

## **SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT OF HOTEL SERVICE EMPLOYEES – THE MODERATING ROLE OF OPENNESS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates servant leadership as a predictor of psychological empowerment in hospitality employees. The hypotheses suggest that employees' openness to experience predicts psychological empowerment and acts as a moderator of the relationship between servant leadership and empowerment. Using survey data from 154 hospitality service employees in 5-star hotels in Europe the study applies a hierarchical moderated multiple regression approach to test the main and interaction effects. The findings support the hypotheses of the study, demonstrating positive main effects of both servant leadership and openness on psychological empowerment as well as a significant interaction effect.

**Keywords:** hospitality, leadership, openness, psychological empowerment, servant leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

Empirical research in the hospitality industry provides ample evidence for the benefits of empowerment in a service context. In terms of psychological outcomes, empowerment has been shown to predict job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Meng and Han, 2014; Raub and Robert, 2013; Ruiz-Palomo *et al.* 2020) as well as employee well-being (Biron and Bamberger, 2010; Rahman *et al.*, 2020) or engagement (de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014). At a behavioral level, empowerment is positively related to the display of organizational citizenship behaviors (Chebat and Kollias, 2000), including voice behavior (Raub and Robert, 2013) and extra-role customer service behavior (Garg and Dhar, 2016). This translates into higher service performance (Kim *et al.*, 2017) and service quality (Lin *et al.*, 2017). Psychological empowerment has also been demonstrated to contribute to more successful service recovery (Bae *et al.*, 2021; Hewagama *et al.*, 2019; Zhang and Geng, 2020) and complaint management (Ogbeide *et al.*, 2017), with greater customer loyalty as an ultimate outcome (Koc, 2013). Last but not least, in the specific context of the restaurant industry, psychological empowerment is positively related to food safety performance and food quality (Roseman *et al.*, 2017) and has been demonstrated to predict service employees' customer orientation (Gazzoli *et al.*, 2012) and service orientation (Yen *et al.*, 2016).

As the hospitality industry is characterized by low wages and high turnover (Iverson & Deery, 1997), a good understanding of the antecedents of psychological empowerment is of great importance. Research has investigated a range of possible antecedents in which leadership behaviors have played an important role. For instance, extant studies suggest that empowering leadership predicts psychological empowerment (Raub and Robert, 2010; Tripathi and Bharadwaja, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, leader-member exchange (LMX) has been shown to predict psychological empowerment (Kim and George, 2005) and

to interact with psychological empowerment in predicting extra-role customer service (Garg and Dhar, 2016). Finally, transformational leadership is positively related to both employees' desire for empowerment (Gill *et al.*, 2010) and their actual psychological empowerment (Bhatti *et al.*, 2021; Choi *et al.*, 2014; Schermuly and Meyer, 2020).

Another approach to leadership that should contribute to followers' psychological empowerment is servant leadership. Servant leaders "place their followers (and others) first in their actions" (Allen *et al.*, 2018: 126) and servant leadership includes a particular focus on "facilitation of follower performance and development" (Winston & Fields, 2015). In his foundational contribution, Greenleaf (1977) suggested that servant leaders focus on developing and empowering followers. More recent operationalizations of the servant leadership construct (Erhart, 2004; Liden *et al.*, 2008) also explicitly include "empowering subordinates" as one dimension. Despite the strong theoretical affinity between servant leadership and psychological empowerment, there are surprisingly few empirical investigations of this relationship to date (cf. Newman *et al.*, 2017 for a notable exception). Moreover, none of the existing research has relied on empirical data from the hospitality industry nor even on data from another service industry. The hospitality industry has traditionally been characterized by mechanistic structures (Shamir, 1978) with high levels of bureaucracy (Raub, 2008) and limited room for empowerment. In such a context it is particularly relevant to study which leadership approaches can potentially contribute to higher levels of empowerment.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, and most fundamentally, this study assesses whether servant leadership predicts psychological empowerment in hospitality service employees. Second, as past research (e.g. Robert *et al.*, 2000; Zhang *et al.*, 2014) has suggested that the effectiveness of empowerment-related organizational interventions and leadership behaviors depends on employees' individual differences, this study also enriches

the basic model by investigating the role of employees' degree of openness as a predictor of psychological empowerment and as a moderator of the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment.

