer discipline to a couple of workers who were taking advantage of her 'softness'. Susan may view these situations as failures to validate her identity as a servant leader, resulting in a lowering of self-esteem. Yet, by deploying the idealized self-image as her defence mechanism, Susan remains intact and resilient, and hence sustains her identity as a servant leader.

In other situations, Susan's serving behaviours will likely be tested and possibly confirmed by self-sacrifice, as illustrated in the 'Lost Key' story (Chapter 4). In that story, Susan's urge to protect Joey from the manager's anger and punishment, left her as the only party to bear the consequences as she served as the scapegoat in that situation. Susan also reports that Joey's story is not the only case where she needs to 'pay the price' for her serving behaviours to the subordinates. While Susan has experienced some form of hardship and adversity as a consequence of her serving behaviours, Susan carries on and sustains her identity. Susan is still willing to take risks and put her job on the line in order to be able to serve and protect her subordinates. According to Susan, this is because: "That's just the way I am... I've always done that for my whole life... I stick up for my workers no matter what!" In doing so, as mentioned earlier, Susan resorts to her 'wished for' ego-ideal fantasy. Such a mechanism not only helps Susan to tolerate frustration and deprivation, but also "protects against depreciation of the self and the world" (Feldman, 1989, p. 580). This self reinforced identity, at times well supported by denial (refusal to embrace such reality) or repression (being unaware of his or her anger or aggressive wishes), helps Susan sustain an unaffected image of herself as a powerful servant leader. Before I discuss the complexity of the production and maintenance of Susan's identity in more detail, I want to first consider 'how the identity of being a servant leader is constructed in Susan's ego-ideal?'

### **The Construction of Susan's Identity**

Psychoanalytically speaking, a person's ego-ideal fantasy and desires are constructed through a number of identifications with admired objects, most notably with the parents (Carr, 1998; Gabriel, 1999b; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). In Susan's case, her father serves

as the main source of identification leading to the construction of her identity as a servant leader. Susan saw her father as an 'ideal' person, as he was the one who adopted her when she was three years old, notwithstanding that he came from a lower class background. Susan shares how her father influenced the construction of her current identity:

### Extract 2

That's the way I am. I can't change my nature... I think that's the way you're brought up with your parents, like how your parents teach you. When you become older and older, what your parents teach you comes out in your life, like 'to be good to everybody' or 'try to be good to everybody,' 'to welcome people into your home'... It was my father who taught me all these... and that's the way he used to do it... and that's exactly how I am.

Here Susan appears to idealize and make identification with her father whom she understands to have been a man who held firm Maori values or principles that emphasize that leadership and authority come from long service to others (Cyril, 20006; Tamihere, 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that Susan also admires and idealizes such values, especially about respecting and serving other people, even if she needs to make a 'sacrifice' for doing that. One could even claim that Maori people have known and practiced the concept of servant leadership in their culture. According to Cyril (2006), an understanding of leadership in Maori culture can be drawn from the nature of *rangatiratanga*, described as an action that is closely related to serving others and building a community. In a Maori context, in order to sit on the *paepae* or the *taumata* (traditional seating of speakers on a *Marae*), people will start from the kitchen before they are going forward to lead. People will only become a leader after years of service to their *whanau*, *marae*, and to the *hapu* (Tamihere, 2007). The way to authority in this culture is through service; to lead is to first serve.

In identifying and idealizing these admired objects (her father, Maori culture, as well as other significant objects or ideas such as her religious education or religious leaders), Susan incorporates their ideal characteristics, especially the value of serving other people, into her ego-ideal. Being a powerful servant leader, then, serves as an aspiration and identity that Susan needs to achieve as it can provide gratification of her narcissism as well as a sense of hope and power (Gabriel, 1999b; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008).

### **The Production of Susan's Identity**

The concern for others, which is established and re-established through various identifications, now can be observed in Susan's acts and behaviours. In the workplace, the desire of being a powerful servant leader provides Susan with a powerful emotional compulsion to exercise service to her subordinates. On many different occasions, as her subordinates reported in their accounts and stories in Chapter 4, Susan sensitively responds to her subordinates' emotional needs, contains their anxieties, and helps them out of their difficult situations. We can recall in Joey's 'Lost Key' story, how Susan protected him from the potential punishment or anger of the managers. In turn, subordinates admire Susan and endow her with the identity of leader.

In promoting her desires as a servant leader, Susan locates her identity in relation to the meaning of her working for other people, especially her subordinates. Whenever Susan succeeds in attending to subordinates' wishes and expectations, she gains satisfaction as she experiences a considerable boost to her identity. Yet, if she fails to meet their expectations, then she potentially experiences adverse effects. Susan needs to be loved by her workers in order to gain confirmation of her self-worth and self-esteem. When she does not receive love, Susan loses herself. The thought of losing her subordinates' love is what might scare Susan the most. As a consequence, she engages in performing service to subordinates whereby she seeks to impress them in order to promote her identity and narcissism.

The psychodynamic literature on leadership has shown that narcissism is a very important element when we talk about leaders or leadership (Cluley, 2008; Gabriel, 1997, 1999b; Kernberg, 1979, 1998; Kohut, 1971, 1985; Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2004, 2006). A certain amount of narcissism is needed for anyone who wishes to be a leader. Narcissism also offers leaders a foundation for conviction about their identity as well as the righteousness of their cause, which in turn can help leaders evoke subordinates' idealization and identification (Gabriel, 1997; Kets de Vries, 2004, 2006; Oglensky, 1995).

Like any other leader, Susan needs a portion of narcissism as well. While Susan lacks the aggression commonly associated with narcissism, she is capable of channelling the fantasy of her ego-ideal through the relationship she has with subordinates. Accordingly, subordinates turn into the foundation for Susan's narcissism, hence, she idealizes them. Susan believes that the "workers are very good," "they're good to me and I'm good to them". Consequently, as part of the reciprocal process, Susan expects them to return her service positively. For example, workers should be committed and loyal to her ("It's a two way thing," "if you're good to your workers, they'll be good to you"). In this leader-subordinate relationship, there exists a mutual idealization in which Susan and her subordinates idealize each other (we may bear in mind that in Chapter 4 I have demonstrated subordinates' idealization of Susan).

In practice, of course, it is extremely unlikely that such mutual idealization can be sustained (Gabriel & Schwartz, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004; Oglensky, 1995). Organizational life is so complex, and love is conditional. Gabriel and Schwartz (1999) note, "none of us is perfect, and an attempt to maintain the fiction of our perfection can easily lead to dysfunctional consequences, when the appearances of perfection can no longer be sustained" (p. 68). In other words, failure to maintain the idealization is always tempered with the possibility, or actuality, of frustration and perhaps even a sense of deprivation and failure.

In the following section, I further elaborate and analyze the production of Susan's identity as well demonstrate how her idealization of subordinates leads to disappointment

and frustration as illustrated in the ‘Margaret’s Betrayal’ story. Nevertheless, the story also reveals how Susan recovers from the ‘fall’ with help from a providential agency, leading in turn to the continuous maintenance of her identity as a powerful servant leader and idealization of servant leadership in general.

