THE IMPACT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP STYLE VARIABILITY ON BURNOUT

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Abstract

Although leadership styles and job demands are well documented (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Halbesleben, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2011), minimal attention has been paid to the costs of leading to leaders themselves. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources framework, this study positioned servant leader's behavioural variability (SLBV) as a cognitive demand and burnout as the logical strain. A total of 176 leaders from Canada and the United States completed the initial survey in week one, and 77 participants remained to complete at least two daily surveys in week two. Data were analyzed using correlation and regression models. The present study did not support the hypothesized relationship between SLBV and burnout. This null result may reflect the low statistical power due to the substantial attrition rate, as well as unmeasured moderators. This study highlights the challenges of studying within-person processes using diary methods and emphasizes the importance of adequately powered longitudinal research. Future studies would benefit from longer diary studies with greater spacing between measurements, oversample the initial survey to offset attrition, measure both positive and negative effects, and directly measure recovery strategies.

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Introduction

With increasing demands for ethical, people-centered management, servant leadership has gained attention as a model that fosters employee empowerment and development (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders prioritize humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance, while also providing direction, stewardship, and ethical leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Liden et al., 2008). Servant leadership has been linked to several positive outcomes, including job attitudes, increased job performance, team effectiveness, and a stronger organizational focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Yet while the positive outcomes of servant leadership are well-documented, minimal attention has been paid to the costs these leadership behaviours may impose on leaders themselves. In particular, leaders may need to adapt their approach throughout the day based on situational needs (feedback, mentoring, or check-ins), team dynamics, and followers' emotional states. As such, servant leadership requires anticipating the moment-to-moment needs of an employee (Ford et al., 2021), resulting in leaders frequently varying their behaviour accordingly. This behaviour variability, or changing one's servant leadership behaviours over time, may end up taxing or depleting the servant leader who must constantly tailor their behaviour to the employees they encounter. Indeed, such variability in behaviour may become a source of stress for the leader (Matta et al., 2020).

To better understand whether servant leadership behaviour variability (SLBV) – operationalized here as the standard deviation of daily servant leadership scores collected across a five-day workweek – can have a negative effect on leader well-being, this paper examines the effect of SLBV on leader burnout, or a state of mental exhaustion that manifests itself as the

inability to carry out work due to chronic fatigue and an unwillingness to spend effort at work (Schaufeli et al., 2020). In particular, drawing upon Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, I argue that SLBV consumes available resources, leading leaders to experiencing burnout. That is, because SLBV places substantial demands on leaders' attention, memory, and executive function as they continuously adjust their behaviours from day to day, I argue that SLBV should be positively related to experiencing burnout. This study investigates whether SLBV influences leader burnout through use of a diary-study design to assess variability in daily servant leadership behaviour over the course of a week, and its' cumulative impact on leader burnout.

This research advances both servant leadership and JD-R theory by introducing the construct of SLBV and demonstrating that SLBV (rather than average servant leader behaviour) can significantly influence burnout. Existing leadership research largely assumes that a leader's average behaviour is the primary driver of impact. However, I challenge this notion, arguing that daily variability in leadership behaviours may play a role in influencing outcomes. This variability perspective not only challenges the view prevalent in existing literature but also emphasizes the importance of leader mental health, an often-neglected dimension in leadership studies.

In so doing, this work also contributes to the larger literature documenting the importance of variability as a construct worthy of study in its own right (Matta et al., 2020; Matta et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2012; Suurd Ralph & Barling, 2023). In particular, while leadership theories have traditionally focused on consistent, average behaviours, this overlooks the day-to-day variations that significantly impact leaders. This work advances these theories by demonstrating that SLBV is a meaningful component of leadership experience that current frameworks miss. Moreover, by integrating the JD-R theory into variability research, I highlight how variability

can affect outcomes, providing a theoretical framework for future variability research.

By identifying the effect of SLBV on burnout, this study offers actionable insights for organizations aiming to support leadership well-being. Understanding these patterns can inform leadership development programs, stress management interventions, and policy changes that help prevent burnout among managers. The American Psychological Association has published a crisis stress management guide to address these concerns, while companies like Deloitte are implementing burnout inventory assessments and preventive policy measures (APA, 2020; Deloitte, 2025; Fisher et al, 2021). Incorporating an SLBV perspective can enhance these burnout interventions by accounting for the impact day-to-day variations may have on employee well-being, role effectiveness, and the overall health and resilience of the organization.

In the following sections, the concept of servant leadership, its antecedents, mediators, and moderators will be reviewed. Then behavioural variability with a focus on SLBV will be discussed. Next, the JD-R theory will be outlined as the guiding theoretical framework. Finally, the methods used in the present study will be reviewed, concluding with a brief discussion.

Literature Review

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, defined as a desire to serve others first through leadership, emphasizes leaders empowering and serving their followers. Servant leadership includes behaviours such as humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, stewardship, empowering and developing people, and behaving ethically (Liao, et al., 2020; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership has been linked to positive individual outcomes such as employee engagement (Li et al., 2021), well-being (Parris & Peachey, 2013), reduced turnover intentions (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014), and improved job performance and attitudes

(Van Dierendonck, 2011). Moreover, it is also associated with broader organizational benefits, including enhanced team effectiveness (Parris & Peachey, 2013), organizational commitment (Van Dierendonck et al., 2014; Liden et al., 2008), job performance, interest in sustainability, and higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviour (Hu & Liden, 2011). The current demand for people-centered management (Van Dierendonck, 2011), combined with the promising organizational outcomes associated with servant leadership, underscores both its practical relevance and the need for continued theoretical exploration.