The three specific objectives the study aims to reach are the following:

1. To empirically assess whether servant leadership predicts psychological empowerment in hospitality employees.
2. To investigate the role of openness as a predictor of psychological empowerment in hospitality employees.
3. To assess the potential moderating effect of openness on the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Psychological empowerment**

The origins of the psychological empowerment construct can be found in research on intrinsic task motivation (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990), participative management (Lawler, 1992) and job design (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Extant research provides ample evidence for the impact of psychological empowerment on important attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. For instance, at the attitudinal level, psychological empowerment has been shown to be positively associated with job satisfaction (Sparrowe, 1994; Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997) and negatively associated with strain (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997) and turnover intentions (Sparrowe, 1994). At the behavioral level, research supports a positive relationship between psychological empowerment and managerial effectiveness at the individual level (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997), team level (Chen *et al.*, 2007; Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Kirkman *et al.*, 2004), and organizational level (Birdi *et al.*, 2008).

In a hospitality context, the particular importance of psychological empowerment stems from its relationships with employee behaviors that go “above and beyond the call of duty”. In her foundational contribution, Spreitzer (1995: 1448) argued that empowered employees are “likely to proactively execute their job responsibilities by, for instance, anticipating problems and acting independently.” This is supported by empirical evidence demonstrating a positive relationship between psychological empowerment and extra-role behaviors (Alge *et al.*, 2006) – a relationship that has also been demonstrated in specific service sector studies (Chebat and Kollias, 2000; Wat and Shaffer 2005). Last but not least, Zhang and Bartol (2010) have shown that psychological empowerment predicts creativity.

Psychological empowerment has been described as an active orientation towards one’s work role (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995). The seminal contribution by Spreitzer (1995) has further refined the notion of psychological empowerment as being anchored in four different cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. *Meaning* is reflected in the degree of fit between employees’ own beliefs and values and what their work requires. Closely related to Bandura’s (1977) concept of self-efficacy, *competence* encapsulates an employees’ belief that they are “up to the job”, i.e. capable of performing required work activities. A feeling of autonomy in the workplace or a perception of choice with regard to work methods and processes and the pace and effort in work activities results in the cognition of *self-determination*. Lastly, *impact* is defined as the extent to which an employee believes that he or she can exert influence on final work outcomes at the strategic, administrative or operational level.

Antecedents of psychological empowerment have been identified at multiple levels, including organizational structure, work roles, access to information, and resources and organizational climate (Spreitzer, 1996). In addition, considerable emphasis has been placed on the role of leadership as an antecedent of psychological empowerment. In this context, the

construct of empowering leadership (Arnold *et al.*, 2000) has played a prominent role. Several studies (Raub and Robert, 2010; Zhang and Bartol, 2010; Thomas and Rahschulte, 2018; Tripathi and Bharadwaja, 2020) suggest that empowering leadership behaviors predict subordinates' psychological empowerment. Due to the almost tautological nature of this relationship, this study opted for the investigation of an alternative type of leadership behavior that appears to be a promising candidate as a predictor of psychological empowerment, namely servant leadership.

### **Servant leadership**

It has been suggested that the concept of servant leadership can be traced back to the Bible, with Jesus being “the first to introduce the notion of servant leadership to everyday human endeavor” (Senjaya and Sarros, 2002). Servant leadership was introduced to modern organization theory by Greenleaf (1977), who suggested that a servant leader “is servant first... it begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants.” (pp. 13-14). Graham (1991) distinguished servant leadership from transformational leadership and outlined that servant leaders should possess the following characteristics: relational power, humility, moral development of followers, autonomy, and emulation of leader's service orientation.

More recent conceptualizations of servant leadership suggest that servant leaders “center their efforts on helping subordinates grow to reach their maximum potential and achieve optimal organizational and career success” and that servant leadership “extends beyond the desires of the self-ego and builds a working climate that generates feelings of employee empowerment (Liden *et al.*, 2008: 163). This strong focus on development of

follower competences and facilitation of their job performance is reflected in several of the servant leadership dimensions that were suggested and empirically validated by Liden and colleagues (2008). These dimensions include “putting subordinates first”, “helping subordinates grow and succeed” as well as – explicitly - “empowering subordinates”.