### **The Maintenance and Sustenance of Susan’s Identity**

Susan shares how she was betrayed by one of her subordinates and closest friends, Margaret, in the story below:

#### ‘Margaret’s Betrayal’ Story

Margaret, she was working with another lady, and the other lady was bringing her husband in, to help her clean, which Brendon’s [Susan’s manager] not allowed me to do, because he [the woman’s husband] didn’t actually work for us. So, I said to Margaret and her lady: “This is in confidence. I’ll let you bring your husband as long as Brendon doesn’t find out.” That was our confidentiality, between us! Anyway, they’re working in the Domus [one of the client’s buildings]. Just happened in one of those days when her husband was helping, a cell-phone went missing out from one of the offices in the Domus. And of course, the first person they blamed is the cleaner! All the clients are like that. The person to blame is the cleaner! Well, Margaret, when we’re told, “Oh, the lady’s husband was helping us.” And that’s how I got brought into the trouble. And Brendon said to me, “you know that he was not allowed to be in those places?” Because Margaret when we’re told, she broke the confidentiality between us. I could just get fired from that episode. And after all that big meeting with Brendon and the big boss Ross, I have a big meeting with them, because of that episode. Because Margaret had broken our confidentiality, to cover herself, but she didn’t think about me, so she

betrayed me. That's what I'm trying to say... So, again, I took the whole blame!

Over several years, Susan and Margaret had built a close personal relationship based on trust. Thus, when Margaret breached the agreement, as none of them was supposed to 'share' this information with the managers, she violated the established trust. Accordingly, Susan considered this a betrayal, which "by its very nature requires transgression, violation of an agreement or trust" (Krantz, 2006, p. 229). Yet, Margaret's betrayal is really beyond Susan's imagination. How can such a nice, warm and easy-going person act in such a way? How can a person betray her best friend? In fact, Susan thought that she had been really nice to her and had done nothing wrong so far. Nevertheless, French, Case, and Gosling (2009) observe that the person's best friend can become the main source of a betrayal, since this kind of friendship is "built on trust and openness," which makes this relationship "vulnerable to betrayal, magnifying the impact of the perceived treachery" (p. 147). The authors then speculate that betrayal appears to be the shadow side of close friendship, a situation that appears plausible in this case.

### **Subordinates' Projection and Transference**

Margaret, in her internal life, may not consider this as a betrayal. She may also feel that she is not responsible for the phone (disappearance) incident. It is somebody else's fault. In this case, Margaret regresses to the splitting mechanism. She is a good and innocent person. It is only because of her benevolence that the woman's husband can come and help his wife. Margaret knew she was not the thief, so it must be somebody else who stole the mobile phone. Therefore, that person must take responsibility, as Margaret unconsciously projects 'her irresponsibility' by blaming the other woman (and her husband) and even Susan. The other woman, as the object of this projection, might start to unconsciously identify with Margaret's displaced feelings in such a way that her own feelings are affected, and may begin to use them as the source of her action (Halton, 1994). In her counter-transference, the other woman might also project her 'irresponsibility' in blaming Susan and Margaret by telling managers that she already had Susan's and Margaret's permission to have her husband come and help her. Thus, in

blaming the other persons, Margaret and the other woman try to escape their responsibilities by projecting their denied feelings to each other and to Susan.

As the group's leader, Susan is the workers' projected being. Whenever subordinates are in the midst of anxiety-laden situations in which they feel incapable of dealing with the problem (e.g. a worker facing a threat from the manager or being subject of a serious complaint from the client), they project their anxieties and associated feelings onto Susan. The anxieties triggered could be exacerbated by the knowledge that working in this company is the 'best option' for them since they have no other option to find a better job or a better company. Anecdotal evidence received from a worker employed by the same company suggests that this company offers better benefits than other local cleaning companies. Thus, to lose their job would be most detrimental for workers, because it means they would not get a better job. Therefore, whenever a worker is in crisis or facing a difficult situation due to their breach of the rules or a client's complaint, that individual is likely to project his or her fear, anxiety, and sense of insecurity to Susan – the group's leader. In doing so, workers expect Susan to provide the needed comfort, care, and protection.

Similarly, when considering this case, in their helplessness, Margaret and the woman may have sent some signals of anxiety and discomfort to Susan who is their imagined symbolic caregiver. In this situation, transference is at work in that the workers desire a sensitive response from Susan to buffer their intense feelings of fear in the face of threats or dangers (Oglensky, 1995). That desire also comes with a demand that Susan must take responsibility to deal with the situation and protect these workers from the potential managers' anger and punishment. Hence, the 'Margaret's Betrayal' story reveals an attribution of unconscious motive from the subordinates: in a difficult situation, subordinates expect the leader to 'manage' the situation, and hence help them out of the problem.

### **Susan's Counter-transference**

Susan, as the target of workers' projection, may feel unable to cope with their displaced feelings and then might blame them back as part of her defence mechanism. Nevertheless, in contrast to Margaret's response, the story shows me that Susan did not show any aggression towards Margaret and the other woman. Neither did she get angry or punish one of her subordinates. In brief, Susan did not provide anyone with an explanation or justification. Consequently, Susan perceives that everything turns out to be her fault in the eyes of the managers: hence the claim, "I took the whole blame!"

It seems that Susan's passiveness and silence was a way to alleviate workers' anxieties and contain what was projected. Such an 'action' is part of meeting Susan's ego-ideal as a powerful servant leader. To confront Margaret and the other woman with noticeable inadequacies and imperfections is far from what Susan's identity may dictate. Susan, then, denies her aggressive feelings and hostility towards Margaret and the other woman for not meeting their agreement. By doing this, Susan wants to demonstrate her willingness to protect these two workers, albeit there are consequences of doing that. Hence Susan demonstrates to all workers that she is their reliable and powerful servant leader.

In doing so, however, as the story shows, Susan became vulnerable and an easy target of scapegoating. This is because, as the supervisor, Susan is responsible for what happens in the work group and to its members. In her defence, Susan did nothing. In line with that, Gemmill (1989) believes that the leader tends to be the scapegoat when something goes wrong in either the group or organization.

Nonetheless, there is a possibility that there are some other considerations behind Susan's apparent reticence. Since Susan was already 67 years and nearing retirement, she may have known that she did not have a lot to lose. Or perhaps, since she had long experience in this job, if Susan had been fired, she would have been well placed to find another job with another cleaning service company. Alternatively, Susan may have been rather confident that the manager would not fire her. There are organizational rules and

procedures that need to be followed in terms of taking this kind of action. Indeed, Susan might have been well aware, based on her long experience working with the manager, that the manager was not a person who liked to fire workers, either because of his personality or because he had to conform to the corporate rules. However, after the incident, the manager called Susan to a meeting. He was angry at Susan and gave her a warning that, if something similar were to happen again, then there was a possibility that she could be fired.