Antecedents of Servant Leadership

Several characteristics – discussed in turn below – have been identified as antecedents of servant leadership, including the desire to serve others, emotional intelligence, moral maturity and conation, prosocial identity, core self-evaluation (CSE), and low narcissism. In terms of desire to serve others, servant leaders draw on their motivation and readiness, in addition to the conscious choice to serve first (Greenleaf, 1977; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). The service emphasis reveals the selfless, altruistic motives, and care for the well-being of others which must precede servant leadership behaviours (Liden et al., 2014). This desire to serve others motivates leaders to adapt to individual followers' needs, which may manifest in servant leadership behaviours such as humility, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, stewardship, as well as empowering and developing people. In terms of emotional intelligence (EI), it has been associated with a greater capacity for empathy, perceptiveness, understanding, and emotional regulation, drivers of altruistic behaviour (Batson, 1990; Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dashborough, 2009; Goleman, 1995; Humphrey, 2002). As such, higher levels of emotional intelligence are thought to support core servant leadership behaviours including humility, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, stewardship, and empowerment. Several theoretical frameworks

have argued for a link between EI and servant leadership (Liden et al., 2019). One time-lagged, multi-source survey design casts doubt when it found no significant relationship between EI and servant leadership (Barbuto, Gottfredson, & Searle, 2014). Taken together, EI has theoretical relevance to servant leadership, but the empirical evidence remains inconclusive.

Moral maturity refers to a leader's ability to engage in moral judgement and independent thinking, while moral conation refers to a leader's motivation to behave morally (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999; Hannah et al., 2011). Both moral maturity and conation precede ethical behaviours of servant leaders through moral identity. Similarly, leaders with a strong moral identity are more likely to behave in accordance with their moral self-view (Mayer, et al., 2012). This moral maturity, conation, and identity should logically precede the servant leaders of behaving ethically. Leaders with a prosocial identity are guided by ethical and service-oriented values that benefit others and the community, leading to increased servant leadership behaviours such as humility, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, stewardship, behaving ethically, empowering and developing others (Liden et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2011). In terms of CSE, comprising self-esteem, self- efficacy, and locus of control, higher levels are associated with reduced fear of failure and an increased ability to focus on others. This translates to a servant leader's ability to provide direction and stewardship. Individuals with positive CSE are less self-centered and more inclined to adopt altruistic behaviours (Rushton, 1980). Finally, with respect to narcissism, or one's inflated sense of self-importance, this trait directly contradicts servant leaders' emphasis on follower empowerment (Judge et al., 2006). Similarly, servant leadership behaviours among CEOs were negatively related to narcissism (Peterson, et al., 2012). Narcissistic tendencies do not conceptually align with servant leader priorities humility, interpersonal acceptance, and ethical leadership.

Mediators and Moderators of Servant Leadership

Servant leaders produce individual and organization level benefits through a variety of mediators – discussed again in turn below. Through their behaviours, servant leaders build trust, prosocial and moral identity, follower self-efficacy, empowerment, support autonomous motivation, and foster commitment to the leader (Chen & Bliese, 2002; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Greenleaf, 1970; Hunt & Morgan, 1994; Liden et al., 2008; Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2011; Pierce, & Gardner, 2004; Van Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris, & Schreurs, 2012). These individual level mechanisms serve as mediators through which servant leadership leads to positive follower outcomes (Liden et al., 2014). The following paragraphs discuss these mediators in greater detail.

Trust, a psychological state to accept vulnerability expecting a positive intention of other's behaviour, is considered a key mediator of servant leader's influence on followers. The concept of trust is present in the seminal work on servant leadership (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Greenleaf, 1970; Russell & Stone, 2002) and is consistently discussed in the literature as both a leader attribute and a follower outcome (Liden et al., 2014). Trust requires a leader's conceptual skills, benevolence, and integrity. Servant leaders display benevolence and genuine care for others through their commitment to followers' development and empowerment. By behaving ethically, openly, fairly and honestly, servant leaders are perceived to have integrity; as such, trust elicited by a servant leader mediates the relationship between the leader and follower outcomes (Liden et al., 2014).

Servant leaders are likely to be seen as role models due to their credibility, concern for others, moral, and prosocial behaviours. By acting as servant leaders, leaders establish norms that emphasize care, morality, and service. Because followers are likely to engage in prosocial

behaviours and group social norms in order to belong (Liden et al. 2014; Tajfel, 1972), servant leaders encourage follower adoption of prosocial and moral behaviours. Through this process, servant leaders also promote the development of follower prosocial identity, which contributes to organizational and community-oriented citizenship behaviours (Liden et al., 2014).

Followers of servant leaders are thought to likely become servant leaders themselves (Liden et al., 2008), suggesting they will model the behaviour of their servant leader (e.g. Bandura, 1986). These social norms are established and upheld by the servant leader, promoting prosocial behaviours and moral behaviour. These behaviours are adopted by followers to increase self-esteem or decrease uncertainty, to become the protypical in-group member (Hogg, 2000; Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Mullin & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1982; J. C. Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979).

Self-esteem and self-efficacy can be positioned as follower attributes or mediators between servant leadership and outcomes. Servant leaders promote self-esteem through interpersonal acceptance, empowering and developing followers. Role models and mentors providing positive feedback are important determinants to self-esteem (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). As previously discussed, servant leaders are likely to become followers' role models, in addition to being highly prevalent in their work environment (Liden et al., 2014). Both aspects, in addition to empowering behaviours, should increase self-esteem and self-efficacy through fostering follower success.

