

Servant Leadership among Higher Education Academic Leaders: The Role of Personality Traits

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ABSTRACT

Despite the power of its influence, there have been few studies on servant leadership in the academic setting, particularly in the segment of the higher-education institution. This quantitative study aimed at investigating the relationship of traits-personality and servant leadership among academic leaders in Indonesia. By applying the purposive and convenience sampling method, 113 academic leaders were drawn from various colleges and universities as participants to complete the Servant Leadership Behavior questionnaire and the Ten-Item Personality Inventory. The result indicates openness as a predictor and adds data into the existing body of agreed literature on servant leadership.

Keywords: *Servant leadership, personality traits, academic leader, higher education*

1. INTRODUCTION

No one doubts at the present day that higher education institutions have great missions and responsibilities which affect all their stakeholders and challenge higher education leaders [1]. Their tasks include instruction, research, service, etc., should be excellently performed.

As how things are going, Handoyo [1] mentions higher education institutions have a few notable characteristics that are different from other organization, such as its organization's structure. Baldrige [1] stated every department/faculty in a traditional higher education institution is given privilege to gain full-authority over important decision makings. Moreover, a higher educational institution is in famous for its organizational anarchy, which is a term commonly used to describe the lack of control in an unstructured management practice. Moreover, Middlehurst, Goreham, and Woodfield [2] stated that leadership in higher education faces binary opposition between 'academics' and 'administrators' besides organizational complexity, structural, economic, and legal complexity. Therefore, due to higher education institutions present a unique set of leadership challenges, Smith and M. Wolverson [3] suggest higher education leadership competencies should include analytical, communication, student affairs, behavioral, and external relations. Consequently, a different style of leadership from other organizations is required.

Furthermore, a higher educational institution is also urged to change to survive natural selection in the modern era. Indonesia, being a country that has a lot of higher education institutions, is also looking forward to adapt to the changes. There are a lot of factors that encourage higher educational institutions in Indonesia to change, such as the changes or

additional government rules regarding education system, the increment of quality in world's education ranking, the necessity to be competitive, the graduates' expectation and other stakeholders, especially the students and their family and relatives.

In this regard, the success in those changes depends on leadership. According to Chakrabarty, Oubre, and Brown [3], a leader needs to portray oneself to be the role model for one's subordinates so that one's subordinates know how the work is done. Having a good role model is one way to increase an individual's competency and so do for the subordinates. A leader should have positive work attitudes and competency that lead to achievements in work place. The success in leadership is not only determined by a leader's own trait and characteristics, but also the ability of the leader to analyze and adapt one's leadership through different kinds of situation [4]. Therefore, the understanding about situational approach in leadership is needed. It is well-known that leadership is the process of how a group is influenced and carried through the personality, power, authority, persuasion, and behavior of a key individual. Thus, these efforts are needed to create structure and coordination to reach the destination of one's own goal [5]. Furthermore, Bass [6] explains that leadership is the ability of a leader to change work environment, work motivation, work pattern, and work values to each and every subordinate's perception so that they will be able to optimize their work to reach the ultimate goal of the organization. In this regard, leadership is defined as an individual's ability to persuade, to motivate and to influence the people to give significant contributions for the fulfillment of organization's effectiveness and success [7]. Higher education institutions, which have unique organizational structure compare to other organizations,

seems to be more effective if they adopt servant leadership model, which emphasizes on the figure of serving leader. Patterson [8] defines servant leadership as a model that focuses on the leader who serves one's own retainers, in which each and every decision to be made considers retainers' interests before the organization's interests. Patterson [9], a servant leader must have a willingness to do things as follows: (1) *Agapao love*, which means to love in a social or moral senses and includes "embracing the judgment and the deliberate assent of the will as a matter of principal, duty, and propriety"; (2) *Humility*, an ability to remember another person's talents and achievements; (3) *Altruism*, to help other people without any ulterior motive; (4) *Vision*, a power to imagine, to see and to understand retainers ability while guiding them to where they are headed and serve them; (5) *Trust*, the confidence to believe in one's organization members; (6) *Service*, an act to serve that include a mission to be responsible to other people; (7) *Empowerment*, to entrust one's power and authority on other people, which in turn it involves *effective listening*, which include seeing the other people's worth, emphasizing team-work, appreciating love and equality. In conclusion, servant leadership is focusing on serving one's own retainers individually [10] and serving other people that comes from one's *natural feeling*, which is an inclination to serve [11] [12]. The principal, values, and trust of a servant leader is the source of motivation that drives the behavior of that leader [13]. Servant leader realizes that oneself is a servant; therefore, a servant leader put priority on serving the retainers.

