



# Exploring the Influences of Childhood Experiences on Servant Leadership

Eva Cooper, The Pastoral Institute  
Phillip Bryant, Columbus State University  
Jan Burcham, Columbus State University  
Thomas McCormack, Columbus State University

## **Abstract**

A long standing debate among leadership scholars is whether leadership can be taught and learned (Tubbs & Schulz, 2005). The research herein explores the influences of childhood experiences on servant leadership behaviors. A narrative research design was used, exploring the childhood experiences of participants through semi-structured interviews, followed by an interview of a family member. Two research questions guided the study. What are participants' perceptions of how specific childhood experiences influenced their servant leadership behaviors? What similarities and differences can be found related to childhood experiences influencing servant leadership behaviors among all of the participants? Five themes were found through data analysis: family life, church involvement, mentors/role models, accountability, and group activities. All five themes point to an individual or individuals who were an influence, whether it was a parent, coach, teacher, sibling, extended family member, or other individual. Exposure to role models may be through the home, school, sports, church, or other activities.

**Keywords:** Childhood Experiences, Servant Leadership

Billions of dollars and much effort per year are spent on leadership development, yet, according to Tubbs and Schulz (2005), “one of the most frequently asked questions of leadership scholars is whether leadership can, in fact, be taught and learned” (p. 7). McCall (2004) submits that “the primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience” (p. 127).

In one of the co-author’s former places of employment, servant leadership was embraced as the leadership model and many of the employees participated in a book discussion of *The Servant*, authored by James C. Hunter (1998). According to Hunter (2004), servant leadership is “about doing the right thing” and “extending yourself for others by identifying and meeting their legitimate needs and seeking their greatest good” (p.90). Even though it was coined “servant leadership” in 1970 by Robert K. Greenleaf in his essay, *The Servant as Leader* (Keith, 2008), this philosophy of leadership of putting others before self is not new. It can be found in historical writings of authors like Lao-Tzu (Keith, 2008), Herman Hesse (Hesse, 1956), Roman philosopher Cicero (Keith, 2008), and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Hunter (2004), submits that servant leadership behaviors can be learned. Cheryl Bachelder (2018), CEO of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, Inc., says she learned servant leadership lessons from her dad growing up. According to Bachelder (2018), the stories always included a “moral of the story to make sure we understood the underlying leadership lesson” (p.8). Olesia, Namusonge, and Iravo (2014) explain that servant leadership “emerges from a leader’s principles, values, and beliefs” (p. 78). Tubbs and Schulz (2005) submit that “some aspects of leadership are more or less fixed at a young age while others are able to be developed even well into adult life” (p. 7). If servant leadership behaviors are influenced at an early age, starting leadership development at a young age may be beneficial.

Hartman and Harris (2001) submit that there are differences in management theorists’ thinking concerning whether “the individual is able to change his or her leadership style” (p. 153). If an organization wants to move toward a servant leadership model, it may be difficult to do that with traditional development efforts. McCall (2004) submits that leadership development “must start early” (p. 128). Minimal research, however, has been directed at the impact of childhood experiences on leadership development, especially servant leadership. Murphy and Johnson (2011) submit that research focused on leadership development ignores early age development influence. They suggest that a lifespan look is required for the full potential of leadership development practices to be realized, sharing the “limitation to our understanding of leader development is the focus on developmental experiences that occur late in life” (p. 459). Research conducted by Schneider, Paul, White, and Holcombe (1999) supports the idea that childhood and adolescence affect adult workplace leadership behaviors. Bornstein (1989) suggests that development during a sensitive period in childhood or adolescence may not be seen immediately but may be observed in adulthood. Murphy and Johnson (2011) suggest that genetics, temperament, birth order, parenting styles, and attachment all influence leadership development. They explain “most leadership researchers agree that even if genetics plays a large role in determining leader emergence or effectiveness, there still is approximately 50 to 70% of variability in these outcomes that is explained by other factors” (p. 462). They stress the importance of considering other early influences in a child’s environment that may enhance the skills demonstrated by a leader. Therefore, there is a need to examine childhood influences on servant leadership behaviors.

## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 55

The purpose of this study was to discover servant leaders' perceived early childhood influences on demonstrated servant leadership behaviors. Research by Schneider et al. (1999) and Bray, Campbell, and Grant (1974) points to the idea that childhood and early life experiences affect adult workplace leadership behavior. However, there is little management research and literature on the importance of early influences on leadership styles (Hartman & Harris, 2001).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1970 Robert K. Greenleaf published his essay, "The Servant as Leader" and launched the servant leadership movement, coining the phrase "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1970). Various authors (c.f. Spears, 2010; Turner, 2000; Autry, 2001; Laub, 1999; Earnhardt, 2008; Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Page and Wong, 2000; Russell and Stone, 2002; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson, 2008; Patterson, 2003) since then have defined servant leadership. Keith (2008) submits that the idea of the servant leader is not new and can actually be traced back thousands of years.

The servant leadership model, definition of servant leadership, and leadership behaviors used for this study are outlined by Jim Hunter in his books, *The Servant: A Simple Story about the Essence of Leadership* (1998) and *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle* (2004). Hunter's model was selected because it is based on centuries old principles that, as Jim Hunter (2012) himself admits, "I mean, let's be honest- these are not my ideas" (p. ix). Hunter (1998) lists and defines eight critical behaviors necessary to be a servant leader: 1) *patience*, 2) *kindness*, 3) *humility*, 4) *respectfulness*, 5) *selflessness*, 6) *forgiveness*, 7) *honesty*, and 8) *commitment*.