Empowerment is both a core dimension and mediator linking servant leadership to follower outcomes. It is defined as a psychological state developed through self-determination, impact, meaning, and competence (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Followers of servant leaders may develop increased competence by receiving

leader attention and support, which is likely to result in positive effects on competence (Chen & Bliese, 2002; Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

Commitment to the supervisor mediates leader behaviours and follower outcomes (Liden et al, 2014). Servant leaders offer positive work experiences and followers in turn develop affective (emotional) and normative (loyalty) commitment to the supervisor (Liden et al., 2014). This commitment promotes reciprocity within followers towards the leader and by extension the organization. Commitment to the supervisor has been shown to contribute to in-role performance and organizational citizenship behaviours (Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Becker & Kernan, 2003).

While the previous paragraphs focus on mediators of servant leadership, few moderators of servant leadership were identified in the literature. One identified moderator is the congruence between followers' servant leadership prototypes and the actual behaviours of their leaders, which influences how servant leadership affects intermediate processes (Liden et al., 2014). When a leader's behaviour closely aligns with a follower's leadership prototype, the follower's perception of leader effectiveness and charisma increases, ultimately impacting perceptions of leader legitimacy, power, and discretion (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Maurer & Lord, 1991; Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Platow, Van Knippenberg, Haslam, Van Knippenberg, & Spears, 2006). Alignment between actual and expected leadership behaviours strengthens the follower's identification with the leader, and affirms their sense of belonging to the in-group, which positively increases self-esteem (Liden et al., 2014).

Servant Leadership Behavioural Variability

While research has examined the benefits and outcomes of servant leadership, it must also consider how leadership behaviours are enacted over time. Servant leadership primarily

focuses on average behaviour rather than variability. The typical servant leadership study measures how frequently or strongly leaders exhibit servant leadership traits (e.g. humility, empathy, and service), and relates those to outcomes such as employee satisfaction, OCBs, and performance. This approach assumes leaders' behaviours are stable and consistent across days and weeks. The frequently cited servant leadership scales ask followers and managers about their general perceptions of the manager (Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, & Nuijten, 2011). On the other hand, emerging diary methods can assess state and daily expressions of servant leadership behaviour. Example items include "Today, I emphasized the importance of giving back to the community" and "Today, I made an employee's career development a priority" (Liao et al., 2021). Behaviour variability is how people change or differ from repeated routine behaviours over the course of a day. Each day servant leaders balance varying concerns and expectations from all stakeholders; organization, supervisor, followers, community, and personal life and family (Liden et al., 2014). For example, a leader may primarily provide direction to followers one day, and the next day focus on stewardship. Given that different needs necessitate behavioural variability, servant leadership would benefit from methodological research on variability.

Defining Behavioural Variability

Although traditional views in psychology and organizational behaviour often assume that behaviours remain stable over time, growing research highlights the importance of behavioural variability. Most research to date relies on one-time, cross-sectional assessments asking participants to reflect on general patterns rather than capturing real-time fluctuations. This approach limits our ability to detect how behaviours and experiences shift in response to momentary demands. These demands will inherently vary across situations, individuals, and

within individuals. Relying on average scores may mask behavioural variability, providing an incomplete and potentially misleading picture. For instance, Person A may consistently score 3 out of 5 each day; while Person B may vary between 1, 3, and 5. Though they both have the same average score (3), their experiences and behavioural variability are clearly different. Person B may be more emotionally reactive, while Person A is more stable, factors that would have been invisible if only averages were considered.

Research has shown that this variability has real psychological consequences. For example, self-esteem variability has been linked to higher reactivity, that is, a greater intensity of emotional or psychological reactions (Kernis, 2005). Similarly, when employees experienced fluctuations in how fairly they were treated (justice treatment variability), it negated the benefits typically associated with high levels of interpersonal justice (Matta et al., 2020). Within-person variability in personality is meaningful, shaped by individual differences in how people respond to psychologically relevant features of situations, which vary by trait (Fleeson, 2007). The extent to which individuals experience variability in behaviours across time is theoretically and empirically distinct from average behaviour.

The traditional average approach overlooks the fact that servant leadership, in particular, demands context-sensitive responses that require empathy, emotional regulation, and an adaptation to others' needs (Liden et al., 2014). This oversight is particularly significant because key servant leadership antecedents such as desire to serve others, moral conation, self-efficacy and self-esteem, may vary from day to day. Prior research suggests other oriented identities, and motives are similarly variable (Foulk, Lanaj, & Krishnan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2012). Various aspects of servant leadership, both antecedents and behaviours, vary within and between days, suggesting a variability methodological approach may provide further insight.

I aim to extend theory and research on servant leadership by introducing servant leadership behaviour variability (SLBV). Similar to other variance constructs, SLBV is operationalized as the standard deviation of daily servant leadership scores collected across a five-day workweek. I introduce SLBV as a construct referring to the extent to which servant leadership behaviours vary across situations. Serving others inherently requires employee-specific considerations and support shaped by situational needs (feedback, mentoring, or check-ins). These considerations necessitate behavioural variability, which may increase leaders' resource demands. I aim to show SLBV is critical to how leaders experience strain, such that behaviour variability impacts average burnout level. These predictions are grounded within the Job Demands-Resources Model.