Even though servant leadership model has a lot of virtues and advantages, that does not mean this model has no flaw and weaknesses. According to Stone, Russel, and Patterson [10], this model is way too philosophical, lack of empirical gist, and the model concept is still too young, so that scientific rigorous is needed. Meanwhile, taken from social perspective, this model is considered to be gender bias for it applies androcentrism, as well as capitalism in its economic policy. Indeed, while this model emphasizes on spiritual and moral dimension, it is possible that this model actually different from each and every individual's spiritual, if not being the opposite of them [14]. Moreover, this model also emphasizes on aspiration of collective-collegial leadership, in which doubt emerges on the effort and work performance of the adult individuals [15]. Furthermore, this kind of leadership model is presumed to be unrealistic since it overlooks the accountability and an individual's aggression in workplace, as well as its failure on considering the differences on competency level among individuals.

Nevertheless, there are necessities to explore servant leadership more than it is, because there are a lot of variations in its aspects, characteristics and its categories. Greenleaf [16] perceives servant leadership to be one of the highest forms of charismatic leadership that is influenced by morale values, pointed by its main components, such as *humility*, *relational power*, *autonomy*, *moral development of followers*, and *emulation of leader's service orientation*. Spears [17] extends Greenleaf's perception regarding *servant leadership* by expanding it into 10 characteristics of

a servant leader, as follows: *listening*, *empathy*, *healing awareness*, *persuasion*, *conceptualization*, *foresight*, *stewardship*, *commitment to the growth of people*, and *community building*. In addition, Barbuto and Wheeler [18] put calling into Spears' characteristics of a servant leader, in which the factor analysis in their study is divided into 5 categories, as follows: *altruistic calling*, *emotional healing*, *wisdom*, *persuasive mapping*, and *organizational stewardship*.

Empirical evidence has shown the role of a leader's individual attributes in servant leadership, such as leader's personality, affect the subordinates' performance, which later affects the organization's performance [19]. Washington, et al.'s [19] study mentions the empirical evidence that support servant leadership by examining the relationships among big five personality with one's empathy, integrity, and competency's score in 126 supervisors and 283 of their subordinates. The study mentions that the subordinates' score depends on the *agreeableness* factor of their respective leader, while neuroticism have no influence on servant leadership since *neuroticism trait* features scepticism, feeling of high-pressure, angry, and insecurity. The result is very acceptable since an individual with high score in *neuroticism* tend not to be a role model, since one have no positive perspective of the future, and possible one is full of hesitation to make a breakthrough to change [20]; even though, breeding, developing and having a commitment on other people's growth are several attributes of a servant leader [21] [22] [23] [9]. Moreover, if we relate *neuroticism* to one's emotion, since an individual with high score in *neuroticism* often feeling insecure and easy to vent their anger on other people, usually this kind of individual does not apply servant leadership, since the behavior of servant leadership induces one's ability to empathize, listen, and create a safe environment.

Agreeableness refers to a tendency to be flexible, trust, teamwork, forgiving, and being tolerant. On the other hand, since *altruistic calling* attribute in servant leadership describes a leader who has a strong desire to give positive influences on other people's life, especially on their subordinates [18], there should be no objection if we infer *agreeableness* factor to be in tune with servant leader attribute. This statement is supported by Costa and McCrae [24] study that mention a servant leader shows *agreeableness* through altruism.

Openness to experience depicts an individual with the characteristics to be imaginative, cultural, insightful, sharp-witted, and artistic. These factors are deemed to be somewhat related to *wisdom* and *organizational stewardship*. Wisdom can be perceived as the combination of awareness toward environment, anticipation toward consequences, full of insight and the advent of benefits. Meanwhile, *organization stewardship* shows how far a leader prepare the organization to produce positive contributions toward society through development, program, and the coverage of a society [18].

An individual with *extraversion* induced the characteristics to be able to socialize, assertive and speaking effectively, thus it is determined by its main components, which are

ambition and sociability. On the other hand, servant leadership uses the insight and mental framework to encourage people to have vision of the future of an organization through persuasion [18]. In spite of its lacking of valid empirical evidence, some servant leadership experts acknowledge that an ability to persuade, influence and communicate espousing the attributes of servant leadership to be able to lead effectively [23].

Conscientiousness induced the characteristics to be careful, comprehensive, responsible, and well-organized. There are volitional elements found in this factor, such as hard-working, achievement goal-oriented, and the ability to maintain the *status quo* [25], aside from *stewardship* element by being responsible. Meanwhile, organizational *stewardship* encompasses the ethics and responsibility values for the community welfare in order to make sure the strategies and decisions taken reflecting the commitment to give one's best for the behalf of the community [18].