As indicated in the previous section, psychological empowerment is reflected in four cognitions: meaning, impact, self-determination and competence (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). This research suggests that servant leadership can enhance every single one of these four cognitions. Servant leaders show their employees that their jobs have value and that they respect their subordinates’ beliefs. In addition, by serving their subordinates they install a strong trusting relationship which helps them reach their full potential. This enhances their sense of meaning in their workplace (Newman *et al.*, 2017). Servant leaders engage in training, supporting, coaching or mentoring activities with the aim of contributing to their subordinate’s development and job performance (Farling *et al.*, 1999). They show their followers that they possess adequate knowledge to execute their jobs and to reach their objectives. This contributes to employees’ sense of self-efficacy (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010), which corresponds to the facet of competence in psychological empowerment. Servant leaders also care about their subordinates’ viewpoints and encourage them to take part in decision making processes, thereby further increasing their confidence. Moreover, they trust that followers have the abilities to complete their work on their own and, therefore, allow them to have a significant amount of autonomy. This contributes to a sense of freedom at work which increases the cognition of self-determination (Greenleaf, 1977; Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). Finally, as servant leaders have the ability to listen to their followers and consider their ideas, the latter will sense that they can make a difference in the workplace. By allowing them to participate in decision making and showing consideration for their ideas, servant leaders make their followers feel that they are contributing to the organization’s success, thereby



increasing their perception of impact (Newman *et al.*, 2017). As servant leaders contribute to the perception of meaning, impact, self-determination and competence of their followers, the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment should be positive.

Expressed as a formal hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: Servant leadership is positively related to the psychological empowerment of hotel service employees.*

### **Openness as a predictor and moderator**

The “Big Five” (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae and Costa, 1991; Wiggins and Trapnell, 1997), which comprises openness, neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness, is one of the most agreed upon personality model. These personality traits predict outcomes such as job performance or leadership to name a few (e.g. Barrick and Mount, 2001; Soto, 2019), but these traits also moderate the relationship between the work environment and work outcomes. For instance, extraversion moderates the relationship between leader-member exchange, performance, and turnover intentions. Positive exchanges between leaders and followers only impacts leader performance when the leaders are low in extraversion (Bauer *et al.*, 2006). In a similar vein, conscientiousness moderates the relationships between psychological contract breach and outcomes such as organizational loyalty, job satisfaction, and turnover intention in such a way that the relationship is stronger for employees low in conscientiousness (Orvis *et al.*, 2008). These results demonstrate that not all the employees react in the same manner, and that the big five traits might be significant moderators to consider in explaining employee behavior and attitudes.

Simonet *et al.* (2019) have shown that personality traits predict psychological empowerment, but they did not observe nor hypothesize that openness might be related to psychological empowerment. This study contends that openness might be an overlooked antecedent of psychological empowerment and moderator of the relationship between servant

leadership and psychological empowerment. People who score high in openness are characterized as being creative, imaginative and having varied interests (McCrae and Costa, 1991). They generally welcome new experiences, ideas and are open to listening to other people's opinions (Kaufmann, 2013). Individuals high in openness are also comfortable with abstract concepts and working without specific guidelines (Kaufmann, 2013).

Referring back to the concept of psychological empowerment (which comprises self-determination, meaning, competence, and impact), this research hypothesizes that people scoring high in openness might be more likely to feel psychologically empowered. First, they value much more self-determination over obedience (Roccas *et al.*, 2002), and they like to work autonomously (Kaufman, 2013). Self-determination should therefore be higher for individuals scoring high in openness. Second, people scoring high in openness are searching for meaningfulness and responsibility through their occupation (Bipp, 2010). Third, individuals scoring high in openness tend to creatively solve new situations encountered (LePine *et al.*, 2000), and report having greater decision-making latitude than those scoring low in openness (Sutin and Costa, 2010). This should contribute to their sense of competence and impact. For these reasons, the following hypothesis is suggested:

*Hypothesis 2: Openness is positively related to the psychological empowerment of hotel service employees.*