Job Demands-Resources Model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model posits that job demands, such as emotional, cognitive, or physical effort, deplete individual resources and can lead to strain when not offset by adequate support (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Job resources are aspects of the job that can help one achieve work goals, regulate job demands, and stimulate personal growth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Job resources can be but are not limited to autonomy, social support, feedback, and task significance (Christian et al., 2011; Halbesleben, 2010). Job demands are aspects of the job which drain resources, and can lead to strain. Job demands can be but are not limited to role ambiguity, role conflict, role stress, stressful events, workload, and work pressure (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Job demands are important predictors of burnout in various occupational sectors (Alarcon, 2011).

I propose that when leaders must vary their servant leadership behaviours across diverse and sometimes conflicting stakeholder needs, this variability introduces new emotional and

cognitive demands. Even if a servant leader's behaviours levels remain consistently high, frequent adjustments between behaviours introduce job demands. In particular, engaging in the same behaviour every day (low SLBV), resembles a habit which typically requires fewer self-regulatory resources due to established heuristics, mental shortcuts, reducing cognitive demands. In contrast, constantly changing behaviours (high SLBV) will consume more self-regulatory resources and may function as a job strain within the JD-R framework. Supporting this view, research suggests that in high stress and variable situations, leaders relying on active problem solving rather than habits are less effective, highlighting how habitual responses can reduce cognitive demand of decision making (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Fiedler & Leister, 1976; Fiedler, McGuire, & Richardson, 1989; Potter & Fiedler, 1981). In a similar vein, behavioural variability may require sustained self-regulation and effortful control, key indicators of psychological demand within JD-R theory. This extends the JD-R framework by identifying behavioural variability as a form of job demand. As such, SLBV may function as a job demand within the JD-R model - potentially diminishing personal resources and contributing to leader strain over time.

In line with JD-R theory, SLBV represents a situational and interpersonal regulation job demand for servant leaders. Servant leaders engage in varying behaviours, such as empowering and developing others, providing direction, fostering interpersonal acceptance, and demonstrating stewardship. Unlike more stable leadership approaches, SLBV involves daily fluctuations that require attention regulation, memory, and executive functioning as well as emotional regulation, which intensifies the psychological strain. These characteristics align with the JD-R criteria of job demands, persistent effort, and psychological cost. Over time, the cognitive and emotional demands required to flexibly tailor these behaviours to meet the

evolving needs of multiple followers may deplete leaders' personal resources. Consequently, I argue that SLBV may be a key contributor to *leader burnout* by consistently depleting leaders' cognitive and emotional resources.

Burnout is a state of mental exhaustion that manifests itself as the inability to carry out work due to chronic fatigue and an unwillingness to spend effort at work (Schaufeli, De Witte, & Desart, 2020). The World Health Organization (2019) added burnout to the international classification of diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon that significantly impairs health, indicating the prevalence. Burnout develops through work stressors (e.g. interpersonal), primarily as a result of demands (McGrath, 1976; Shirom, 1989; Schuler, 1980). Burnout represents a specific type of job stress, with emotional exhaustion, mental distance, emotional and cognitive impairment as strains resulting from a variety of work demands (Cordes, & Dougherty, 1993; Schaufeli, et al., 2020).

To summarize, I argue that SLBV may represent a cognitive and emotional job demand within the JD-R framework, due to the emotional, cognitive, and attentional strain. The necessity to frequently vary servant leadership behaviours, such as empowering others, providing direction, or offering support to meet the shifting needs of multiple stakeholders requires sustained emotional regulation, attentional shifting, and executive control. These demands can interfere with leaders establishing routines and habits, requiring active problem solving, which may increase psychological strain. Strains are the immediate psychological cost, while burnout is the long-term outcome if adaptive efforts are prolonged or not met with sufficient resources. Therefore, SLBV can be theorized as a job demand, leading to strains of emotional exhaustion, mental distance, emotional and cognitive impairment. Thus, according to the JD-R model,

burnout is a logical outcome of SLBV. I hypothesize that greater SLBV is associated with higher levels of leader burnout.

Method

Procedure

I conducted an initial survey, then released five daily surveys on Prolific over the course of a week to provide a representative snapshot of the variability each leader experiences in servant leadership behaviours on a day-to-day basis. The initial survey assessed demographics and control variables of baseline servant leadership, pre-existing burnout levels, work unpredictability, collectivism, and moral identity. The following week, participants completed one survey per workday capturing servant leadership behaviours. Furthermore, at the end of Friday's survey, participants completed the burnout assessment tool (BAT-12).

Inattentive responders and duplicate responses were screened out of the corresponding surveys prior to analysis. Within the initial survey, duplicate responses from three participants were excluded, while daily surveys used bogus questions such as "I do not understand a word of English" to flag and remove inattentive responses. This led to the removal of 18 inattentive responses across five days. Within Qualtrics, bot detection was also used to analyze each response, but no participants were removed.

Participants

Participants were full time (30+ hours), working adults holding leadership positions from the eastern time zone recruited from Prolific. Participants earned $3.00 CAD for the initial survey, and $1.00 per daily survey. For completing all surveys, participants received a $2.00 bonus with an overall compensation of $10.00. I recruited 176 participants who completed the initial survey (44% female, approximately 38.4 years old who had been working at their job

approximately 8.5 years). Their mean work experience was 16.65 years, and average leadership experience was 7.51 years. I released the daily surveys at 5pm, and closed submissions at midnight to ensure data was accurate for that day. Of the 176 participants who began the study, 42 did not complete any daily surveys. Of the 134 remaining, 32 only completed a single daily survey, and were excluded because SLBV could not be calculated. Of the 102 remaining, an additional 25 did not complete the final burnout measure; all three groups were excluded from analysis. This left 77 participants for analysis (37.7% female, approximately 37.95 years old who had been working at their job approximately 8.89 years).