### METHOD

A qualitative approach to explore the research questions was chosen. According to Creswell (2015), "qualitative research relies more on the view of participants in the study and less on the direction identified in the literature by the researcher" (p. 17). Additionally, qualitative research was chosen over quantitative since the aim was to discover variables by learning more from the participants through exploration.

A narrative research design was used as the aim was to explore childhood influences on servant leadership behaviors. Findings were validated by triangulation, consisting of corroboration from different sources. A 360 degree instrument was used, and in-depth interviews of individuals conducted, followed by an analysis of the interviews to develop themes.

The research used a 360 degree assessment, based on Jim Hunter's Leadership Skills Inventory to measure individual servant leadership behaviors. Scoring is done by assigning a numerical weight to each of the responses. The scores are averaged and a composite score is assigned to each statement. A scale is used to indicate the degree to which the individual demonstrates each of the eight servant leadership behaviors. 0.0 to 2.3 indicates an urgent problem area, a 2.4 to 2.7 indicates a potential problem area, a 2.8 to 3.1 indicates good shape, and a 3.2 to 4.0 indicates excellent shape. Hunter's Leadership Skills Inventory was chosen because it reflects the servant leadership behaviors of patience, humility, forgiveness, kindness, selflessness, respectfulness, commitment, and honesty. These behaviors can possibly be influenced by childhood experiences.

Four selected participants were interviewed, using one-on-one semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, gathering stories about the experiences of their childhoods, allowing them to share without restraint. Scarce notes were taken while audio recording the interviews, allowing for researcher’s active listening. Each interview ended with the question, “Is there anything else you would like to add?” to allow the participants an opportunity to provide any last minute thoughts.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview audio recordings were transcribed and the data organized, beginning with thoroughly reading the transcripts several times in order to gain an overall sense of the data. Data analysis was an inductive process in which the data were coded by considering the participants’ statements, quotes, perceptions, and underlying meanings, reducing them to themes of people, places, or events (Creswell, 2015). Each case was analyzed separately, looking for patterns to emerge. Then, an across-case analysis was conducted to determine any similarities and differences for layering and/or interconnecting themes to provide an understanding of the perceptions of how specific childhood experiences have influenced servant leadership behaviors.

According to Creswell (2015), a number of strategies can be used by a researcher for validating the accuracy of qualitative results. Triangulation and family member checking was used in this study. A member of the family of the individual being interviewed was also interviewed to enhance the accuracy of the study.

Each of the eight who participated in the 360 degree assessment process received an overall average score ranging from 3.27 to 3.93, which according to Hunter’s Leadership Skills Inventory scale, indicates “excellent shape” to describe the degree to which an individual demonstrates the eight servant leadership behaviors. A score of 4.0 is the highest score one can receive.

Out of the original eight, four were selected to interview, based on results of their 360 degree assessment; two with the highest overall average scores and two with the lowest. Table 1 shows overall average scores from others along with overall average self-scores. Two of the participants (P1 and P3) self-assessed themselves at an overall higher score than the overall score they received from others. The other two participants (P2 and P4) self-assessed themselves at an overall lower score than the overall score they received from others, with P2’s self-assessment score only six one- hundredths lower.

Table 1. *Overall Average Scores of 360 Assessment*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Overall Average Score from Others</b>	<b>Overall Average Score from Self</b>
P1	3.27	3.7
P2	3.38	3.32
P3	3.91	3.96
P4	3.93	3.48

## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 57

All four participants were interviewed. Additionally, a family member of three of the four participants was interviewed regarding the information shared by the participant in the interview. The fourth participant was not able to get in touch with a family member to interview.

All four participants hold leadership positions at a single, common place of employment. In place of names, each participant is identified using numbers (P1....P4). Brief descriptions are listed for each participant.

P1 was born and raised in a small community in Texas. He was one of seven children. He has 30 years of experience in the healthcare industry, 20 years of leadership experience, and is currently Nursing Manager. He received an overall average score of 3.27 on the 360 degree assessment, with a response rate of nine out of nine. His self-assessment overall average score was 3.7.

P2 refers to herself as an “Army brat.” She was the youngest child, with two older brothers. With her father being in the Army, they traveled a lot. She has 30 years of experience in the healthcare industry, 25 years of leadership experience, and is currently Charge Nurse. She received an overall average score of 3.38 on the 360 degree assessment, with a response rate of six out of nine. Her self-assessment overall average score was 3.32.

P3 was born in South Carolina and was the third born child, the second son of four. His father was a physician and his mother a former nurse. He has 25 years of experience in the healthcare industry, 23 years leadership experience, and is currently Director of Pastoral Care. He received an overall average score of 3.91 on the 360 degree assessment, with a response rate of seven out of nine. His self-assessment overall average score was 3.96.

P4 grew up in a community outside Syracuse, New York, living in the same house throughout her youth. She had three brothers, with one being ten years older than her. At one point, her grandmother moved in with the family and lived with them until she passed away several years later. She has 14 years of experience in the healthcare industry, 6 years of leadership experience, and is currently Director of Therapy Services. She received an overall average score of 3.93 on the 360 degree assessment, with a response rate of eight out of nine. Her self-assessment overall average score was 3.48.

