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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

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Management

At Massey University (Manawatu)

New Zealand

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2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have supported me to the completion of this part of my journey and I am truly indebted to all of them for their contribution and presence during these years.

First of all, I give praise and gratitude to my Lord and my saviour Jesus Christ, for granting me all that is necessary to endure this long journey as well as His unending grace on my life and my loved ones.

Special thanks go to my academic supervisors, Associate Professor Dr. Craig Prichard and Dr. Robyn Walker, who have given me guidance, insights, immense encouragement and moral support. Both of you have helped me become a much better scholar and person.

My sincere thanks and appreciation go to my wife, Dad, Mum, and my sister for your daily prayers, love, support, and companionship that really helped me and enabled me to get through this PhD. I dedicate this for you all, my loved ones.

Finally, I would like to thank the Sampoerna Foundation and DIKTI's staff and management for giving me the opportunity to pursue my dream through your scholarships and assistances.

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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