In terms of education, 54.6% held a bachelor's degree, 22.1% held a master's degree, 9.09% had completed some college or university without earning a degree, 6.49% held a high school diploma or equivalent, 3.9% held a doctoral degree, 2.6% held a professional degree and 1.3% held an associate degree. Participants worked in industries that included healthcare (16.9%), accountancy/banking/finance (14.3%), computing/IT (13%), education (9.09), engineering/manufacturing (9.09%), business/consultancy (6.49%), retail (5.19%), property/construction (3.9%), charity/voluntary/nonprofit (3.9%), energy/utilities (2.6%), hospitality/events (2.6%), public services (2.6%), science/pharmaceuticals (2.6%), environment/agriculture (1.3),, law(1.3), sales(1.3), transport/logistics(1.3), and technology (1.3). Most participants (71.5%) worked from home or in hybrid arrangement, averaging 2.11 remote workdays per week. Participants self-identified their racial identities as White (46.8%), Black or African American (11.7%), East Asian (11.7%), South Asian (9.09%), Southeast Asian (9.09%), unspecified (6.49%), other (3.9%) and Hispanic/Latino (1.3%).

Measures

All instructions and items are provided in Appendix A (initial survey), and Appendix B (daily surveys).

SLBV

Participants completed a twenty-eight-item scale assessing servant leadership (adapted from Liden et al, 2008). For the initial survey, participants were instructed to base their responses on how often they engage in each behaviour overall, whereas for the daily surveys, they reported behaviour within that specific workday (e.g., "Today, I cared more about an employee's success than my own.") consistent with the Liao et al. (2021) scale. Responses were made using a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) for overall scores, and 1 (never) to 6 (five or more times) for workday surveys.

Burnout

Participants completed the twelve-item measure provided by Schaufeli, De Witte & Desart (2020) to assess leaders' pre-existing and weekly burnout levels (e.g., "At work, I feel physically exhausted."). Responses were made using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

Control Variables

Control variables were included to account for pre-existing stress levels, workload, and leaders' identity. Initial burnout in particular, was important to establish before measuring burnout as an outcome. Initial servant leadership was used to establish what leaders considered their average levels of servant leadership behaviours. Work unpredictability, collectivism, and moral identity were included as control variables. Work unpredictability was intended to account for the week's stress level and to determine if the week was particularly stressful due to

deadlines, or uncertainty. Collectivism and individualism were included to establish the leader's affinity for servant leadership behaviours. Moral identity was an attempt to establish if servant leadership was a natural leadership style for the individual, or if it required more effort to enact servant leadership behaviours.

Work Unpredictability

Participants completed the four-item measure adapted from Schyns & Paul (2004) to assess the unpredictability of work tasks (e.g. "The time demands of my task are foreseeable"). Reponses were made using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Collectivism

Participants completed the sixteen-item measure provided by Triandis & Gelfland (1998) to assess the level of collectivism within leaders to evaluate other orientations (e.g. "My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me."). Responses were made using a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Moral Identity

Participants completed the ten-item scale developed by Aquino and Reed (2002) to assess their moral identity (e.g. "It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics"). The scale instructions were "Listed below are some characteristics that may describe a person; caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind. The person with these characteristics could be you or it could be someone else. For a moment, visualize in your mind the kind of person who has these characteristics. Imagine how that person would think, feel, and act. When you have a clear image of what this person would

be like, answer the following questions" (Aquino & Reed, 2002, p. 1424). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics calculated central tendencies (mean, median) and variability (standard deviation) to assess servant leadership behaviours (Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora, 2016). Correlation analysis, using Pearson's correlation coefficient (Trochim et al., 2016), examined the between-individual relationship between SLBV and self-reported burnout levels. I computed each participants' SLBV using the standard deviation of their responses to the servant leadership scale over the five days of the week. Higher scores indicated higher variation in servant leadership behaviours across days. A priori power analysis indicated that a sample size of N = 159 is well-powered to detect a small-to-medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.05$) with 80% power at $\alpha = 0.05$ (Faul et al., 2007). Next, I then conducted supplementary analysis with linear regression models. All analyzes were run and documented using R Markdown to ensure reproducibility. The data analysis was conducted using RStudio, with a focus on descriptive and correlation analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and inter correlations for study variables are presented in Table 1. Completion of diary studies ranged respectively from 1 to 5 days (N = 102, 96, 88, 83, and 81), and the analytic sample was n = 77, due to missing SLBV or burnout data. Contrary to the prediction, SLBV was not significantly associated with burnout. A Pearson's correlation between SLBV and burnout was near zero, $r(75) = -.00$, $p = .995$, and 95% CI [-.225, .223].

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SLBV	0.37	0.24						
2. Overall burnout mean	1.85	0.74	-0.00					
3. Initial servant leadership mean	5.59	0.56	0.06	-.41**				
4. Initial burnout mean	1.88	0.63	-0.19	0.60**	-0.19*			
5. Work unpredictability	3.50	0.66	0.12	-0.09	-.09	-0.24**		
6. Collectivism mean	5.14	0.57	-.18	-0.15	0.33**	0.03	-0.27**	
7. Moral identity	3.98	0.51	0.11	-0.40**	0.61**	-0.19*	-0.10	0.49**

Note. M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval.
* indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.