## Interviews

The steps outlined in Creswell’s (2015) *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* were followed: the data were organized, explored, and coded to build descriptions and themes. The interview transcripts were read several times, noting concepts, ideas, and hunches in the margins of the transcripts, while also getting a general sense of the interviews. Next, as themes (subcategories) began to emerge, text was segmented and labeled. As redundancy occurred, multiple themes were reviewed. This resulted in combining and reducing them into five themes (major categories). The list of themes is provided in Table 2, along with the number of occurrences of each of the categories across participants.

Table 2. *Frequency of Themes across Participants*

Major Theme	Subcategory	P1	P2	P3	P4	Total Frequency
Family Life	Two parent home	31	16	14	21	82
	Siblings	5	9	5	6	25
	Grandparent influence	0	0	6	4	10
Church Involvement	Church attendance	15	5	3	3	26
	Sunday school	4	0	3	0	7
	Bible reference	1	0	0	0	1
	Christ/God reference	2	2	0	2	6
Mentors/Role Models	Coaches	9	0	5	0	14
	Teachers	5	1	0	6	12
	Parents	4	0	7	6	17
	Dad	26	6	6	8	46
	Mom	1	10	1	7	19
	Siblings	5	9	5	6	25
	Extended Family	0	0	6	4	10
	Others	6	1	23	7	37
Accountability	Responsibilities	6	0	0	0	6
	Expectations	4	2	2	3	11
Group Activities	Clubs	2	0	2	1	5
	Sports Teams	2	0	2	2	6

Occurrences reflect the number of times that the particular subcategory was referred to or mentioned. For example, if a participant mentioned his/her dad, that was counted as one occurrence. Every time the dad was referred to, with “he” or “him”, they were also counted and included as an occurrence. This was chosen as a more reliable method to account for occurrences, eliminating the need to determine if the reference was for the same thought or account.

Three of the themes (family life, mentors/role models, and group activities) were considered ordinary themes, which, according to Creswell (2015), are themes “that a researcher might expect to find” (p. 249). They were ordinary themes, as they were uncovered in review of the literature. Van der Veek, Van der Leij, and Scholte (2011) concluded from a study conducted on 49 adults, that parental behavior can have a long term influence on the core beliefs of an adult. Brown and Trevino (2014) asserted that individuals “learn what to do and how to behave largely by observing and emulating role models” (p. 588). Madsen (2006) discovered, in a study of ten women university presidents, that “other than their own parents, influential individuals during childhood included predominantly women elementary school teachers, aunts, and grandmothers” (p. 1). Sports participation, according to Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock (2014), is linked with the development of leadership skills. Sports participation is considered a type of group participation. Two of the themes (church involvement and accountability) were unexpected themes, which, according to Creswell (2015), are themes “that are surprises and not

## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 59

expected to surface during a study” (p. 248). The two unexpected themes were not found in the review of literature.

### **Theme: Family Life**

Family life, a main category, identified specific characteristics of the home environment. A commonality among participants was a childhood home life with both a mother and father, although P2 mentioned that her father was in the Army and was physically gone quite a bit and wasn't really involved in her early childhood. All four participants had at least two siblings, with one participant being one of seven children. Two participants mentioned a grandparent as being part of their early childhood family life. P3, when asked about significant people who had influenced his leadership behaviors, mentioned his grandfather, saying, “My grandfather was very much... he was a very strong Christian man....I have a feeling it's because of his prayers that I'm where I am today”.

While, the four participants are products of a home with both a mother and father, it does not necessarily mean they are healthy and happy, as Bowlby (1998) asserts. However, as Popper, Maysless, & Castelnovo (2000) found, secure attachment is associated with empathy and emotional investment in one's followers. Since, according to Olesia et al (2014), servant leadership descriptors typically include service and humility, which requires empathy, one might find that secure attachment may be linked to the demonstration of the participants' servant leadership behaviors.

### **Theme: Church Involvement**

A commonality among all four participants is the perception that church involvement influenced their leadership behaviors. This theme evolved, overwhelmingly, even though an interview question did not specifically ask about church influence. Participants mentioned church (26 times, four participants), Sunday school (seven times, two participants) the Bible (one time, one participant), and Christ/Jesus/God/Lord (three times, two participants). While the researcher did not uncover church involvement as a theme in the review of literature, a possible link may be between the principles taught through church involvement and the behaviors of servant leadership in that they reflect the character of an individual. According to Shields (2011), “When we focus on the character of the learner, rather than the contents of learning, we address what's likely to be sustained through time and circumstances” (p. 49).

P1 shared, “The number one thing I think that influenced me is that my parents were consistently church going people. My dad was a church leader. He was a Deacon, Sunday School Teacher”. He added, when later asked about school influence, “My Sunday school classes in church probably had more of an influence on that than regular elementary school”. Speaking specifically of servant leadership, P1 shared, “I think most of my involvement that contributed to servant leadership though, really, was in church. We were really involved in church”. And, the father of P1, when asked to share thoughts on what might have influenced his son's leadership behaviors, mentioned church five times, the Bible one time, and Lord three times. He shared,

He (P1) was raised in the church.... He was involved in church all the time....One of the things we did once a week was have a family devotion. We would read the

60 COOPER, BRYANT, BURCHAM, & McCORMACK

Bible and pray together....We'd go to church together. We never missed church. We have seven kids and ever since they were small I brought them up in the church.

P2, when asked about sports participation, shared,

I didn't really participate in sports, but I was very involved in children's church and I babysat in the nursery and I led children's church for years and years and years. I think I really wasn't in sports per se as was more socially engaged in the church activities. Church camp, things like that.