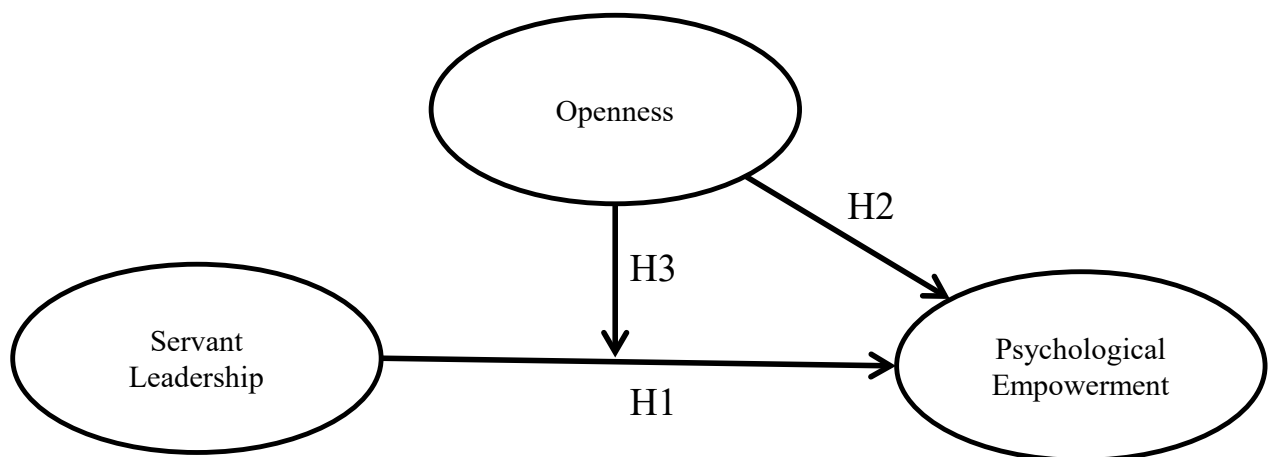
Last but not least, openness should also moderate the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment. The theoretical rationale for this moderating effect relies on the fact that personality traits help to explain why cognitive and behavioral reactions to the exact same situation differ from one person to another. Employees who score low in openness tend to value conformity more than those who score high in openness (Parks-Leduc *et al.* 2015; Roccas *et al.*, 2002). As they might feel less psychologically empowered than individuals who score high in openness, they may be less inclined to work

autonomously, and may depend more on external factors, including the way in which their leaders behave towards them. As a consequence, interaction with a servant leader will increase their feelings of meaning, impact (Newman *et al.*, 2017), competence (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010), and self-determination (Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). On the contrary, people scoring high in openness to experience tend to feel more easily psychologically empowered, i.e. they are capable of finding meaning, of feeling competent, and of perceiving impact and self-determination in their work environment without having the assistance of a servant leader. For these reasons, a moderating effect of openness on the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment is hypothesized. Formally stated:

*Hypothesis 3: Openness moderates the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment of hotel service employees in such a way that this relationship is more strongly positive for employees low in openness.*

Figure 1 summarizes the hypothesized relationships.

**Figure 1. Hypothesized model**



## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sampling and procedure**

Data for this research were collected from service employees in two five-star hotels in Europe. The sample was constituted of employees in the front-of-the house section of the hotels, including primarily front desk and concierge services. Respondents worked in stable work configurations with clearly identifiable leaders.

Survey questionnaires were prepared in an online data collection tool. With the authorization of the participating hotels' general managers, the survey links were forwarded to the front office managers of the hotels who then forwarded them to all employees. This procedure allowed for fully anonymous data collection. Questionnaires could be completed either during work time, breaks or in the respondents' free time. Respondents were assured in the online survey form that their responses would remain fully anonymous<sup>1</sup>.

With proficiency in the English language being a professional requirement for all the respondents, the entire questionnaire was prepared in English. Prior to data collection the questionnaire was pretested on a sample of five hospitality students whose demographics were similar to those of the respondents'. The purpose of this procedure was to ensure that all items were properly understood and that the questionnaire could be completed in a reasonable time frame. While the survey load was considered acceptable, minor adjustments to the introductory statements were made.

The survey was sent out to a total of 330 employees. We received 154 completed questionnaires, corresponding to a response rate of approximately 47%. 60% of the

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<sup>1</sup> The anonymous data collection procedure was conducted in accordance with the legal and ethical frameworks governing research in the geographic region where the study was conducted.

respondents were female and 40% male. The average age of respondents was 25.4 years ( $sd = 4.8$  years) and their average tenure was 2.1 years ( $sd = 1.2$  years). All of the questionnaires were fully completed so that no issues with missing data had to be addressed.