As far as we know, there is not any study in Indonesia that is meant to unfold the determinants of servant leadership. However, Handoyo [1] has succeeded the construct test of servant leadership in higher education public institutions in East Java and finds that servant leadership can be an alternative for leadership model in higher education institutions to devise a change for organizational structure. The study also proves that servant leadership is a construct that is unidimensional. This study, *per contra*, cannot be generalized into other education institutions for the limitation of gathering the whole numbers of population. Besides, Handoyo [1] does not intend to conduct study to test either the determinants or antecedents of servant leadership; instead, it was intended to conduct a psychometric construct test for servant leadership in terms of education organization. Therefore, in this study, we test the influence of personality trait toward servant leadership among higher education academic leaders.

2. METHODS

This research applied correlational study aims to find out the relationship between certain traits-personality and servant leadership among participants comprised 113 academic leaders, as a convenience and purposive sample drawn from ten higher education institutions in Indonesia. The mentioned academic leaders are the people who fill one of the following positions: Head of Department, Head of Study Program, Dean and Vice Dean in their respective education institutions, be it private or public institutions.

The instruments used in this research were self-report measures which followed the procedure on arranging the validity of the content as follows: 1) Compiling an adaptation of *Servant Leadership Behavior* [26] and *the Ten-Item Personality Inventory* [27]. All of the procedure is preceded step by step, as follows: a) Asked an expert in the related discipline to translate the questionnaires before checking it with an Indonesian language teacher; b) The scale that is translated into Indonesian is re-translated into English by an expert in English. This procedure is needed

to make sure whether the adaptations of these questionnaires have the same meaning as the original. As a result, we find some items in the questionnaires is adapted through interpretations, since there is no equivalent diction to deliver the same meaning in the original. Hence, we put the interpretations through deep and profound understanding of the basic concepts; 2) Modify *the Ten-Item Personality Inventory* to measure personality trait by simplifying it from 7-choice-scale into 5-choice-scale to avoid the difficulties on differentiate from one option to another due to its close proximity. Servant leadership is measured by *Servant Leadership Behavior*, meanwhile *the Ten-Item Personality Inventory* measured trait-personality, and these scales have internal consistency reliability ($\alpha=.93$) and ($\alpha=.75$) respectively.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We got different percentages among the number of participants according to administrative rank, in which the greater percentage is found in Head of Department (46.0%), followed by Head of Program (32.7%), before Vice Dean and Dean with the same percentage (10.6%). Furthermore, the majority of the participants are young adults, have completed a master or equivalent degree, men, married, non-Javanese ethnic, Associate Professor in academic rank, less than 5 years of working experience in higher education institution, and Head of Department or equivalent in academic rank. The result of this profile data makes us presumed that the young adults are more interested to be interested as the leader in academic, especially higher education.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Variables

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max
Extraversion	3.99	0.81	1.50	5.00
Agreeableness	4.11	1.00	1.00	5.00
Conscientiousness	3.92	1.04	1.00	5.00
Emotional Stability	4.00	0.57	2.00	5.00
Openness to experience	3.72	1.40	1.00	5.00
Servant leadership	4.13	0.48	3.00	5.00

According to Table 1, it is apparent that the highest score for the measurement of trait-personality variables is *agreeableness*, while the lowest is *openness to experience*. In general, it seems the leaders in the faculties that become the participants of the present study have the characteristics of humble, soft-hearted, trust in other people, tolerant and generous. On the contrary, their interests on other things are limited and superficial. Based on this fact, it implies that most higher education academic leaders in Indonesia do not like to apply new things and tend to focus only on specific things and become an expert in that respective discipline. Based on this fact, we can imply that personality trait of the participants coexisting with Indonesia's law constitution of the bill of personal competency, which is stated in UU No. 14 Tahun 2005 (Law No. 14/2015). The bill states that the main responsibility of an educator is to educate, to teach, to guide, to direct, to train, to assess and to evaluate the

students in professional manner. The result of the inferential statistic to test the prediction of personality trait, cultural

values, spiritual intelligence, and demographic on servant leadership can be seen on Table 2.