The experience of being scapegoated by her subordinates and being reprimanded by the managers, in addition to her perception that she did not do anything wrong, allowed Susan to generate an attribution of moral responsibility in her narratives: to determine the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and then assign each of them to the appropriate characters. Susan not only cast herself as a good person, who suffers from her friends’ betrayal and saves them from the managers’ punishment and anger; she also cast others as ‘bad’ persons. The managers, Margaret, and the client who ‘missed’ the mobile phone and blamed the cleaner, all fell short.

### Extract 3

And the funny thing about it, about a month later, nothing was said about the phone missing. No talk anymore about the phone! So, we went to the lady who owns the phone, “Did you ever found your phone?” “Oh yes, sorry, I made a mistake. I left it at home.” Oh my Gosh! So, after all that trouble, it was the client’s fault! She left it at home. She didn’t miss it in the office. But she reported it. She blamed the cleaner! And that’s how I got into the trouble. And when the bosses found out that it wasn’t my fault, they didn’t apologize to me, nothing! I took the blame for everything! And when they find out what the woman said, no apology, nothing!

In the account above, the managers are cast in the role of ‘bad’ persons because they never apologized to Susan, although they realized that they had made a mistake by

reprimanding her about the incident. In addition, Susan casts the client as a fool, who made a 'foolish mistake.' The mobile phone was not stolen, but the client had actually left it at home. Meanwhile, Margaret was considered a 'bad friend' because she only sought to protect her own interests, for which she was willing to sacrifice her best friend. Margaret refused to accept responsibility for the incident. She denied it, instead scapegoating and passing on the blame to Susan. Consequently, Susan became the victim of the client's foolish mistake and the managers' unwillingness to apologize as well as Margaret's betrayal, hence Susan "took the blame for everything."

As a victim, Susan struggled with her own feelings in the aftermath of the betrayal, particularly because Susan and Margaret often had to rely on each other as they continued to work together, bound by the group's common goals. In fact, for many people the experience of being betrayed will be tremendously difficult to bear (Sievers, 2007). As Burchard Sievers (2007) notes, betrayal can produce a range of reactions including "disenchantment and loss of trust, and may raise feelings of loss, anger, rage, despair, the desire for revenge, cynicism or even traumatisation" (p. 70). Susan may have experienced some of these feelings, and she may have repressed them. But she carried on, which suggests that she was able to hide from herself and other workers behind the "façade of an apparently well-adjusted personality" (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008, p. 18). Things did not, however, return to their previous equilibrium:

#### Extract 4

After that it was never the same, because I'm the supervisor! I just need to carry on, like nothing is wrong. But from that day, I didn't trust her again... Oh, that was terrible! And because every day I have to sit here with her and just carry on, and just make like everything was fine! Because I'm the supervisor!

As this quotation suggests the betrayal incident had a significant impact on Susan's idealization of the subordinate (Margaret) and produced feelings of disappointment and frustration. Susan may even have come to perceive Margaret as a 'selfish person' who

had taken advantage of her ‘softness’ for her own ends. There is a suggestion in the above quote that Susan, consciously or unconsciously, wanted to ‘get rid of’ Margaret from the group as a way of helping her ‘healed the narcissistic injury’. But there was nothing she could do about it which, consequently, left her with a sense of helplessness and anxiety.

### **A Victory for All**

In response to the threat of identity devaluation, Susan might employ various defence mechanisms. In this situation, it appears that she projected her helplessness and vulnerability to an omnipotent and omnipresent figure. Susan sought divine guidance to help and reaffirm her faith in the idealization of subordinates and servant leadership. For Gabriel (2000), this means that the leader is unconsciously expecting the work (attribution) of providential agency. Gabriel suggests that the providential agency attribution “presents an incident as having been engineered by a superior intelligence... [which] restores justice and brings about the punishment of the villains and a happy end for all the rest” (2000, p. 39). When this agency is perceived at work, it may provide the symbolic mechanism by which to turn powerlessness into strength, and helplessness into control, as shown in Susan’s account:

#### Extract 5

It was a big relief when she left. I was happy... Maybe the good Lord up there took her away from my side. And at the end, I was rewarded, because she left... I’m the winner! That’s how I feel anyway, I’m the winner. I’m still here, and she’s gone, out of my sight (laughs heartily).

In this case, Susan attributed responsibility for the relief that Margaret’s departure gave her to an omnipotent and omnipresence figure. Rather than consider that the dynamics of the betrayal challenges Susan’s approach to her staff and her work as a servant leader, Margaret’s removal came to be understood as a divine intervention. This intervention, consequently, helped to reinforce Susan’s faith in the idealization of subordinates and,

more generally, in servant leadership. Identification with a divine figure allowed Susan to assume responsibility for otherwise inexplicable phenomena.

By re-telling this story, Susan conveys her faith in God, who helps her sustain the idealization of self and servant leadership. The alteration of her suffering into rewards for the victor is not achieved by Susan's own strength or power, but through the work of providential agency. By her faith in God, Susan understands that she has prevailed over her difficulties. The predicament, then, becomes a test or trial for Susan's belief in God – is she faithful enough to assert her identity as a servant leader in the face of such a difficult situation? At the end, Susan is the victor who wins 'the battle', sustains her identity as the group's servant leader, and maintains the idealization of servant leadership.

For Susan, faith in God may function as an agency of aspiration in order to deal with the frustration and disappointment caused by difficult and uncontrollable situations. By attaching herself to an all-powerful God, through idealized transference, she can seemingly remedy her own imperfection, vulnerability and frustration. Yet, this reality can be distorted because it focuses on what one wishes, not on what is. Hence, Susan may unreasonably hope that a providential agency may 'do' for her all the things necessary for her to sustain the idealization of servant leadership, and thus corroborate the fantasy to become God.

It appeared that the story generated both pleasure and pride for Susan when she recounted it to an audience (the interviewer). The story's worth lies in its fulfilment of a potent wish. Where the response of other leaders may have been to consciously reciprocate and blame Margaret, Susan responded with passivity and quietness. Susan's 'sacrifice' was, however, rewarded. As Gabriel (2000) notes, such a sacrifice "converts an impersonal organizational transaction into something personal, emotional, and unique — it stands for caring and for relations outside the organizational cash nexus" (p. 82). Passivity is not only Susan's weakness but also her strength. By becoming passive, she was powerless at first, but with the help of providential agency, she becomes a powerful servant leader.

On the other hand, the cleaners may also have gained some benefits from the incident. When they realized that the mobile phone was not stolen, but was left at the client's home, indirectly it worked as clear evidence that they were not the thieves but rather the victims of stereotyping as suggested in the story: "If something is missing or stolen, they [the clients] blame cleaners". Thus, this story was delivered as a way to get rid of the 'all cleaners are thieves' label or stereotype. Such attribution of fixed quality was insulting and very disturbing to the cleaners. This attribution also stressed the lack of value of cleaners in the eyes of clients. In the aftermath of this incident, the cleaners may have hoped that in future if something went missing in the clients' buildings, the cleaners will not automatically be blamed.