## Measures

*Servant leadership.* Servant leadership was measured with the 7-item Servant Leadership Questionnaire 7 (SLQ7) developed by Liden *et al.* (2008). Sample items are: “My leader puts my best interest above his own” and “I would seek help from my leader if I had a personal problem” ( $\alpha=.80$ ).

*Psychological empowerment.* Psychological empowerment was measured with the widely used 12-item scale developed by Spreitzer (1995), with subscales reflecting the facets of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Sample items include “I have significant influence over what happens in my department” (impact) and “I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job” (self-determination). In line with the practice recommended by Spreitzer (1995), all items were averaged to compute a single psychological empowerment score ( $\alpha=.94$ ).

*Openness.* Openness was assessed with 10 items from the big five inventory (BFI) developed by John and Srivastava (1999). Sample items include “Has an active imagination” and “Is ingenious, a deep thinker” ( $\alpha=.83$ ).

The Likert-type rating scales for all measures were anchored at “1 - strongly disagree”, and “5 - strongly agree”. Scale scores were computed by averaging the responses across all items of a scale. In addition, the study controlled for employees’ gender, age and organizational tenure in all analyses.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations among the study variables as well as their internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas). All of the internal consistency reliabilities exceeded the conventional .70 cut-off value.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	.60	.40	-					
2. Age	25.43	4.81	-.05	-				
3. Tenure	2.05	1.18	.14	.21**	-			
4. Servant Leadership	3.29	.82	-.06	.14	.08	<b>.80</b>		
5. Psychological Empowerment	3.57	.96	-.08	.22**	.11	.54**	<b>.94</b>	
6. Openness	3.36	.80	-.03	.17*	.01	.34**	.70**	<b>.83</b>

For gender: 0 = male, 1 = female. Age and Tenure measured in years.  
Bold figures on the main diagonal are scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha).  
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

The main hypotheses of this research were tested using a hierarchical multiple regression framework. SPSS Statistics (version 27) was used for all the analyses. All independent variables were standardized prior to the analysis and the product term for Servant Leadership x Openness was computed from the standard scores for both variables. Table 2 shows results for the hierarchical regression with psychological empowerment as dependent variable.

**Table 2. Results of regression models**

	Step 1 Controls only			Step 2 Main effects			Step 3 Interaction effect		
	Estimate	t	p	Estimate	t	p	Estimate	t	p
<i>Gender</i>	-.08	-.99	.32	-.05	-.92	.36	-.04	-.67	.51
<i>Age</i>	.20	2.49	.01	.06	1.18	.24	.06	1.18	.24
<i>Tenure</i>	.08	1.00	.32	.08	1.40	.16	.07	1.39	.17
Servant Leadership				.32	5.90	.00	.34	6.21	.00
Openness				.58	10.56	.00	.57	10.45	.00
Servant Leadership x Openness							-.12	-2.25	.03
R <sup>2</sup>			.06			.61			.62
$\Delta R^2$			.06			.55			.01
F			3.23*			46.13**			40.34**

Dependent variable: Psychological empowerment

Estimates are standardized regression coefficients (betas).

For gender: 0 = male, 1 = female. Age and Tenure measured in years.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

*Hypothesis 1* suggested that servant leadership is positively related to the psychological empowerment of hotel service employees. In addition, *Hypothesis 2* predicted that openness is positively related to the psychological empowerment of hotel service employees. To test these hypotheses, the hierarchical regression proceeded with two initial steps. In Step 1 only control variables were entered. The main effects model in Step 2 shows that both servant leadership ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and openness ( $\beta = .58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) are significantly positively associated with psychological empowerment. These results provide support for *Hypotheses 1 and 2*.

For *Hypothesis 1*, the results suggest that servant leadership is positively associated with psychological empowerment. In practical terms, this means that employees who rate their leaders as higher in servant leadership will tend to perceive a greater level of

psychological empowerment as compared to those who rate their leaders lower in servant leadership.