Table 2 Result of Personality-Trait Regression Test on Servant Leadership

Predictor	B	SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Personality-trait				0.16*	0.12*
Constant	3.52	0.32			
Extroversion	0.03	0.07	0.00		
Agreeableness	-0.04	0.06	-0.08		
Conscientiousness	0.07	0.05	0.15		
Openness to experience	0.12	0.03	0.34*		
Emotional stability	0.01	0.08	0.12		

*significant at 0.05 level

In Table 2, we know that if the characteristics of personality is inserted into the model, statistically there is only a single factor that become the predictor for servant leadership, which is openness to experience ($\beta = 0.34, p < .05$), and so does for the coefficients for the equality of regression (($F(5,107) = 4.11, p < .05, R^2 = 0.16, \Delta R^2 = 0.12$)).

In general, the participants have moderate to high score when only personality-trait is measured. The participants' *agreeableness* and *emotional stability* also scored moderately-high, while other factors are moderate. The high score on *agreeableness* is perceived to be in relation with high score in *altruistic calling*, which is rooted on the desire to make positive differences on other people's life [28]. Washington et al. [19] also found a positive relationship between agreeableness and servant leadership. This factor is also associated with the wisdom and willingness to take care of organization so that it will give positive contributions to the society through society development and coverage program [18]. Washington et al. [19] mention that competency have positive correlation with servant leadership and similar to openness to experience factor. In this case, competency is regarded to be correlated with broad-mindedness. According to Nahrgang, Morgeson, and Illies [29], interpersonal relationship attributes of an individual, especially extraversion and agreeableness, is essential since they allow a leader to build strong emotional relationship and high-quality relationship with one's subordinates. In other words, it is somewhat correlated with an individual's emotional intelligence.

In this study, emotional stability factor also deemed to be high, in which most of the participants have low score on neuroticism. Neuroticism is determined by several characteristics, such as unreasonable anxiety, susceptible to depression, easy to anger, paranoid, stressed out, and being emotional, which can be regarded as negative characteristics. According to Teng [30], these personal characteristics is the opposite of extraversion and often vulnerable to experience negative emotions. The human resources who have these kinds of characteristic are always lacking on confidence; therefore, they are uncalled to be a leader. This statement is in line with Costa and McCrae [24] who mention that an individual whose score is high in neuroticism dimension is vulnerable to stress, feeling inferior, afraid to be mocked by other people, and feeling

uncomfortable when one is being together with other people. Several studies mention that neuroticism also causes an individual hard to adapt oneself in positive manner, emotionally unstable, and unable to coping with stress [31] [32] [33]. Negative emotions that are developed within oneself have a characteristic of neuroticism which make them unwilling to make suitable commitments for organization. In conclusion, an individual with low score on neuroticism and/or high score on emotional stability can be perceived as an individual who tends to apply servant leadership, and *vice versa*.

In this study, the personality characteristics that give meaningful influence toward servant leadership is the openness to experience. An individual with high score on openness to experience has characteristics that provide a lot of virtues, such as imaginative, creative, curious, free-thinking, original, and likes a lot of variations. Several studies mention an individual who opens to experience usually correlated with imaginative, civilized, curious, insightful, sharp-witted, and artistic [25] [28]. In this regard, the low score on this factor can be perceived that the leaders mostly focus on their own discipline and struggle to fully understand the discipline in which they are involved.

Nevertheless, several studies mention openness to experience also have negative influences on organizational behavior, in which the tendency to leave one's current workplace because one is interested in variation and other experiences [25] [24] [34] [32] [35]. Therefore, in this case, the result that shows openness to experience have negative influence on servant leadership can be perceived that academic leaders that become the participants in this study have strong commitment in their own respective discipline and the organization their belong, while having a strong-will to guide the organization/faculty to achieve the goals, productive and produce a lot of contributions to the society. Regarding the demographic factor, it shows that in this study, it does not predict servant leadership. This fact is as same as what Washington, Sutton, and Field's [19] study, who exclaims that length of working experience, does not predict servant leadership and Barbuto and Gifford's [36] study, who find that the differences in gender do not predict servant leadership. On the contrary, Molnar [37], who conducts explorative study, mentions that males have higher score in servant leadership compare to women, while

late-adults and seniors tend to have higher score in servant leadership compare to younger participants. Be that as it may, we find no similarity between marital status and education level on servant leadership. The present study indicates everyone can be shown on any individual regardless of one's personal characteristics, if mentioning that all leaders can be like that is deemed to be an exaggeration. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the weaknesses in methodology usually become the main reason that the theoretical review in relation to demographic study with servant leadership are inconsistent and contradict to each other, and so does the limitation in sample uptakes.