Given that the workers were aware that the client and managers did not offer a word of apology to Susan, this story also potentially casts the workers as more intelligent and moral individuals than the client and managers. Through identification with Susan, the workers can laugh at the client's 'stupidity'. It turns out the client is more stupid than the cleaners. Workers might miss their mobile, but they will not report to the other party that the phone had been stolen, and even blame others without any clear evidence. Should the cleaners make the same mistake, at least they would apologize when they realized that they were wrong. Hence, this story casts the cleaners as better people than the client. The same comparison also applies to the managers. Thus, by identifying with Susan, the workers also experience the sense of a victory and superiority against the inferior client and managers.

Therefore, in a manner similar to that identified by Gabriel (2000), this story also offered gratification for the cleaners (as well as Susan):

in the form of the moral satisfaction of those who have suffered injustice and whose suffering is finally displayed for all to see. Thus, in its own way, the story represented the fulfilment of the wish to have the injustice brought to light. The consolation offered by the story is substantially

strengthened when the story is shared with others. It represents a collective wish-fulfilment, and as such it becomes a group's prized possession, a genuine heritage. (Gabriel, 2000, p. 50)

'Margaret's Betrayal' story can thus be considered as a 'good' story as at the end of the plot it turns Susan and her workers into victors. This story could be perceived, in the first place, as a sad story, as there is an endeavour to generate sympathy in the audience who are asked to empathize with Susan's suffering resulting from this betrayal by her closest workmate. Yet, the emotional tone at the end of story turns to pride and pleasure as it casts Susan and the workers in the role of victors. In Susan's case, the alteration of the protagonist's suffering into a victory is achieved through an attribution of providential significance, ensuring that justice is done, and this helps Susan prevail over her difficulties. Susan as the protagonist takes on an appreciative stance in the face of this superior agency intervening (Gabriel, 2000). "This process, then, restores the wish-fulfilling quality to the story, since it enables the victim to swap camps, albeit in fantasy; the story provides a symbolic mechanism for turning passivity into activity, helplessness into control" (Gabriel, 2000, p. 55). It is no longer Susan who suffers because of the betrayal, but she is the person who wins 'the battle' and meets workers' insecure desires and feelings. In this situation, Susan is constructed as a victim who overcomes adversity through her noble attitude. The predicament, then, becomes a test for her character as the altruist servant leader: is she strong enough to assert her identity and ego-ideal in the face of a difficult situation? Hence, in line with Gabriel's observations, the story reveals a proud and defiant character, who, while stopping short of confrontation, refuses to give into blaming and scapegoating, makes the most of the moment, and turns victimhood into survival against the odds. In the end, Susan becomes a winner. The listener responds to such a story with empathy and pity for the protagonist's adversity, but, on the other hand, also experiences feelings of respect and reverence for her character and noble quality (Gabriel, 2000).

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have further demonstrated the construction, production, and maintenance of Susan's identity as a powerful servant leader. Such an identity creates a double-edged sword for Susan, for it not only provides narcissistic gratification and boosts her self-esteem, but it also brings with it the threat of betrayal. As a consequence of her subordinate's betrayal, Susan experiences feelings of disappointment and frustration. However, with help from a superhuman figure, Susan recovers from the situation, and hence experiences a considerable boost to her identity and confidence, leading to the sustenance of servant leadership practice.

In the previous three chapters (4, 5, and 6), I have presented the collected stories and accounts of subordinates and their leader (Susan) as well as my psychoanalytic interpretation and Gabriel's poetic tropes interpretation of the empirical material. The following chapter presents the implications of my findings for the related concepts and theories, recommendations and ideas for future research, as well as my conclusion and final reflections on the research process.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The current propensity to view servant leadership in infatuated terms can cause one to miss some important aspects. It can also cause people to reject the concept of servant leadership, since cynicism is likely to be the first response to an overly complimentary interpretation of the phenomenon presented by a clearly besotted advocate of servant leadership (Johnson, 2009). The purpose of this study was to offer a richer explanation for, and to better understand, the complex dynamics of servant leadership. This was achieved by focusing on informal relationships and leadership, and utilizing a psychoanalytic interpretation. I do not, however, claim that the insights provided in this study will address all misgivings around servant leadership; instead my aim was to articulate some key issues and concerns relate to the characteristics and experience of servant leadership.

My study has placed idealization as the cornerstone of servant leadership, therefore disputing the current construction of romantic notions of servant leadership which privilege its actors as ideal and moral persons who can only bring positive outcomes to the organization as a whole. By studying servant leadership indirectly through the substance of informal relationships and leadership, and by using a psychoanalytic framework, my study presents a new avenue of inquiry into the phenomenon. Through this study, I hope that servant leadership can gain broader attention from scholars and researchers, who may in turn produce empirical research to further enhance the body of knowledge regarding servant leadership.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the value of my study and to explore its potential contribution to the related theories and concepts. I first provide a brief discussion about the value of the study's findings to the psychoanalytic approach to leadership. Then I provide the rationale for positioning this research as a study of servant leadership. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of my research for the study of servant

leadership, particularly highlighting Greenleaf's (2002, 2003) version of the concept. Each section includes ideas for future research and some implications for practice. I conclude by presenting my main argument, followed by final reflections related to the research process in general, and my role as a researcher.

## **Implications of the Findings for Psychoanalytic Approach to Leadership**

### **The Symbolic Mother**

Viewing the leader as subordinate's unconscious expression of the longing for the mother is noticeably absent from the psychoanalytic literature on leadership. While, empirically, Hodgson, Levinson and Zaleznik (1965) found that a follower's fantasy of a leader can be constructed in one of these images: paternal, maternal, and fraternal, the psychoanalytic literature on leadership is nevertheless dominated by discussion of the leader as the father surrogate (Gabriel, 1997; Maccoby, 2004). The paternal fantasy according to Gabriel "is one of the commonest, if not the commonest fantasy about leaders" (p. 330).

Utilizing the substance of informal relationships and leadership and psychoanalytic frame of thinking, my findings in Chapter 4 demonstrates a key psychoanalytic insight that subordinates' current relations are constructed by, and bear a resemblance to, early life ones (Oglensky, 1995); in this case, those from early childhood with the good-mother. I demonstrate how subordinates spontaneously talk of their supervisor, an older woman, as their symbolic mother at work. In their accounts, subordinates underline various positive qualities and emotions, especially the caring and supporting aspects of the leader. The leader was not viewed as a symbolic father in a way Freud envisaged – the demanding and stern Oedipal Father – but rather as the representation of the primal mother (Gabriel, 1997). In the subordinates' fantasy, the symbolic mother is often perceived as a giver of unconditional love and care, which is different from the symbolic father that is often viewed as dominated, detached and impersonal. Unlike the leader as father substitute, whose attention and approval are based on performance or achievement, the leader as

surrogate mother reinstates the individual subordinate's narcissism as the leader accepts and respects the person just the way he or she is (Gabriel, 1997, 2010; Maccoby, 2004).