P3, when asked to share information about his family situation and early experiences that may have impacted his leadership behaviors, said, "We were raised in the church growing up, though that wasn't a big part of my life until I really got into high school". He shared that Mr. Bill Turner, author of *A Journey Toward Servant Leadership* (2000), was his Sunday school teacher and the father of one of the friends with whom he grew up. P3 added, "I didn't really know who he was. He was the father of one of my friend," P4 shared that she was involved in the Catholic Church. She went to Catholic school and shared that she was "very involved in extracurricular activities associated with the church". She added,

My parents were very heavily involved with the church. My dad was a lector and a Eucharistic minister. My mom was also a Eucharistic minister. She also taught CCD, which were the confirmation or the religion classes in the evening.

The researchers found the fact that all four participants spoke of church involvement may suggest that church involvement may be an early influencer of servant leadership behaviors. Hunter (1998) submits that First Corinthians, chapter thirteen in the New Testament in the Bible describes the behaviors of a servant leader. And the research conducted by Naylor (2010), exploring the influence of the books we read and stories we are exposed to as children, found that the stories from childhood impact our adult lives. The stories of the Bible, such as those reflected in the story of the washing of the disciples' feet, demonstrate the actions of a servant leader. Based on findings in the literature review related to church involvement, indirectly, one might conclude that church involvement for all four participants was an early childhood influencer of their servant leadership behaviors.

### **Theme: Mentors/Role Models**

The results showed the influence of mentors and role models is supported in the review of literature. The social learning theory, according to Brown and Trevino (2014), "posits that individuals learn what to do and how to behave largely by observing and emulating role models" (p. 588). And, Brown and Trevino (2014) submit that, "according to social learning theory, role models facilitate the acquisition of moral and other types of behavior" (p. 587). We found that within the category, Mentors/Role Models, participants mentioned coaches (14 times, two participants), teachers (12 times, three participants), parents (17 times, three participants), Dad (46 times, four participants), Mom (19 times, four participants), siblings (25 times, four participants), extended family (ten times, two participants), and others (37 times, four participants). All four participants mentioned family members (mother, father, siblings) when sharing their childhood experiences. While the occurrences weren't direct references to family members as mentors or role models, all references to family members were counted. Tim Bower (2004) asserts that an



## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 61

individual's family past may provide insight into how one may act in the workplace. Therefore, we may find that family members were role models or mentors, simply by being part of one's life.

**Sub-Theme: Coaches.** According to Wright and Côté (2003), "receiving feedback, acknowledgment, support, cognitive engagement, mature conversations with adults and physical encounters with older peers are important social influences" (p.1). The interaction with coaches, via participation in sports, points to the potential influence of coaches on servant leadership behaviors. P1 mentioned that he had good coaches when he was asked how sport related experiences influenced his leadership behaviors. He spoke about one particular coach, a baseball coach, who, "really showed a lot of confidence in me and I think more confidence than I really deserved. He would always encourage me and when I was struggling he would always make it a point to talk to me". After getting in trouble in history class, P1 shared the coach told him how disappointed he was in him, which influenced him to go to the teacher and apologize. The teacher respected the fact that he apologized and it caused a transition in that class that year. He added that the coach "took the time to sit down with me and say, 'Look, hey, you're better than this.' He had a great influence on me".

**Sub-Theme: Teachers.** Three participants spoke of teachers when sharing potential influencers in their life. P2, when speaking about significant people who influenced her leadership behaviors, shared how she recalled teachers taking interest in her. P1 shared an interesting story of a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, who, by her negative treatment of him, influenced his behaviors. The teacher put him on the spot, pointing out the difficulty he, as a Hispanic person, had pronouncing a certain word. He shared that he told himself that it would never happen to him again, that he would learn to do it the right way.

**Sub-Theme: Parents.** Three participants mentioned their parents collectively, with four also specifically mentioning their fathers, and four mentioning their mothers. According to Sheffield, Waller, Emanuelli, Murray, and Meyer (2005), there is a relationship between the core beliefs of an adult and their reported parents' behaviors. P1 shared,

My family didn't drink, they weren't on drugs, there was no alcohol or drugs or anything related like that in my background, in my family's background, my immediate family. My parents were very Christian people and they set the standard. Not perfect, but very honest and open. I think that had a lot to do with it.

The father of P1, in his interview, shared that he tried to bring up his children the "right way." He added, "I'm not bragging but I made sure that they can't point a finger at me". P3 also spoke of his parents sharing, "My parents were both hard working. They believed in studying hard". While P4 did not share any specific examples of role models, when asked about the influence of people on her leadership behaviors, she mentioned her parents, who, as she described, "were very involved in extracurricular activities associated with the church". P4 shared that her personality was more like her father's when she was younger but is becoming more like her mother's as she gets older, describing, "as far as just being more outgoing and more willing to speak up for things".

**Sub-Theme: Siblings.** All four participants mentioned siblings in the interviews. Two elaborated on their siblings, giving specific examples of potential influence. P2 spoke of

62 COOPER, BRYANT, BURCHAM, & McCORMACK

her brother as an influence, explaining, “My brother actually was in the restaurant business early and taught me things about how to treat people, how to tip”. P4 spoke of her brothers as being an influence. While she said she couldn’t specifically point to any specific behaviors with them or specific parts of the relationships with them, she said, “I think those relationships helped me become the person I am”.

***Sub-Theme: Extended Family.*** Two participants mentioned a grandparent in their interviews, as they shared information about their childhoods. P3 shared how his grandfather, a very strong Christian, with his prayers, had a lot of influence on “where I am today”. The grandmother of P4 moved in with the family for a while, until she passed away several years later.