Using regression, I then tested SLBV as a predictor of burnout while controlling for initial servant leadership, initial burnout, work unpredictability, collectivism, and moral identity using standardized regression coefficients. The overall model was significant $F(6, 70) = 8.28$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.415$, and Adjusted $R^2 = 0.365$, but driven significantly by the initial burnout, (0.508), $p < .001$. SLBV remained insignificant $\beta = .070$, $p = .464$, as did other controls (servant leadership $\beta = -.122$, $p = .314$; work unpredictability $\beta = -.087$ $p = .382$; collectivism $\beta = -.103$, $p = .395$; moral identity $\beta = -.110$, $p = .407$). There are no concerns regarding multicollinearity as values ranges from 1.09 to 2.08.

Table 2 Regression Predicting Burnout from SLBV and Related Variables

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	.023 (0.115)	.058 (0.094)	.048 (0.092)	.010 (0.105)
SLBV	-.001 (0.135)	.116 (0.111)	.082 (0.111)	-.045 (0.126)
Initial burnout		.734*** (0.116)	.622*** (0.131)	
Initial servant leadership			-.135 (0.133)	-.419*** (0.118)
Work unpredictability			-.089 (0.102)	
Collectivism			-.095 (0.111)	
Moral Identity			-.113 (0.135)	
SLBV × Initial servant leadership				.195 (0.147)
N	77	77	77	77
R^2	.000	.350	.415	.185
Adj. R^2	-.013	.333	.365	.151
F (df1, df2), p	0 (1,75), $p = .995$	19.93 (2,74), $p < .001$	8.28 (6,70), $p < .001$	5.52 (3,73), $p = .002$

$+ p < 0.1$, $^{*} p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$

Note. Standardized regression coefficients are reported.

Regression Model 1 showed that SLBV did not significantly predict burnout, β = -.001, SE = .135, $R^2 = .000$. Model 2 included SLBV and initial burnout as predictors. SLBV remained nonsignificant, β = .116, SE = .111, whereas initial burnout was a strong predictor of burnout, β = .734, SE = .116, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .35$. Model 3 added initial servant leadership, work unpredictability, collectivism, and moral identity as additional predictors. Consistent with model 2, SLBV remained non-significant, β = .82, SE = .111; initial burnout remained the only strong predictor, β =.622, SE = .131, $p < .001$. The overall model was significant, $F(6,70) = 8.28$, $p < .001$, and explained 41.5% of the variance in burnout ($R^2 = .415$). Overall, these models do not support the hypothesis that SLBV predicts burnout. Instead, initial burnout emerged as the most consistent predictor of burnout across models.

Supplemental Analysis

An exploratory supplemental analysis, model 4, was performed. The model was used to determine if the effect of variability changes at high or low levels of typical servant leadership levels. Variability may have little effect on leaders who are already high in servant leadership, since the behaviours are habitual for them. Whereas for leaders with low levels of servant leadership, no such habit exists, so variability may be more consequential. Model 4 provides the test of whether initial servant leadership moderated the relationship between SLBV and burnout by including SLBV, initial servant leadership, and their interaction term. SLBV was not significant with $\beta = -.045$, SE = .126. Initial servant leadership was a significant negative predictor of burnout, $\beta = -.419$, SE = .118, $p < .001$, indicating that higher initial servant leadership were associated with lower levels of burnout. However, the interaction between SLBV and initial servant leadership was not significant, $\beta = .195$, SE = .147, indicating no evidence that initial servant leadership moderated the relationship between SLBV and burnout. Overall, the moderation interaction was insignificant, while servant leadership showed a significant negative effect in the moderation model.

Discussion

In an era of increasing workplace demands, complexities, and availability, it's increasingly important to research and consider employee strains, with potential for burnout. Leaders in particular face pressure to adapt to their ever-changing organizational environment while being the vital support system for their employees. The responsibility of adaptation and support creates significant emotional and cognitive strain on maintaining personal well-being, which could increase the risk of burnout. In addition to individual consequences of burnout, organizational consequences include turnover, absenteeism, and decreases in job quality and

performance (Firth & Britton, 1989; Jackson et al., 1986; Maslach & Jackson, 1985). Over time, burnout may compromise a leader's ability to sustain servant behaviours, potentially diminishing the very relational benefits that servant leadership seeks to cultivate.

I predicted that behavioural variability may deplete a servant leader. Servant leaders tailor their behaviour to best suit their employees, which requires cognitive efforts of attention, memory and executive function and emotion efforts which may become a source of stress/strain. In contrast, I suggested that habit formation would reduce cognitive strain of variability. Through the JD-R framework, I hypothesized that SLBV was a job demand that would drain leaders' resources, which if not adequately offset or replenished, would lead to burnout.

Contrary to my hypothesis, SLBV was not associated with burnout. Furthermore, the proposed control variables including initial servant leadership, work unpredictability, collectivism, and moral identity, did not explain variability in burnout. Instead, previous levels of burnout emerged as the strongest predictor of later burnout. Overall, the hypothesized relationship between SLBV and burnout was not supported in the present study. Subsequent paragraphs discuss the potential reasons why the hypothesis was not supported.