### **Gendered Narcissism and Maternal Transference**

Findings not only provide insight to the limited discussion of symbolic mother leader in the psychodynamic literature on leadership, but they also offer insight to the discourse of feminine narcissism (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). Narcissism in that literature has been dominated by masculine narcissistic characteristics such as self-orientation, rationality, dominance, and result orientation (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2008; Kets de Vries, 1999; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). However, such characteristics were not prevalent in my findings. The group's leader performs her narcissistic leadership identity by providing service and protection to her subordinates whereby she seeks to impress them. Subordinates' adoration and admiration then can provide narcissistic gratification to the leader as well as secure and reaffirm her identity as the subordinate's caregiver and protector. For Susan, her narcissism was not managed and achieved by non-emotional, logical and aggressive actions, but rather via sensitivity, compassion, caring, tolerance and other forms associated with the feminine characteristics. As the insight from this finding treats narcissism in a feminine fashion, as suggested by Pullen and Rhodes (2008), then, it may provide a 'voice' for a more nuanced discussion of gendered narcissism and leadership.

Another issue that may interest others in relation to gender aspect in my study is the possibility of men evoking subordinates' maternal transference. Although male managers in my study were perceived by subordinates in terms of the 'bad' symbolic father, not all males are the same. Kakar (1971) observes that male managers in the traditional Japanese, Turkish, Ghanain, and Thai organizations were often viewed as symbolic benevolent fathers. Western (2008) also found that the spiritual leader in a monastic community was perceived as the monks' symbolic loving father. While these figures were seen as 'good' symbolic fathers, they might have evoked subordinates' positive maternal transference. In fact, psychoanalysis, as Maccoby (2004) observes, has demonstrated that individuals can have a maternal transference with a male or female

leader. It is not impossible then for a male leader to be fantasized as mother substitute (Durkin, 1989; Schindler, 1951). Nevertheless, it is perhaps not accidental that my research, like that of Gabriel (1997) and Maccoby (2004), was studying a woman who triggers a maternal transference to others. It is likely that women are more able to enact this kind of transference from others than are men, in particular those women who already have long experience as a mother. Of course, not all mothers are the same and mothers clearly differ from fathers, therefore, further research is needed in order to examine whether women are more able to evoke subordinates' maternal transference than are men, particularly in relation to the production of servant leadership in for-profit organizations.

## **Rationale for Naming the Research a Study of Servant Leadership**

### **Symbolic Mother as Servant leader**

Gabriel (1997) and Maccoby (2000) have other analyses of the leader as symbolic mother, yet I contend that the more appropriate term to use is servant leader. Gabriel (1997), who borrows from Kohut's (1985) typology, likens the symbolic mother leader with charismatic leader. Nevertheless, others point out that the characteristics of charismatic leadership in the leadership literature are closer to Freud's symbolic father leader characteristics (Lindholm, 1988; Shamir, 1991). Maccoby (2000), basing his analysis on Freud's distinctions of individuals' personalities, names the symbolic mother as the erotic-narcissistic leader. Nevertheless, this research has shown that care, support, and recognition are dominant emotions in subordinates' narratives about their leader. Therefore, I suggest that the followers' maternal fantasy of their leader is more akin to Greenleaf's (2002, 2003) fantasy of a servant leader. In his story of servant leadership, Greenleaf emphasizes that "the servant-leader is servant first" (2002, p. 27). The servant leader cares and is genuinely concerned about his or her followers. The individual leader also strives to develop subordinates and wants to facilitate their growth as his or her main objective, much as mothers nurture and look after their children (Bass, 2000; Greenleaf, 2002; Spears, 1995; Yukl, 2010).

### **Symbolic Family Group and the Servant Leader**

My findings illustrate other characteristics of servant leadership: I show how subordinates' construction of their symbolic family group, the product of subordinates' identification with the servant leader and with one another, reflects many characteristics of servant leadership. These characteristics include behaviours that facilitate personal close relationships, group cohesion and community building, shared decision making, and the principle of 'primus inter pares.' These characteristics are argued by proponents of servant leadership as the main features of the concept (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 2002; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Prosser, 2010; Spears, 1995; Yukl, 2010). This study shows, via a psychoanalytic interpretation, why this might be the case. In addition, the production of servant leadership in this study is demonstrated through the leader's (Susan's) own narratives whose main internal orientation is to care about, protect, and serve her subordinates, which is has been recognized in the leadership literature as servant leadership (Bass, 2000; Northouse 2010; Sendjaya & Cooper, 2010; Yukl, 2010).

### **Implications of the Findings for Servant Leadership**

#### **Servant Leader as a 'Flawed' Individual**

The person is a complex individual with particular inner dynamic, histories, and self-interests (Gabriel, 1999b, 2010; Kets de Vries, 1989a, 2006; Oglensky, 1995). Indeed, for Greenleaf (2003), servant leaders are not elite or exclusive; rather, they are ordinary and "mortal people subject to error and deserving forgiveness like everybody else" (p. 33). Yet the literature of servant leadership continues to construct a vision of a servant leader as an altruistic, moral, and even saintly person (Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, & Kakabadse, 2002; Winston, 2004). Servant leaders, I am told, are flawless and have no self-interest – they only care about others and are willing to sacrifice themselves in order to meet others' needs and wishes. This study, therefore, disputes that idealistic view of a servant leader.

On one hand, my study argues that the idealization process appears to construct the leader as a moral, altruist, and self-sacrificial being. The leader must be endowed with extraordinary characteristics because only then can subordinates view her as the 'real' leader, accepted and legitimated (Gabriel, 1999b, 2010). At times, subordinates may also deny the leader's personal weaknesses and poor performance (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987). Such infatuation with the leader, according to Meindl et al. (1985, p. 100), "can also be used to learn something about the motivations of followers." Accordingly, my study reveals that the subordinates' adoration of the servant leader is not adoration of a concrete person, but is rather the outcome of their unconscious fantasy. Subordinates viewed the leader as a symbolic recreation, or representation, of aspects of the early mother-child relationship. Such subordinates' view of the servant leader functions as a way to allay anxieties associated with a threat to identity which is triggered by the impersonal and uncaring managers. The servant leader symbolism then becomes subordinates' wish fulfilment, working as a psychological means of affirming their narcissistic identity.

Against the current construction of the altruistic model of a servant leader, I have shown that the individual leader is not necessarily absorbed in meeting the needs of others, but that she serves in order to satisfy her own fantasy. My analysis illustrates that the leader's identity is partly based on a fantasy reproduction about what she accomplishes with respect to her subordinates. The leader is engaged in serving behaviours whereby she seeks to meet subordinates' wishes and desires as a way of promoting her ego-ideal fantasy, that is, to become a powerful servant leader. In return for service, there is an expectation of admiration to secure the reassurance and recognition as a servant leader. Accordingly, my study reveals that the leader is not a purely altruistic and moral servant leader, but rather an individual that seeks to establish and secure her sense of identity and narcissism, which is a requirement of one is to be what Greenleaf (2002) calls as a whole person.