Openness to experience makes 16% of the contribution altogether, while the rest (84%) are made of other contributing factors that are not measured in this study. A few factors, such as personal, interpersonal, and organizational are presumed to be some of them. The examples would be the necessity to make an empirical study that consists of role of identification process, replicating positive modeling, emotional contagion, positive self-determination, and positive social exchange to explain authentic leadership (e.g., servant leadership [38]). As an addition, we should consider qualitative empirical research on Beck's [39] findings regarding qualitative study on the role of one's volition toward the manifestation of servant leader behavior, in which if a leader spends at least one hour a week to work on one's volition, the greater it is the chances for the leader to show servant leadership behavior. Amrai, Farahani, Ebrahimi, and Bagherian [40] find the correlations of personality-trait with spiritual intelligence on college students, which are correlated in positive manner among *conscientiousness*, *agreeableness*, and *extraversion* in its relation to spiritual intelligence, while *neuroticism* is correlated in a negative manner with spiritual intelligence. Therefore, the possibility of personality-trait as a mediating variable should be considered in the relation of spiritual intelligence and servant leadership.

This study has some considerable limitations. Firstly, since this study is carried through *convenience sampling* technique in small amount and probably is not sufficient enough to represent the population of higher education academic leaders in Indonesia. Moreover, the participants are limited to those who are related to faculty environment and do not include college or university level. Consequently, this study cannot be generalized to be applicable for external uses, since it is very plausible that the external validity of this study is not as good as its internal validity, which is limited to the higher education academic leaders who become the participants of this study. Secondly, this study does not consider the role of personal factors, organizational factors, and other interpersonal factors that may be considered to be relevant, such as organizational commitment. As an example, this study does not put the length of working experience in certain academic administrative rank to be the predictor of servant leadership, in which Beck [39] mentions that the longer an individual work as a leader, the more an individual is likely to act as a servant leader. In this regard, an extended study is needed by applying qualitative approach, such as interview, to discover the role of organizational values on

servant leadership, for the principles of servant leadership appear in organizational values [41]. Afterwards, we need to explain in more explicitly regarding the role of organizational culture on servant leadership, as long as servant leadership is somewhat related to values and identities that become the essential elements of the organization. As a remainder, a deeper and thorough assessments are needed to make the theoretical framework regarding the construct of servant leadership, such as its characteristics, elements, and its dimensions through qualitative study and mixed-method like several studies do, especially in indigenous and cross cultural context, where differences in possibility might be found aside from the chances of equality [42] [43].

Thirdly, this study also contains some limitations in its instruments. For instance, TIPI, which is used to measure personality trait is not adequate enough, for the limited number of items becomes an obstacle to test its internal consistency. Likewise, several studies mention that thorough psychometric assessments are needed to test personality trait instrument [44].

Finally, the predictors in this study are rarely examined in education, especially toward higher education academic leaders, *per contra* to industrial field, which often appear in various studies. Hence, this study should be taken as pilot study to encourage more extended research since there is not much literatures found regarding servant leadership in Indonesia. Putting aside the study limitations, this study has contributions to understanding and explanation regarding the predictor of servant leadership, especially when it is taken from internal perspectives, such as personality trait and spiritual intelligence, as well as external perspective, which is cultural values, especially in organizational behavior, so that this study is expected to make significant contributions, be it in theoretical or practical usage.

4. CONCLUSION

According to the data analysis, we find that only openness to experience has effective contributions toward servant leadership. Based on this study, we suggest extended researches in similar theme, such as cross-cultural theory, model, and other approaches. For instance, self-determination theory and other synthetic model in theoretical relationship, such as *constructive-development model*. The extended researches should consider the roles of internal and external factors, psychological and non-psychological factors, personal and non-personal factors, such as organizational culture, identification processes, positive modeling, emotional contagion, and self-determination that has supportive attributes social exchange and volunteering, and other demographic factors, such as length of working experience and ethnic. The extended studies should expand the number of samples and its procedure, e.g., nationwide through *multistage sampling*. We encourage those who are interested to extend this study, to test theoretical model of personality trait as mediator in its relation with spiritual intelligence on servant leadership,

e.g., path analysis. As a whole, this study is still not able to give a clear depiction regarding the predictors for servant leadership. Therefore, we should consider more comprehensive study through qualitative and mix-method study. We can also conduct similar study in different participants, which are the leaders in university environment, since this study only covers faculty-level leaders.

The result of descriptive statistic shows there are high level in servant leadership. We hope this good result would be maintained through altruistic calling, willingness to help, self-authenticity, morale responsibility, meaningful relationship, and transformation influence. On the contrary, focusing on the present will solve more technical problems that encourage compassionate, attention, helping, ethical behavior and getting supports from the leaders or subordinates. The higher education institutions, especially university, should develop and improve servant leadership on the leaders in the environment, through various sensitivity training and development, such as self-development and other methods.

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