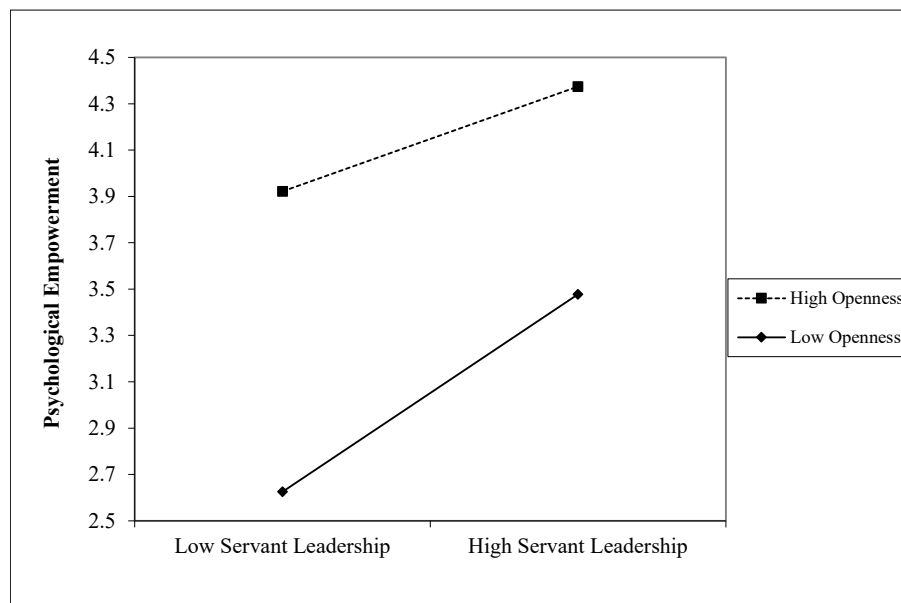
For *Hypothesis 2*, the results show that openness is also positively associated with psychological empowerment. From a practical viewpoint, this means that employees who rate themselves as higher in openness will tend to perceive a greater level of psychological empowerment as compared to those who rate themselves lower in openness.

Finally, *Hypothesis 3* stated that openness moderates the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment of hotel service employees in such a way that this relationship is more strongly positive for employees low in openness. To test this hypothesis, the product term for the two variables was added in Step 3 of the hierarchical regression. The results suggest a significant interaction ( $\beta = -.12, p < .05$ ) between servant leadership and openness in predicting psychological empowerment. This result provides support for *Hypothesis 3* in the sense of a significant interaction between servant leadership and psychological empowerment.

In order to allow for an interpretation of the exact shape of the interaction effect, the simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the mean were plotted, following the customary procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991). The plot was established with the utility developed by Dawson (2014). The plot is represented in Figure 2 and illustrates that for low levels of openness the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment is more strongly positive than for high levels of openness. For *Hypothesis 3*, the compensatory type of interaction observed means that the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment is stronger for employees scoring lower on openness than for those scoring higher on this trait.



**Figure 2. Interaction plot**



Last but not least, in order to determine the significance of the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment at both low and high levels of the moderator, the significance of simple slopes was tested with a web utility developed by Preacher *et al.* (2006). The simple slope for the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment at one standard deviation below the mean for openness was .43 and it was statistically significant ( $t = 6.02, p < .01$ ). At one standard deviation above the mean for openness the simple slope was .23 and it was also statistically significant ( $t = 3.20, p < .01$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

The three main objectives of this research were a) to assess the role of servant leadership as a predictor of psychological empowerment in hospitality employees, b) to assess the role of openness as a predictor of psychological empowerment in hospitality employees

and c) to test for a moderating effect of openness on the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment. Current findings suggest that the three main objectives have been reached. Below we will discuss the implications for each of these findings for research as well as their practical implications.

First, our results show that servant leadership is positively associated with hotel service employees' psychological empowerment. This result contributes to filling the research gap with regard to the consequences of servant leadership for psychological empowerment. The construct of servant leadership has recently been examined in two separate meta-analyses (Hoch *et al.*, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2020). The studies have highlighted that servant leadership is distinct from other forms of leadership (e.g. transformational leadership) and predicts work outcomes, such as task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors, above and beyond other forms of leadership. There is little research, however, linking servant leadership to empowerment. Of the existing studies investigating this link, many have been purely conceptual (e.g. Gupta, 2014; Fischer and Schultz, 2017; Jeyaraj and Gandolfi, 2019). Others have not investigated the relationship directly but only via an additional path through structural empowerment (Allen *et al.*, 2018) or have found limited support in combination with parts of the model that were unsupported (Newman *et al.*, 2017). This study provides clear evidence for a positive relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment among hospitality service employees. These results enhance current knowledge about the leadership-empowerment relationship beyond what is already known with regard to empowering leadership, transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX). Practically speaking, our results suggest that when leaders put their own ego aside, signal to their followers that they sincerely care about their personal development and success and actively serve and support their subordinates,

they will reap benefits in the form of increased follower empowerment, which in turn will lead to a host of beneficial outcomes for the leaders and the organization.