As for the leader in this study, she needs to be loved by subordinates to affirm her self-worth and narcissism, which can help her allay the anxiety triggered by anti-identity

position of being a cleaner. Whenever the leader cannot deliver service to subordinates, or does not succeed in gaining their love or loyalty, she is likely to sense it as a failure to meet the demand of her ego-ideal, leaving Susan with a sense of powerlessness and low self-esteem. My study thus challenges the unattainable model of the current construction of servant leaders, recommending in place of a superhuman an alternative of 'flawed' individual in interactions with others. The leader in this study, like any other idealized figure (leader), is not an object lacking subjectivity.

### **Subordinates as Active Players in the Servant Leadership Process**

The servant leadership literature also tends to describe subordinates very positively (Graham, 1991; Northouse, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2010). Subordinates, we are told, will return the servant leaders' service with loyalty, commitment, and love. They then fulfil their potential and become the servant leaders themselves in organizations. That is as far as analysis goes, as the literature of servant leadership presumes that the individual subordinates are not complex and they do not have a 'dark' side.

My findings contradict the servant leadership literature that depicts subordinates in lofty terms and portray them as a passive agent that lack autonomy and influence in the leader-follower relations. My study shows that subordinates play an active role in the production of servant leadership.

For the leader in my study, all workers are good, and she considers that all of them will reciprocate her love with admiration and loyalty. This idealization is a way for the leader to affirm her lingering narcissistic ego ideal, that was built based on identification with significant others. While the complexity of organizational life shares a different view of individual subordinates, the leader's idealization of workers may often prevent her seeing such reality. At times, some of them did not return the leader's care and love 'positively'. There are a couple of workers, who try to take advantage of the leader's 'softness' for their own personal interest. Again, some workers consistently take advantage of the leader's propensity to serve them as a means to satisfy their own needs. Indeed, in the leader's account of 'Margaret's Betrayal,' one of the workers, a close friend of the leader,

was prepared to 'betray' her in order to defend herself from managers' anger and punishment. For that worker, this action might simply have been an act of survival. Yet, for the leader and other subordinates, they may consider her as a 'bad friend' because she only sought her own interest by sacrificing her friend. From this perspective, subordinates are seen as powerful and active players in the leadership dynamics (Bligh, 2010; Collinson, 2006; Shamir, 2007; Sinclair, 2010), able to exercise a degree of autonomy and control over the leader. In other words, the subordinates are not perceived as persons who comply merely because they believe that the leader has an abstract right to be in such a position or role. Rather, subordinates comply: "to fulfil fantasies, to appease internalized authority figures, and to cope with emotional conflicts" (Oglensky, 1995, p. 1037).

The study's findings also extend the above discussion by revealing subordinates' dependency on the leader. The workers rely on the supervisor to cushion them against the adversity and hardship of organizational life. Subordinates' emotional strivings for love, recognition and security can only be satisfied at the mercy of the leader. They rely on the leader for the bestowal of a sense of identity. Such dependency on the leader indicates the subordinates' lack of self-sufficiency and control. The ambivalence of subordinates' need for dependency, in addition to their need for control, has been recognized as a major theme in psychoanalytic insight on the dynamics of leader-subordinates relations (Oglensky, 1995).

Findings also highlight an important insight that subordinates are not only emotionally attached to their leader, but they are also emotionally attached to fellow subordinates. The dynamic of inter-subordinates processes that echo the positive siblings' relations as well as siblings' rivalries and conflicts in the family constellation may add depth and richness to the servant leadership processes.

### **Servant Leader and Subordinate Relationships**

The servant leadership literature suggests that dynamic relationships between servant leaders and their subordinates can only produce positive outcomes. Proponents of servant

leadership believe that this form of leadership is wholly desirable as it can improve corporate profitability and organizations' members' well-being (e.g. Graham, 1991; Liden et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2010). Such claims mostly are presumptions not supported by empirical research (Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo; 2008; Washington, Sutton, & Field, 2006; Yukl, 2010). There has been an apparent lack of interest in the negative effects, such as conflicts or rivalries, associated with servant leadership (Cerit, 2009; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Van Dierendonck, 2010; Whetstone, 2002).

However, I reveal that the production of servant leadership in this study not only has the potential to support the organizational functioning and subordinates' development, but it is also has the potential to complicate and hinder these processes. Indeed, the latter may override its potential benefits and make working lives more onerous, less satisfactory than they are currently. To introduce servant leadership as advocated by its many supporters, the result could be dire for managers and staff.

#### *Empirical Evidence: The Potential to do Good*

This study demonstrates that servant leadership processes at times could enhance subordinates' sense of security and self-esteem in the context of a bureaucratic organization. In the 'Lost Key' story I illustrate how the leader contains her subordinate's fear and anxiety in the face of a threat associated with the potential manager's anger and punishment, therefore, helping him feel secure, comfort, and respect. Equally important is my illustration of how the leader in the mirroring process sensitively responds to subordinates' desires and satisfies their narcissistic self-esteem at the times when they experience a sense of helplessness and low self esteem evoked by people in authorities. In both cases, Susan functions as subordinates' shelter against the threatening, uncaring, and harsh corporate managers. Thus the leader seems to act against the organizational process, in which bureaucratic threats are contained and bureaucratic damages are repaired. This demonstrates that the leader has a kind of informal authority wherein she can bend or break some organizational rules and procedures and put her personal stamp on the informal domain of the organization.

Accordingly, subordinates idealize the leader. Personal satisfaction and empowerment as well as good teamwork and group's cohesion are the result. In addition, when subordinates begin to identify with one another based on their identification with Susan, they demonstrate caring and supportive behaviours toward one another. Individuals are encouraged, and start to take the role of a servant when dealing with fellow workers. Some subordinates then might become servant leaders themselves. Together, the leader and her subordinates construct a symbolic family group that transform work relations into informal relationships and leadership, which reflects many servant leadership features: caring and close relationships, community building, and shared decision making that aims for consensus. Such an environment is shown to become a good holding environment that further supports individuals' sense of development and empowerment. These findings, therefore, provide evidence of the benefits of servant leadership, since the literature noticeably suffers from the lack of empirical research in explaining whether and how servant leaders meet subordinates' needs and desires (Mayer et al., 2008; Washington et al., 2006; Yukl, 2010).

#### *Empirical Evidence: The Potential to do Damage*

Current knowledge about servant leadership suggests that the production of servant leadership only manufactures positive outcomes to all actors involved. However, my findings illustrate different outcomes. Idealization may bring with it many positive effects, but maintaining the idealization can be extremely difficult. Failure to do so, as shown in this study, is always tempered with the possibility, or actuality, of frustration and perhaps even a sense of deprivation and failure (Gabriel & Schwartz, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1988, 2004; Oglensky, 1995).