First and foremost, a priori power analysis indicated that a sample size of N = 159 was well-powered. However, the study was significantly underpowered with only 77 participants for analysis, despite starting with 176. Many participants completed only the initial survey, and participation declined continuously throughout the week. The final survey was instrumental for analyses, but had the lowest participation rate. Requiring at least two daily surveys to calculate SLBV, and both initial and final burnout scores for analyses, ultimately resulted in losing 99 participants overall, leaving a final analytic sample of 77 participants, well below the 159 required for adequate power. Future research should account for the substantial drop in

participation from the initial to daily surveys, and across dailies, when planning for initial recruitment and compensation. Methods such as oversampling, weighing higher compensation for later surveys, and within day reminders could benefit future research.

Another possibility is that the relationship between SLBV and burnout depends on conditions not measured in the present study, as this study did not examine individual or contextual moderators of that relationship. Poor sleep quality is associated with increased hostility and fatigue with decreased attentiveness and friendliness (Scott & Judge, 2006; Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008), which can deplete leaders' psychological resources before the workday even begins. If participants were experiencing poor sleep quality, a floor or ceiling effect my have masked the hypothesized relationship. Similarly, recovery experiences such as psychological detachment from work, relaxation, and control during leisure time, help replenish resources and buffer the impact of job stressors (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Inadequate recovery may impact leaders' abilities in the following workday. If some participants obtained adequate recovery and others did not, the effects may have been further obscured. Previous research also suggests that the effects of servant leadership variability depend on contextual factors such as leader support, role conflict, and perspective taking (Li et al., 2023; Liao et al., 2021). Work-related or personal resources may similarly improve leaders' psychological resources or afford greater recovery experiences. Taken together, these individual and contextual factors may explain the null findings in this study. As literature on leader variability expands, future research should examine these and other potential moderators.

Although methodological explanations such as low statistical power remain the most likely explanation for the present findings, it is also possible that SLBV simply does not increase burnout. Rather than being inherently demanding, adapting leadership behaviours may represent

an effective leadership strategy that experienced leaders perform with relatively little additional cognitive effort.

Practical Implications

This research has several implications for practice. While SLBV was not found to be a significant predictor of burnout, initial levels of burnout were the strongest predictor of later burnout across models. The findings highlight the importance of monitoring employee well-being over time and intervening early when burnout symptoms emerge. Organizations may benefit from implementing burnout prevention strategies, including workload management practices, access to well-being recourses, opportunities for recovery from work, and training resilience and psychological detachment from work. Although the present findings do not suggest that SLBV contributes to burnout, organizations should continue to support leader well-being given the emotional and cognitive demands often associated with leadership roles.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be noted. First, the study used self-report measures which may raise concerns about same-source and common method variance bias. Following best practices for controlling common method variance, the study ensures participant anonymity, and implemented proximal separation of measurement (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We incorporated quality control strategies to detect inattentive and dishonest responding through the use of bogus items and bot detection (Meade & Craig, 2012). For example, bogus items such as 'Choose *Strongly Agree* for this question' were embedded within scale items to identify careless responding. Careless responding can make correlations appear weaker, lower internal consistency of reliability estimates, and distort factor analysis results, all while avoiding detection by typical data leaning methods (Meade & Craig, 2012).

Second, this study has limitations concerning generalizability. Although I recorded demographics information, I only collected participants from the Eastern Standard time zone, to ensure survey completion took place after the workday. As a result, I cannot speak to differences across cultures, job sectors, or industries. To establish a foundation for this research, I relied on western, presumably WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) sample. Future research should consider methods or a greater scale study to understand other cultural and contextual factors to increase the generalizability of my results.

Third, this study positioned and measured variability as a negative process. Due to measuring only negative variability outcomes (i.e., burnout), positive aspects of SLBV were consequently unmeasured. Variability may have alternative explanations that are positive in nature. A possible explanation is leaders with high autonomy may experience variability as a break from high servant leadership or stressful tasks. Variability may also require work engagement, a psychological connection to work, encouraging individuals to invest physical, emotional and cognitive energy in performing tasks (Kahn, 1990; Christian et al., 2011). Because positive affect and a proactive personality are theoretical antecedents of work engagement (Christian et al., 2011), leaders with higher SLBV may be more engaged, and in turn, may have a more positive disposition.

Fourth, this study could not establish causality between servant leadership variability and burnout. While control variables for pre-existing levels of burnout, work unpredictability, collectivism, and moral identity were included in the initial survey to reduce confounding, cross sectional designs cannot rule out reverse causality or potential third variables. Additionally, the pre-existing burnout control variable accounted for some of the variance, leaving significant

unexplained variance and suggesting the presence of unaccounted-for variables. Future research should set out to strengthen causal claims through longitudinal research.

Conclusion

Although job demands are generally well documented (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Halbesleben, 2010), this study positioned servant leader's behavioural variability (SLBV) as a cognitive demand and burnout as the logical strain within the JD-R framework. Contrary to the hypothesis and theoretical expectations, the present study did not support the hypothesized relationship between SLBV and burnout. This lack of results may suggest the lower statistical power due to a substantial attrition rate, and unmeasured moderators, play a large role. The findings highlight the challenges of studying within-person leadership processes using diary methods and emphasize the importance of adequately powered longitudinal research. This null finding itself is informative: it suggests industry leaders and theorists should not treat behavioural variability as straightforward demand, but rather investigate the conditions under which it fluctuates or functions as one. Future research would benefit from longer diary studies with greater spacing between measurements, oversampling the initial survey to offset attrition, broader outcome measures capturing both positive and negative effects, and direct measurement of recovery strategies. Such work may better indicate whether, within the JD-R framework, behavioural variability functions as a demand on leaders.