Second, our results also show that openness is positively associated with hotel service employees' psychological empowerment. Employees who score high on openness value autonomy and self-determination, are creative and thrive in situations where they need to perform without specific guidelines or instructions. Practically speaking, this suggests that openness may be a highly relevant personality trait when organizations want to select employees or assign employees to positions where a high level of psychological empowerment is desirable.

Third, our results suggest that openness moderates the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment in such a way that the relationship is stronger for employees who are low in openness. This is a potentially even more interesting finding than the underlying main effects of servant leadership and openness. Other research has explored potential moderators of the relationship between servant leadership and important work outcomes. For instance, Lee *et al.* (2020) have shown that employee tenure can serve as a moderator. Specifically, in their study, servant leadership was found to be more beneficial for employee with longer tenure than for those with shorter tenure. The present study provides additional knowledge about the moderating factors that play a role in the relationship between servant leadership and job outcomes. We suggested a compensatory relationship between servant leadership and openness, i.e. it was expected that the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment would be stronger for individuals low in openness. This hypothesis was based on the idea that low openness would make employees more receptive to the empowering signals sent by servant leaders and more willing to change their perceptions about the degrees of freedom and potential for initiative their work environment provides them with. When employees who score low in openness interact with a

servant leader who treats them with respect, is attentive to their needs, provides them with developmental opportunities and encourages them to get involved in decision making, they may be prompted to be more attentive to the potential for empowered action. Servant leadership will make such opportunities more salient for these employees, strengthen their belief that they can succeed by taking initiative and thereby make them more inclined to change their workplace perceptions.

Even if this study demonstrates that openness is a positive predictor of psychological empowerment, the question remains open on the role of other personality traits. Simonet *et al.* (2019) have asserted that personality has been a neglected predictor of psychological empowerment. Their study has also demonstrated that personality predictors of psychological empowerment might be different for each sample (agreeableness in employed college students, and extraversion for working adults recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk). This difference might arise due to the very specific sample observed in this study. As there are poor conditions of employment in the hospitality industry (characterized by monotonous jobs, low pay and benefits, long and irregular hours, rigid "hierarchical" style of management; Kuslivan *et al.*, 2010), employees low in openness might be more inclined to passively accept these conditions, whereas those scoring high might be more likely to feel empowered.

### **Implications for practice and recommendations**

The results of this study have a number of relevant implications for managerial practice in the hospitality industry. Fundamentally, they highlight the value and importance of engaging in servant leadership in a service context where empowerment of service employees is a desirable outcome. Hospitality firms that have institutionalized empowerment programs and have made empowerment part of their organizational culture may want to include the aspect of servant leadership in their criteria for promotion to leadership positions and as part

of their ongoing leadership development activities. For instance, individuals who are agreeable are more likely to act as servant leaders with their followers (Washington *et al.*, 2006). In addition, the moderating effect of openness suggests that leaders should engage in a situationally flexible use of their servant leadership behaviors and focus more strongly on individuals they perceive to be low in openness, as these are likely to benefit the most from servant leadership.

Hospitality firms may also support their leaders to become more aware of the benefits of servant leadership by offering specific leadership training that illustrates the key behaviors of servant leaders. Leadership development programs that focus specifically on servant leadership behaviors teach leaders to develop psychological capital in their subordinates by maintaining frequent interactions with them, listening to them, supporting them, showing trust towards them and involving them in participative decision-making. In addition to training these specific behaviors, servant leadership development also involves the development of leaders' positive attitudes towards servant leadership and motivating them to apply this approach in their daily work (Lohrey and Guillaume, 2015).

With regard to training, and considering that servant leadership encompasses a range of different attributes, including “emotional healing”, “creating value for the community”, “conceptual skills”, “empowering”, “helping subordinates grow and succeed”, “putting subordinates first”, “behaving ethically”, it has to be noted that not all of these aspects can be trained. Leader personality plays a significant role in regards to servant leadership. For instance, previous research suggests that CEOs' level of narcissism is negatively related to their servant leadership (Peterson *et al.*, 2012). This relationship can obviously not be mitigated through training.