In the case of subordinates' idealization of their leader, findings clearly demonstrate how such idealization turns into disappointment and anger as the leader fails to meet subordinates' (exaggerated) expectations. Moreover, the subordinates' idealization mechanism can trigger further problems. When individuals' expectation of being the leader's 'favourite' collide with the leader's limitations (perceived or actual) relating to the provision of equal treatment and care to each subordinate, members' rivalries and

conflicts result. In fact, such conflicts split-off the group, hence, distract group's members from their primary tasks and potentially cripple the group's productivity. Splitting also occur in a wider context, wherein subordinates' idealization of the symbolic mother calls for further defensive mechanisms, as the subordinates project all 'negative' characteristics to the senior managers – viewed as the 'bad' symbolic father. The co-existence of maternal and paternal transference processes then transforms ordinary bureaucratic circumstances into anxiety-ridden predicaments for all organization members (Baum, 1985).

The leader's idealization of subordinates has many consequences. Analysis demonstrates that the leader, like the mother in the father-mother-child triangle in the family constellation, is caught in the middle of her managers and subordinates. This means that, on occasions, she struggles to meet others' needs and interests. As a result, the leader often serves as a scapegoat and bears the consequences. Idealization turns into disappointment and frustration that can be experienced as a betrayal.

Hence, my study reveals that the servant leader and subordinates' mutual idealization is an ideal that can be aspired to, but it is ultimately unattainable. Since no one is perfect and organizational life is so complex, inevitably such close relationships can lead to dysfunctional consequences both to the servant leader and subordinates. It is perhaps not surprising then Greenleaf view servant leadership as:

a dangerous creation: dangerous for the natural servant to become a leader, dangerous for the leader to be servant first, and dangerous for a follower to insist on being led by a servant (2002, p. 26).

Greenleaf may not elaborate as to why he calls servant leadership a 'dangerous creation.' Yet, my findings reveal some of the possible reasons that may have underpinned Greenleaf's thinking. The threats and challenges of being betrayed and scapegoated with its associate consequences (as shown in my study), seems to be risky and difficult to bear. Moreover, my findings illustrate how hazardous it is to be a follower of a servant leader

wherein individuals' idealization of the leader produces conflicts with others, which in turn triggers more anxiety-ridden predicaments for the subordinates. Simply, servant leadership can be considered a dangerous creation as it potentially can do damage; the damage is both to the servant leader, and to those who are led (followers). Given that servant leadership can also create tension among layers in organizational hierarchy, the results of this are potentially dire for the leader and other managers as well as for subordinates. Perhaps, the only way for the leader and subordinates to survive is to 'abandon the journey', as indicated in Hesse's story.

On the other hand, betrayal can bring some psychological benefit for the servant leader. This is because a subordinate's betrayal may help the leader to stay alert to reality. There is a danger in subordinates' idealization of the leader as this can reinforce a leader's narcissistic tendency which in turn gradually diminishes her capacity for self-criticism and reflection, leading to narcissistic regression that can corrupt her abilities and force her to pursue the 'wrong ends' (Johnson, 2001). While the leader's serving behaviours can provide narcissistic gratification, it may also prompt her to undermine the primary tasks and organizational goals in efforts to gain subordinates' adoration and love. The importance of the leader's narcissistic gratifications can take precedence over difficult decision making, particularly at times when her 'loyalty' to subordinates comes in conflict with the organization's interests. Betrayal then may work to intervene or confront the leader's idealization of subordinates with the demands of the organizational objectives and tasks, wherein the betrayal provides the leader with a capacity for self-reflection that can work against the threat of narcissistic deterioration (Kernberg, 1998). In addition, as Krantz (2006) asserts, the leader may also purposively betray the subordinates in the service of corporate objectives, which may turn subordinates illusion about the leader into reality. The main challenge that needs to be managed for both the leader and subordinates is to learn how to deal with the experience of betraying and being betrayed as the leader and subordinates continue to work together bound by the common group's goals.

The threat of betrayal is perhaps the reason why some people in authority are reluctant to embrace the idea of servant leadership. Indeed, the empirical research is notable for its lack of discussion of the perils and threats of being a servant leader, yet there are some well-told stories that suggest such a view. The story of Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Christ, the archetype of a servant leader (Gabriel, 2010), is one such example. Yasser Arafat's (viewed by some as a servant leader) story of being betrayed by party members is another example (Krantz, 2006). It seems that the production of servant leadership, as these stories depict, brings with it the ever-present possibility of betrayal (as well as other consequences). Hence, for business decision makers, perhaps it is a lot 'easier' to enact another style of leadership rather than to employ servant leadership with all of its possible consequences. Perhaps anyone could be a servant leader, and the notion seems to hold appeal when focusing on the positive aspects. But not everyone wants to be one, and even those for whom the idea of servant leadership holds particular appeal may not be prepared to 'pay the price'.

#### *Intervention of Divine Agency*

Much of the prescriptive literature views servant leaders as determined individuals who are unaffected by the challenges and complexity of organizational life. One can wonder: how do a servant leader remains untouched when dealt with such challenges and threats from work relations? In coping with betrayal, the leader in this study craves intervention from a superhuman figure. In this case, I might suggest that this interpretation of divine agency becomes her "animating force" (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 205) that works as an agency of aspiration in maintaining the leader's identity as a servant leader and her idealization of servant leadership. Belief in some divine or metaphysical figure may thus serve as a final refuge for the leader. In other words, the expectation of a divine intervention works as the last defence mechanism that can help her provide the symbolic process in turning helplessness into control and a 'bad' thing into a 'good' thing.

Believing in the work of such a powerful external force in the face of betrayal is an act of faith. It is a faith that relies on the idealization of a superhuman power that will provide answers and results in response to the practical difficulties and problems in practicing

servant leadership. Hence, the leader sees the divine figure and its intervention as a key feature of servant leadership which heightens her own identity as a servant leader with supernatural force. The implication is that such production of servant leadership may serve as a resacralisation of theological notion of charisma. And the notion of charisma has been desacralised in the contemporary writings of leadership (Ladkin, 2006) and, arguably, in Weber's original account (Conger, 2010; Rieff, 2007). Bass argues that: "Theologically, charisma was an endowment of spiritual grace from God" (1985, p. 39). Charisma in this sense demonstrates that, because the leader's power comes from divine favour, it communicates divine sovereignty (Rieff, 2007). The power is not based on self-generated power, but on a divine gift (Ladkin, 2006) through an act of self-surrender and sacrifices (Grint, 2010). The result is the enactment of hierarchy in its original meaning in Greek: "the sacred organizational space that facilitates god's (or the priesthood's) leadership" (Grint, 2010, p. 91).