***Sub-Theme: Others.*** P1, when asked if he found any themes as he shared during the interview, shared that a man at his church really influenced him. P1 shared,

My dad and I had a decent relationship but my dad put a lot of pressure on me sometimes and sometimes it seemed unfair. Sometimes I felt like I let my dad down. This man pulled me aside one day and he said ‘Look I’m going to give you some tips.’ He saw I was very frustrated during an event. He told me that I need to look at a situation and anticipate what is needed. He told me, ‘Don’t wait to be asked; don’t wait to do it. If you know your dad needs something just stay ahead of him.’

P1 added that was the greatest advice. He shared that it is something that has always stuck with him, explaining,

...to look at situations and anticipate needs rather than wait until the need was present... being proactive. I think that really had an effect on how I solve things. It really helped my relationship with my father. It really made an impact on me because when I started doing it I saw the impact it had.

P3, when asked about his childhood experiences, said,

I think growing up here, and the culture here, my father’s work, my neighbors’ fathers, I saw the kind of work ethic, the servant leadership that was displayed through modeling of that. I had Mr. Turner as my Sunday school teacher and I didn’t really know he was really who he was.

P3 later in the interview spoke about the influence Mr. Turner had on him, later in youth, when he was high school age. He shared,

I can remember, and I’ve talked about this before, when he did the washing of the feet...He had a bowl and he gave us a piece of towel and said, ‘You’re now a member of the order of the towel. You’ll always remember this. This is a way you are to go about serving others. You take that towel with you wherever you go.’ I think about that when I come in the hospital. I’ve got my towel with me. I’m here to serve.

When the brother of P3 was asked for his thoughts on the story of Bill Turner’s influence on P3, he shared that Bill Turner was a very kind and giving person, always with a smile on his face, and not pretentious at all. P3’s brother shared he couldn’t say that the

## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 63

experiences P3 shared had a formative effect on him as well. He shared that his experiences growing up were different from his brother, who went into the ministry. He said his biggest influence was his mother. Their dad was a physician and was always working so he went to his mother with problems. He added, “Mom was a kind and sweet lady”.

Clearly, from the interviews, coaches, teachers, parents, dads, moms, siblings, extended family members, and others, to varying degrees as perceived by the participants, had an influence on their servant leadership behaviors. As Adler (2008) shared in her writings, *I am my mother’s daughter: Early developmental influences on leadership*, that “perhaps one of the most powerful early influences on future leadership success is embedded in the personal stories and behavior of those we love the most” (p.7). Adler (2008) shared that her courage, inspiration, and values come from her mom’s stories and behaviors, shaped by her experiences as a Holocaust survivor.

### **Theme: Accountability**

All four participants spoke of accountability as they were growing up, communicated and experienced in different ways, such as being given responsibilities and experiencing expectations. Participants referenced responsibilities (6 times, one participant), and expectations (11 times, four participants).

P1, when asked to share his family situation at the beginning of the interview shared how his father had a leadership role in the church and often called on P1 to help him and even later, as a teenager, he was a substitute Sunday school teacher. The most touching responsibility P1 shared was as caregiver for his younger brother, who, while riding his bike with P1 was hit by a truck. The brother suffered severe brain damage and P1 shared, “A lot of times I was that primary caregiver for him when my parents had to go out or had other responsibilities”. He added, “I spent a lot of time with him, helping him out. I think that’s one of the reasons I’m involved in healthcare”. Several times throughout the interview, P1 referenced the responsibilities and expectations he experienced, many involving an expectation of serving others. He shared, “The whole family was involved in what the church was doing so we learned from a very young age to serve”. When sharing how his father always relied on him, P1 said, “I don’t want to say he forced me, but was a great influence in pushing me in that direction to help him when he wasn’t around, to leave me in charge of that type of thing”. P1 recalled how he was with his father a lot and shared, “He taught me a lot. I was his right hand type of person”.

Even when P1 was asked about childhood sports related experiences, responsibilities and expectations came up. He shared,

I had to make my own practices, so I had to get on my bike, leave the house in time to ride all the way to the park to get there. I had to make sure I had my equipment and stuff like that.

When P1 was asked at the end of the interview if he recognized a theme, he said, “It’s always to serve and do the right thing. You’re never too big to serve....My dad showed me that the leader is the hardest worker”. P1 added, “The Bible has a scripture that says, ‘Whatever your hand findeth to do, do it with all your might’. Speaking further, referencing responsibility, P1 shared,

64 COOPER, BRYANT, BURCHAM, & McCORMACK

As being raised with my brother in the condition that he was, from a very young age... He was total care. You had to take care of him. You're never too big to clean a mess. You're never too good to help somebody that's in need. My dad did teach me that.

P2, whose father was in the military, when asked about her parental influence, also referenced having responsibilities and expectations. The following excerpts further support this experience:

You had to be on time...You had to be dependable...We had chores...We had expectations...My mother as a leader... she had a lot of high expectations for us and always pushed us a little bit more, a little harder. You did great, but you could have done a little better.

P3, while not directly mentioning the words accountability and expectations, spoke of "hard working...studying hard...work ethic" during the interview. And P4, when asked if she noticed any themes, one that she identified was expectations, saying,

One would be high expectations from the people around me. I think the expectations at school were high. I think that the expectations from my parents were high. I really, really didn't want to let any of these people down...I have high expectations for myself. I also now have high expectations for other people, which is sometimes good, and sometimes not good.