However, leaders may be trained more specifically on the aspects of “empowering” and “helping subordinates grow and succeed”. Leaders can be given regular information

sessions on job openings available in their hotel in order to be able to coach their subordinates for future job opportunities. They might be also specifically trained on how to use performance appraisals as an employee development method rather than an employee assessment approach (Boswell and Boudreau, 2000). Finally, leaders can be encouraged to involve employees in decision-making, to help them in setting challenging yet meaningful goals (Conger and Pearce, 2009), and help them in job crafting (Tims and Bakker, 2010), which involves intentional changes made by employees concerning job demands and resources.

Research has shown that specific leadership skills can be improved with well-designed interventions (e.g., Brown and May, 2012; Dvir *et al.*, 2002). The first stage in servant leadership training would be for participating managers to identify the value of servant leadership by understanding its impact on metrics such as employee performance, engagement, well-being, and turnover. Trainers might use recent research on servant leadership to build their presentation (e.g., Eva *et al.*, 2019). The second stage might comprise self-assessments and informant reports on managers' servant leadership skills with existing and validated measures (e.g., Liden *et al.*, 2008). Third, through group discussions and one-to-one discussions with the trainers, the participating managers should identify specific behaviors they could improve and set challenging yet attainable goals. Once these goals are defined, managers should communicate them to their leaders and subordinates to increase accountability. Changes do not happen overnight, and regular sessions should be organized over a period of time ranging from six months to one year to monitor progress towards self-set goals. Based on the obstacles reported by the participating managers, role plays can be organized, and trainers should solicit peer feedback among participants.

Last but not least, openness was a significant predictor of psychological empowerment. From a selection viewpoint, this suggests that hospitality organizations that

want to strengthen empowerment and are willing to include psychometric tests as part of their selection process may want to look out for job candidates' levels of openness as one important criterion in the selection of service personnel. Among the many personality inventories that can be used by practitioners, there are the NEO-PI-3 (McRae and Costa, 2010), the Hogan Personality Inventory (Hogan and Hogan, 2007), and the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (Bartram *et al.*, 2006). These instruments are widely used and have sound psychometric qualities. In replacement or in addition to these psychometric instruments, recruiters might try to infer applicants' level of openness by paying attention to their vocabulary (Yarkoni, 2010), or by asking questions regarding their hobbies (Chapman and Goldberg, 2017) or musical tastes (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2003). Even if these types of questions might not be job-related, they might offer insights about applicants' level of openness. If candidates read books or listen to classical music, these pieces of information might reflect higher openness.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

Like all research, this study has a number of limitations. It relies on cross-sectional data and, therefore, causal interpretations have to be made with caution. However, the strong theoretical rationale for a positive relationship between servant leadership and empowerment supports the idea that causality flows from leader behavior to follower cognitions of the workplace rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, future research should replicate these results using either experimental or longitudinal designs.

In addition, the data were collected in a single industry and in the specific context of two hotel properties in two European countries. It may be that openness is only a predictor of psychological empowerment in hospitality industry contexts. In the light of extant research demonstrating cultural contingencies of empowerment (e.g., Raub and Robert, 2013; Robert

*et al.*, 2000) trust in the external validity of this study's results would be strengthened by replications in different cultural contexts and industries.

Last but not least, this study was focused on psychological empowerment as the sole outcome variable. Future studies should ascertain the role of openness as a moderating variable between servant leadership and behavioral outcomes (including task performance or organizational citizenship behaviors). It would be interesting to see whether the interaction also holds beyond the attitudinal outcomes (psychological empowerment) investigated in this study.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to assess whether servant leadership predicts psychological empowerment in hospitality service employees. In addition, it set out to investigate the role of employees' degree of openness as a predictor of psychological empowerment and as a moderator of the relationship between servant leadership and psychological empowerment. The results confirm that these objectives were achieved. They suggest that both servant leadership and openness are positively related to service employees' psychological empowerment. In addition, they interact in a compensatory way such that a higher degree of openness can make up for a lack of servant leadership and vice versa.

This research addresses a topic of unquestionable importance for the competitive success of hospitality firms. It should enhance the understanding of the complex relationships between leader behaviors and follower cognitions of empowerment and provide starting points for hospitality leaders and hospitality human resources managers to further strengthen employee empowerment. They should be rewarded with more energized and autonomous employees, and a higher quality of service encounters.



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