## **Conclusions**

Most of the popular and academic literature on servant leadership portrays the leader as a perfect and noble person and depicts the leader in lofty terms that extol the virtuous characteristics that constitute servant leadership. Such a construction of servant leadership is superficial and inadequate as it was built based on an over-simplistic view of complex and dynamic human beings.

## **Theoretical Contribution**

This study presents an empirical investigation that extends the field of servant leadership into organizational studies – as its focal point it has the empirical contribution of informal and psychoanalytic processes. Of particular interest are the novel methodology in studying leadership through psychoanalytic method and organizational stories, and the type of organization studied – the investigation of cleaning service workers as 'insignificant beings'. Importantly, my study investigates and connects a range of currently unrelated literature from servant leadership, psychoanalysis and organizational,

psychodynamic processes. Particular contributions emerging from the study include the application of servant leadership and psychodynamics to the chosen empirical context and the interpretative approach and contribution about the ‘dark side’ of servant leadership that entails a leader’s and subordinates’ mutual idealization to protect their narcissistic tendencies. Furthermore, this study provides insight about the complexity of servant leadership as it applies Yiannis Gabriel’s work on psychoanalysis to servant leadership through three particular foci: the symbolic mother, the symbolic family group and the powerful and powerless servant leader (Chapter 4-6). By providing in such insights, this study restores some much needed balance to the current study of servant leadership, yet for some, the results of this study may appear surprising and provocative.

This study illustrates that servant leadership operates differently if compared with, for example, transformational, narcissistic and charismatic theories of leadership. In those theories, idealization works unidimensionally – from subordinates to their leaders. Leaders are less likely to idealize the led, but more likely to accept their fantasies of achievement, vision, and ideology (Burns, 1978; Gabriel, 1999b; 2010; Kets de Vries, 2006; Lindholm, 1988; Post, 1986; Zaleznik, 1977). My study demonstrates that the leader’s idealization of a Divine figure adds another element of distinction between servant leadership and other leadership theories. One may also classify servant leadership as one specialized, distinctive, form of charismatic leadership that operates to sacralise the production of a charismatic relation, which is built based on the leader’s acts of self-surrender, sacrifice, and faith.

### **Practical Contribution**

I reveal that the production of servant leadership in this study not only has the potential to support organizational functioning and subordinates’ development, but it is also has the potential to complicate and hinder these processes. Indeed, the latter may override its potential benefits and make working lives more onerous, less satisfactory, than they are currently. To introduce the concept of servant leadership as advocated by its many supporters, could lead to dire results for practitioners and their organizations. Therefore, I

do not have any intention to encourage managers in the context of for-profit organizations to apply servant leadership as their daily leadership style.

Some formal managers may insist on embracing servant leadership in their organizational lives. Yet, as people in authority, they tend to follow the bureaucratic processes, rules, procedures, and objectives using rational, impersonal, and result oriented approaches. Therefore they are likely to trigger paternal transference instead of maternal transference. One of the consequences may be that subordinates see these managers as impostors who practice servitude behaviours as instrumental way of seeking personal interest, adoration, and advancement. This effect might be ameliorated if each manager were to individually detach from their formal position to create an informal community with other organizational members, and start to engage intimate relationship with them by serving, support, protecting and caring for them. The individual leader then may trigger the maternal transference from subordinates and acquire some benefits from the idealization process. Yet, this leader needs to be aware of the peril associated with such idealization, for idealization is not only able to help the person to bolster his or her narcissism, but also can bring the threat of possible negative consequences. To the extent that followers are also affected by such idealization, they may become responsive subjects, dependent upon the admiration and sacrifice of the leader for secure workplace identities, perhaps even for effective performance at work.

### **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

The utilization of psychodynamics as the framework of thinking can be problematic in terms of research validity and generalizability. It can, however, help me to investigate and comprehend individuals' inner dimensions and the complexity of human relations that complicated the servant leadership process, which perhaps cannot be explicated by rational assumptions utilized by other approaches. In applying a psychodynamic interpretation, I offer new understandings and a logic that may help us to better comprehend servant leadership. I do not want to generalize the findings broadly, as leadership should address the importance of specific setting where it belongs (Bryman, Stephens, & Campo, 1996).

Others may quickly point out some limitations in this study. One perceived limitation, for example, may be associated with the small numbers of participants as the source of data (stories) – as Sveningsson and Larsson (2006, p. 209) note, “limiting the study of leadership to but one group of superior and subordinates may look precarious”. I contend, however, that the richness of my empirical material can negate such a ‘limitation’, as it enables me to provide an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Indeed, the number of participants for interviews in a particular research study should be determined by the aim of that research. If its aim is to understand, for example, the meaning of leadership as experienced by one individual (e.g. a leader or subordinate), then, this one participant is enough (Kvale, 1996). In fact, historically, psychology has provided many examples of how general knowledge was obtained from the study of one or a few subjects. Freud’s series of case studies of individual’s pathology or personality, for instance, had offered a significant contribution to the general knowledge in psychology. Piaget’s work on “children’s cognitive development originated with psychoanalytically inspired interviews with his own children” (Kvale, 1996, p. 102) represents another example of the richness of interpretation to be gained from a small number of research subjects. These classic and influential studies demonstrate that the use of one or a few subjects for interviews can help the researcher to investigate the phenomenon under study in more detail (Kvale, 1996). The challenge of such an approach, as adopted in this research, is to build a sound analysis and interpretation of the narratives that are able to offer insightful examples (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Gabriel, 1999b; Stake, 1994) and persuasive claims (Casey, 1999) into the phenomenon under investigation (in this case, servant leadership). While I, as researcher, attempt to meet those challenges, I will surely submit the credibility of my interpretation and conclusions to the reader’s judgment.

As mentioned earlier, one key limitation of this study is that it is derived on the basis of a substantive case study of a cleaning service company in New Zealand. Therefore, future research can expand this study to include other corporations in different countries and across cultures. I have been studying the informal relations of cleaning service workers

and their supervisor, but further research might also explore whether my findings are only applicable within lower level of group of workers, or whether they have relevance in other contexts such as within middle or top management groups in their informal relations which face different unconscious dynamics of leadership processes.

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## APPENDIX

Each participant was given and signed the following statement.

### INFORMED PARTICIPANT CONSENT

You have been asked to provide information as part of a study on “*Workers’ helping behaviour and caring characteristics in the workplace*” as part of my doctoral study at the Massey University.

The information will be gathered through interviews and observations. The interviews will range from 45 – 75 minutes. Each participant could be asked for 2 or 3 times interviews. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed with your consent, and you are free to turn the tape recorder off at any time.

All responses will be strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any of the transcripts. Any published writing stemming from this study will ensure participant confidentiality by neither identifying the participant name nor location. Pseudonyms will be used to provide for confidentiality.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Even if you agree to participate in the study, you may discontinue at any time. I am grateful for your participation in the study. Please feel free to contact me regarding the study.

Sincerely,

Donald Lantu (dlantu@yahoo.com)

Name of Participant in study: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE:

The Human Subjects Committee for Massey University has approved this project.