P4's father, when asked for his thoughts on what P4 shared regarding expectations, stated, "Yes, I think we communicated to all four children, when younger, we would expect them to succeed to the level of their capability".

Accountability, like church involvement, is an unexpected theme that was not uncovered in the review of literature. All four participants shared that there were expectations of them at a young age, with P1 having a great deal of responsibility, caring for his brother and serving as the right hand person for his father's business. Bower (2004) asserts that an individual's family past may provide insight into how one may act in the workplace. He submits that past family dynamics may influence workplace reenactment/behaviors. He asserts that the workplace reenactment for assuming adult responsibilities as a child is being overly responsible for others or being a workaholic. While the results from the assessment of P1, for example, don't point to being a workaholic, servant leadership is characterized by focus on meeting the needs of others versus being self-centered. Having expectations and responsibilities at a young age, then, may contribute to influencing one to be focused more on others versus self.

### ***Theme: Group Activities***

Three of the four participants mentioned involvement in a club or team. Within the category, group activities, participants mentioned clubs (five times, three participants), and sports teams (six times, three participants). P1 discussed involvement in Royal Rangers, an organization similar to Boy Scouts, as well as playing on a baseball team. P2 shared that she was not involved in sports but was engaged in church activities. When asked how childhood experiences influenced his leadership behaviors, P3 shared that he was on the tennis team in high school, saying, "That was my identity and I think that kept

## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 65

me out of a lot of trouble”. He was also involved in Fellowship of Christian Athletes sharing, “I think that had a lot to do with me and my style of leadership too. Just learning about Jesus Christ and how he led, and me so admiring him and worshiping him”. While P4 shared that she tried out for a lot of different sports, made the cheerleading team, and found that wasn’t for her; she decided to be a basketball player, sharing, “Although it wasn’t the greatest fit, I think the thing about the basketball team, which I really liked, was the practices and the friends, and the comradery about the basketball team”. She also was in scouting for several years, a Brownie and then a Girl Scout. She was also president of the library club at the school she attended. P4’s father shared that he and P4’s mother supported P4 in joining clubs, Brownies, and activities “where they were serving others in a beneficial way”. He added that P4 went to a school “where they encouraged others to serve”.

Involvement in group activities, according to three of the participants, influenced their demonstrations of servant leadership behaviors. This is supported in the review of literature, although not directly linked to the demonstration of servant leadership behaviors but on a broader scale, an influence of behaviors. In-depth interviews conducted by Wright and Côté (2003) with six leader athletes who were engaged in athletics from an early age, found that “receiving feedback, acknowledgement, support, cognitive engagement, mature conversations with adults, and physical encounters with older peers are important social influences” (p.1). And, Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock (2014) link the development of leadership skills with participation in sports. Therefore, one might consider that participation in sports or other group activities may influence the development of servant leadership behaviors.

The perceptions of how specific childhood experiences influenced the servant leadership behaviors of the four leaders were collected through interviews. Five major themes and nineteen subcategories emerged: family life, church involvement, mentors/role models, accountability, and group activities. Two of the themes (church involvement and accountability) were unexpected themes and three (family life, mentors/role models, and group activities) were ordinary themes, based on the review of literature.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the study found that the perceptions reflected in the five themes of family life, church involvement, mentors/role models, accountability, and group activities, shared by the participants, are mostly consistent with the review of literature, with similarities as well as some gaps. As the literature supports, there are many potential influencers in a child’s life that may impact their behaviors as an adult. Thus, many possible childhood experiences may influence the development of servant leadership behaviors.

Several studies related to parental influence support and represent a similarity with this study’s findings that earlier life experiences and parental behavior may contribute to core beliefs/values of an adult and possibly emergence in leadership roles or future emergence in leadership roles. Avolio, Rotundo, and Walumbwa (2009), as part of an on-going longitudinal study (Minnesota Twin Family Study), conducted a qualitative study of one-hundred-nine pairs of identical twins and eighty-seven pairs of fraternal twins and found that earlier life experiences may contribute to explaining future emergence in leadership roles. Van der Veeke, Van der Leij, Van der Leij, and Scholte (2011) investigated whether parental behavior can have long term influences on children’s brains and mental development utilizing MRI scanning and questionnaires. They found that parental

behavior can have long term influence on the core beliefs of an adult. Finally, Adler (2008), in a qualitative biographical case personal history, examined early developmental influences on leadership and shared that her courage, values, and inspiration came from her mother.

Another study by Popper, Mayseless, and Castelnovo (2000) studied eighty-five males, with a mean age of 20, from three platoons of cadets participating in an officers' course in a border guard unit, and found that certain types of leadership, those which involve empathy and emotional investment in one's followers, are expected to be associated with secure attachment. While the study does not specifically reflect a focus on servant leadership, empathy and emotional investment in one's followers are consistent with the eight servant leadership behaviors assessed in this study.

Hartman and Harris (2001), utilizing a leadership behavior description questionnaire, conducted a quantitative study of one hundred ninety-five students and found that early influence was important and that some gender-related differences were operating. The four participants in this study included two males and two females, so gender did not appear to be an issue in the emergence of servant leadership behaviors. However, gender aside, Hartman and Harris also found that early influence was important in shaping the leadership process, which does represent consistency with the researcher's findings.