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Appendix A

Initial Survey

Adapted Servant Leadership Scale (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008)

I am available for my employees to seek help from me if they have a personal problem.
I care about my employee's personal well-being.
I take time to talk to employees on a personal level.
I can recognize when my employees are down without asking them.
I emphasize the importance of giving back to the community.
I am interested in helping people in our community.
I am involved in community activities.
I encourage my employees to volunteer in the community.
I am able to tell if something is going wrong.
I am able to effectively think through complex problems.
I have a thorough understanding of our organization and its goals.
I can solve work problems with new or creative ideas.
I give my employees the responsibility to make important decisions about their job.
I encourage my employees to handle important work decisions on their own.
I give my employees the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that they feel is best.
When employees have to make an important decision at work, they do not have to consult me first.
I make employee career development a priority.
I am interested in making sure an employee achieves their career goals.
I provide my employees with work experiences that enable them to develop new skills.
I want to know about my employees' career goals.
I care more about an employee's success than my own.
I put my employees' best interests ahead of my own.
I sacrifice my own interests to meet employees' needs.
I do what I can to make my employees' job easier.
I hold high ethical standards.
I am always honest.
I would not compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.
I value honesty more than profits.

The short version of the Burnout Assessment Tool
(BAT-12; Schaufeli, De Witte, & Desart, 2020)

At work, I feel mentally exhausted.
After a day at work, I find it hard to recover my energy.
At work, I feel physically exhausted.
I struggle to find any enthusiasm for my work.
I feel a strong aversion towards my job.
I'm cynical about what my work means to others.
At work, I feel unable to control my emotions.

I do not recognize myself in the way I react emotionally at work.
At work I may overreact unintentionally.
At work, I have trouble staying focused.
When I'm working, I have trouble concentrating.
I make mistakes in my work because I have my mind on other things.

Adapted Unpredictability of work tasks (Schyns & Paul, 2004)

The time demands of my task are foreseeable.
I can anticipate which problems will come along with my task.
I can predict the necessary steps to fulfill my task.
I can anticipate solutions for problems that may emerge whilst working on my task.

Converging measurement of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998)

I'd rather depend on myself than others.
I rely on myself most of the time; I rarely rely on others.
I often do "my own thing."
My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.
It is important that I do my job better than others.
Winning is everything.
Competition is the law of nature.
When another person does better than I do, I get tense and aroused.
If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud.
The well-being of my coworkers is important to me.
To me, pleasure is spending time with others.
I feel good when I cooperate with others.
Parents and children must stay together as much as possible.
It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want.
Family members should stick together, no matter what sacrifices are required.
It is important to me that I respect the decisions made by my groups.

The self-importance of moral identity (Aquino, & Reed, 2002)

Instructions:

Listed below are some characteristics that may describe a person: caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind. The person with these characteristics could be you or it could be someone else. For a moment, visualize in your mind the kind of person who has these characteristics. Imagine how that person would think, feel, and act. When you have a clear image of what this person would be like, answer the following questions.
Items:

It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics.
Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am.

A big part of my emotional well-being is tied up in having these characteristics.
I would be ashamed to be a person who has these characteristics.
Having these characteristics is an important part of my sense of self.
I strongly desire to have these characteristics.
I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics.
The kinds of books and magazines that I read identify me as having these characteristics.
The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations.
I am actively involved in activities that communicate to others that I have these characteristics.

Appendix B

Daily Survey

Adapted Servant Leadership Scale (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008)

Today, I was available for my employees to seek help from me if they had a personal problem.
Today, I cared about my employee's personal well-being.
Today, I took time to talk to employees on a personal level.
Today, I could recognize when my employees were down without asking them.
Today, I emphasized the importance of giving back to the community.
Today, I was interested in helping people in our community.
Today, I was involved in community activities.
Today, I encouraged my employees to volunteer in the community.
Today, I was able tell if something was going wrong.
Today, I effectively thought through complex problems.
Today, I had a thorough understanding of our organization and its goals.
Today, I solved work problems with new or creative ideas.
Today, I gave my employees the responsibility to make important decisions about their job.
Today, I encouraged my employees to handle important work decisions on their own.
Today, I gave my employees the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that they feel is best.
Today, when employees had to make an important decision at work, they did not have to consult me first.
Today, I made an employee's career development a priority.
Today, I was interested in making sure an employee achieves their career goals.
Today, I provided my employees with work experiences that enable them to develop new skills.
Today, I wanted to know about my employees' career goals.
Today, I cared more about an employee's success than my own.
Today, I put my employees' best interests ahead of my own.
Today, I sacrificed my own interests to meet employees' needs.
Today, I did what I could do to make my employees' job easier.
Today, I held high ethical standards.
Today, I was honest.
Today, I did not compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.
Today, I valued honesty more than profits.

Adapted short version of the Burnout Assessment Tool
(BAT-12; Schaufeli, De Witte, & Desart, 2020)

Right now, I feel mentally exhausted.
Right now, I find it hard to recover my energy.
Right now, I feel physically exhausted.
Right now, I struggle to find any enthusiasm for my work.
Right now, I feel a strong aversion towards my job.
Right now, I'm cynical about what my work means to others.

Right now, I feel unable to control my emotions.
Right now, I do not recognize myself in the way I react emotionally at work.
Right now, I may overreact unintentionally.
Right now, I have trouble staying focused.
Right now, I have trouble concentrating.
Right now, I made mistakes because my mind was on other things.