While church involvement was not found to be a theme in the review of literature, a link may exist between the principles taught through church involvement and the behaviors of servant leadership in that they reflect the character of an individual. Character education as a possible influencer in the development of servant leadership behaviors was uncovered in the review of literature, and the values of justice, fairness, responsibility and caring, as mentioned by Schwartz, Beatty and Dachnowicz (2006), are consistent with the values demonstrated by a servant leader and are consistent with stories about Jesus' life shared in the Bible. Also, Naylor (2010), through a narrative inquiry, non-structured single interview with a known subject, explored whether the books we read and the stories we were exposed to as children influence the professional adult we become. Naylor identified links between the adult professional self and the characters in the tales that were read as children. All four participants in this study mentioned church attendance and were likely exposed to Biblical stories as children, which reflect behaviors consistent with servant leadership. Servant leader behaviors are reflected in the Bible as, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:4-6, King James Bible). These are consistent with the behaviors (patience, kindness, humility, forgiveness, respectfulness, selflessness, commitment, and honesty) assessed in this study.

While this is an expected theme, studies specifically related to "mentors" were not uncovered in the literature review. It is consistent, however, with studies (Brown and Trevino, 2014; Wright and Côté, 2003) which support the idea that we learn how to behave by interacting with and observing coaches, parents, and even peers, which may be considered role models. Albert Bandura and colleagues' (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961) famous study, the Bobo Doll experiment, indicated that experiences that children have, or even observe, can influence their behaviors.

In one study, Williams, Roberts, and Bosselman (2011), using a qualitative phenomenological design, explored the impact of youth sports on the development of

## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 67

interpersonal leadership skills that prepare managers to adapt to change. They studied twenty managers who participated in youth sports for three to five years and who managed an organization for three to five years and found that managers with a sports background in youth learned interpersonal skills that allow them to accept change easily. While Williams, et al. (2011) did not assess servant leadership behaviors, the related interpersonal skills are reflected in servant leadership behaviors.

Williams (2012) examined the impact of low and high youth participation in sports on leadership styles in the hospitality industry. Williams (2012) found a significant difference between low and high youth sports participation in regards to effective leadership styles. Again, this suggests consistency with the current study's findings in that high participation in sports may also be linked to high exposure to mentors/role models.

## CONCLUSION

Childhood may be an opportune time to influence the development of servant leadership behaviors. Since changing behaviors in adulthood can prove difficult, efforts to instill these behaviors in childhood may be more effective.

Church involvement was a strong influencer of the development of servant leadership behaviors in the subjects in this study. A commonality among all four participants was the perception that church involvement, whether it was attending church and/or Sunday school, exposure to the Bible, or exposure to Christ/God, influenced their leadership behaviors. This theme evolved, overwhelmingly, even though there was no interview question about church influence. This also represents a possible gap in existing research. While church attendance was not uncovered in the review of literature, there may be a link to role models/mentors through involvement in church activities, and even stories in the Bible.

Parents and other role models were also very influential for these leaders. All four participants mentioned role models, whether it was a coach, teacher, parent, sibling, extended family member, or another person who was involved in their lives in an influential way. The theme is also woven in the other four themes (family life, church involvement, group activities, and accountability) in that people served as role models, as the participants shared stories related to those themes.

In summary, this study found that role models in a child's early life are very influential in the development of servant leadership behaviors. Each theme (family life, church involvement, mentors/role models, accountability, and group activities) in this study points to an individual or individuals who were an influence. Parents, coaches, teachers, siblings, and extended family members are represented in the themes that emerged in this study. Exposure to these role models may be through school, sports, church, or other activities. Even stories of role models, as in the Bible, are ways children may be exposed to servant leadership behaviors.

Servant leadership behaviors and the examination of how leadership behaviors are learned formed the conceptual framework of this study. The various influences on leadership development were reviewed to enhance understanding. The understudied areas of childhood influences on leadership development, specifically servant leadership, as experienced by the subjects in this study, helped to identify relationships, adding to the existing field of knowledge.

## **Limitations**

While we sought to collect reliable data, subjectivity may be a limitation of this study. Because the data was collected from adults, whose memories of childhood may be altered, validity and reliability may be compromised. Additionally, the subjects previously read the book, *The Servant*, in which Jim Hunter (1998), the author, gives his opinion about the development of leadership behaviors, perhaps having an influence on their responses to interview questions.

A small sample size may also be a limitation of the study. The subjects were a small representation of individuals who read the book as a voluntary leadership development opportunity. Furthermore, given the use of interviews, participants' responses could be misinterpreted due to varying abilities to express themselves.

## **Implications**

The information from this study may prove useful for researchers and practitioners in the educational arena and beyond. The information from this study has potential to change leadership development efforts, realizing the benefits of starting leadership development early in one's life. Additionally, with the identification in this study of the importance of childhood role models in the development of servant leadership behaviors, parents, schools, churches, organizations and communities might find ways to integrate role modeling if they want to encourage the growth of servant leaders.

## **Future Research**

Additional research is needed to further validate the findings of this study. A future study exploring how negative influences in childhood influenced the development of servant leadership behaviors might prove interesting. Additional studies could be conducted exploring how other leadership development exposure the individuals might have had influenced the subjects along with their early childhood experiences.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

With this knowledge, schools, parents, churches, organizations, and communities should search for ways to incorporate opportunities for children to be exposed to positive role models. This may be a challenge in many cases and may require collaborative efforts toward creative solutions.



## REFERENCES

- Adler, N. J. (2008). I am my mother's daughter: Early developmental influences on leadership. *European J. International Management*, 2(1), 6-21.
- Autry, J. (2001). *The Servant Leader*. California: Prima Publishing.
- Avolio, B., Rotundo, M. & Walumbwa, F. (2009). Early life experiences as determinants of leadership role occupancy: the importance of parental influence and rule breaking behavior. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20, 329-342.
- Bachelder, C. (2018). *Dare to serve: how to drive superior results by serving others*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S.A. (1961). Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 63, 57-582.
- Barbuto, J.E. & Wheeler, D. W. (2006). Scale development and construct clarification of servant leadership. *Group & Organization Management*, 31(3), 300-326.
- Bower, T. (2004, May 10). I'm a bad boss? Blame my dad. *Business Week*, p. 60-61.
- Bowlby, J. (1998). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Great Britain: Routledge.
- Bray, D., Campbell, R.J., & Grant, D. (1974). *Formative years in business: A long term AT&T study of managerial lives*. New York: John Wiley.
- Brown, M. E. & Trevino, L. K. (2014). Do role models matter? An investigation of role modeling as an antecedent of perceived ethical leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 122, 587-598.
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Earnhardt, M. P. (2008). Testing a servant leadership theory among United States military members. *Emerging Leadership Journeys*, (1) 2, 2008, p. 14-24.
- Greenleaf, R.K. (1970). *The servant as leader*. Indianapolis, IN: The Robert Greenleaf Center.
- Hartman, S. J. & Harris, O. J. (2001). The role of parental influence in leadership. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 132(2), 153-167.
- Hesse, H. (1956). *The journey to the east*. New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hunter, J. (1998). *The servant: A simple story about the essence of leadership*. California: Prima Publishing.

70 COOPER, BRYANT, BURCHAM, & McCORMACK

- Hunter, J. (2004). *The world's most powerful leadership principle*. New York: Crown Business.
- Hunter, J. (2012). *The servant: A simple story about the essence of leadership*. New York: Crown Business.
- Keith, K. (2008). *The case for servant leadership*. Indiana: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.
- Laub, J. (1999). Assessing the servant organization: development of the servant organizational leadership assessment (SOLA) instrument. Unpublished dissertation, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL.
- Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Zhao, H., and Henderson, D. (2008). Servant leadership: development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment. *The Leadership Quarterly*, (19), 161-177.
- Madsen, S. (2006). Developing leadership: Exploring childhoods of women university presidents. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 45(1), 99-118.
- McCall, M. Jr. (2004). Leadership development through experience. *Academy of Management Executive*, 18(3), 127-130.
- Murphy, S. & Johnson, S. (2011). The benefits of a long-lens approach to leader development: Understanding the seeds of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22, 459-470.
- Naylor, J. E. (2010). Five have a leadership adventure: Exploring childhood fictional influences on the construction of self as a leader. *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 24(5), 437-458.
- Olesia, W., Namusonge, G., Iravo, M. (2014). Servant leadership: The exemplifying behaviours. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 19(6), 75-80.
- Page, D., and Wong, T.P. (2000). A conceptual framework for measuring servant-leadership.
- Patterson, K. (2003). Servant leadership: A theoretical model. *Servant Leadership Roundtable*. Retrieved from [http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/conference\\_proceedings/servant\\_leadership\\_roundtable/2003/pdf/patterson\\_servant\\_leadership.pdf](http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/conference_proceedings/servant_leadership_roundtable/2003/pdf/patterson_servant_leadership.pdf)
- Popper, M., Maysel, O., & Castelnovo, O. (2000). Transformational leadership and attachment. *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(2), 267-289.
- Russell, R. & Stone, A. (2002). A review of servant leadership attributes: Developing a model. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 23(3), 145-157.
- Schneider, B., Paul, M. C., White, S., & Holcombe, K.M. (1999). Understanding high school student leaders, I: Predicting teacher ratings of leader behavior. *Leadership Quarterly*, 10(4), 609-636.

## INFLUENCES OF CHILDHOOD ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP 71

- Schwartz, M. J., Beatty, A., & Dachnowicz, E. (2006). Character Education: Frill or Foundation?. *Principal Leadership*, 7(4), 25-30.
- Sheffield, A., Waller, G., Emanuelli, F., Murray, J., & Meyer, C. (2005). Links between parenting and core beliefs: Preliminary psychometric validation of the Young Parenting Inventory. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 29(6), 787-802.
- Shields, D. L. (2011). Character as the aim of education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(8), 48-53.
- Spears, L. (2010). Character and servant leadership: Ten characteristics of effective, caring leaders. *The Journal of Virtues & Leadership*, 1(1), 25-30.
- Tubbs, S., & Schulz, E. (2005). Leadership competencies: Can they be learned? *The Business Review, Cambridge*, 3(2), 7-12.
- Turner, W. (2000). *A journey toward servant leadership*. Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing.
- Turnnidge, J., Côté, J., & Hancock, D. J. (2014). Positive youth development from sport to life: Explicit or implicit transfer? *Quest*, 66(2), 203-217.
- Van der Veen, A., Van der Leij, A., & Scholte, S. (2011). Long term consequences on normal young adults' core beliefs and brain functioning due to received parenting. *Journal of Neurology and Neuroscience*, 2(22), 1-13.
- Williams, J. A. (2012). *The impact of youth sports on leadership styles in the hospitality industry*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd>
- Williams, J. A., Roberts, C., & Bosselman, R. (2011). Youth sports and the emergence of chameleon leadership. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 5(3), 6-12.
- Wright, A. D. & Côté, J. (2003). A retrospective analysis of leadership development through sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 17, 268-291.

