



# The Relationship between Supervisors' Servant Leadership and Police Officers' Job Satisfaction

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## **Abstract**

*Recent police killings of unarmed African Americans in the United States and the subsequent protests and demonstrations against police brutality have resulted in more focus on the importance of collaborative relationships between law enforcement agencies and their communities. This quantitative correlational research study was conducted in one southern United States police department that incorporated a servant leadership philosophy, including its leaders being publicly heralded for their servant leadership practices that positively impacted its relationship with its community. The study examined if a relationship existed between perceived servant leadership of law enforcement leaders and line police officers' job satisfaction. The study's participants  $n=31$  completed the Servant Leadership Scale to measure servant leadership characteristics and Job Descriptive Index to measure employee job satisfaction. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between servant leadership and employee job satisfaction of the police officers in the department.*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Police Officers' Job Satisfaction

Weeks of protests, marches, and demonstrations against police brutality, police racism, and lack of police accountability erupted around the United States and the world following the May 25, 2020 videotaped police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed civilian. Scrutiny aimed at policing philosophy, especially against communities of color, and training of law enforcement officers began in the first half of the decade, triggered by police killings of Trayvon Martin (2012), Michael Brown, Jr. (2014), Eric Garner (2014), Tamir Rice (2014) and Freddie Gray (2015). Long-standing concerns associated with the lack of positive relationships between some police officers and especially African American communities have led to calls for the transformation from a “warrior” culture to a “guardian” culture (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). However, some might argue that those calls for a change in culture resulted in no subsequent action or no sufficient realization in the past five years. Innovative theories such as servant leadership and community-oriented policing have long been espoused and experimented with to various degrees. This exploratory, descriptive study was conducted in one southern United States police department that incorporated a servant leadership philosophy, couched within community-oriented policing guidelines, which positively impacted its relationship with its community. We sought to determine whether the department’s espoused servant leadership culture had the result of strong job satisfaction. Police departments provide a very important role in the community, including providing safety and security for citizens, therefore an understanding of servant leadership and job satisfaction is an important contribution to the literature. Our study is designed to support a more intense direction for realization of these philosophies in-practice in the future.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Currently, the traditional response-driven policing philosophy has been replaced with other policing philosophies that build trust within their communities (Lumb & Metz, 2019). Having “become accustomed to the term ‘police service’ rather than ‘police force’ ...there is little doubt that ... [service is] the desired relationship between police and public” (Edwards, 2005, p. 296). In alignment with this notion of service, two popular policing movements have surfaced in the last three decades: community-oriented policing (COP) and problem-oriented policing (POP). The COP movement stresses the importance of building and sustaining “partnerships between the police and the community, while emphasizing problem-solving approaches, to improve overall quality of life for citizens” (Crowl, 2017, p. 449). The POP philosophy requires line officers to identify and target problems with a pre-emptive approach to lessen the need to respond to potential criminal activity that would require formal police intervention (Goldstein, 2015).

Often when organizations, in general, and a police department, in particular for this study, implement new operational strategies, the change is not only difficult, but often rejected by the line officers (Adams, Rohe, & Arcury, 2002). As such, our attention was drawn to various leadership styles that have been used to support these changes in law enforcement. Modern research supports a change in law enforcement to more inclusive and democratic leadership styles (Andreescu & Vito, 2010; Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013). Findings from an earlier study (Bruns & Shuman, 1988) revealed that officers had a preference for a more benevolent-authoritative, participative leadership style. Among Machiavellian, bureaucratic, and transformational leadership styles, a transformational style was preferred, especially as officers become more experienced (Girodo, 1998). In more recent cases, training in servant leadership—associated with improvement in officers' well-being—has been requested by line officers and their administrators (Jones-Burbridge, 2012; Russell, Broome & Russell, 2018; Vito, Suresh, & Richards, 2011). In this study, we sought to determine the perceptions of police line officers regarding the servant leadership of their supervisors, and the satisfaction of these line officers with their positions as their police department went through a change to a more participative leadership style. We chose a police department known for success in implementing this philosophy according to the assertions of its citizens and the department itself.

### **American Policing**

The three distinct eras of American policing—the political era, reform era, and the community problem-solving era—may be distinguished from one another, in large part, based upon operational approaches, policing styles, and strategies and tactics deployed (Schmallegger, 2017). In the political era, from the 1840s to the 1900s, American policing was decentralized and highly personalized, with authority and power typically derived from local politicians, aimed at crime control rather than prevention (Kelling & Moore, 1988; Wilson, 1978). Due to close neighborhood connections, police served their communities by running soup lines, finding housing and work for arriving immigrants, and providing various other social services. Unfortunately, despite these apparent positives, political ties and lack of leadership and organizational oversight resulted in discriminatory law enforcement practices and police corruption.

In the Reform Era that followed in the 1930s, a legalistic style of policing emerged, with officers focusing on policing serious crimes (such as murder, robbery, and burglary). Police success was measured through rapid response times and the number of arrests made, reactive strategies, and on strictly enforcing the law, resulting in paying less attention to minor offenses (Schmallegger, 2017; Sykes, 1986; Weisburd & Eck, 2004). Efforts to lessen political ties and discriminatory

practices from policing, led to banning officers from living in the areas they patrolled, hoping to support more impartial, impersonal and professional crime solvers. Also, detailed instruction manuals prescribed the expected routines and appropriate actions for any given situation (Sparrow, 1988). A rise in crime beginning in the 1960s, with the Civil Rights movement, and Anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, led to a perception of ineffective policing, social disorder, and increased fear of crime in communities. However, finally a realization that fear of crime had more to do with social disorder than actual levels of crime, resulted in renewed community-focused policing (Bayley, 1988).

The community and problem-solving era began in the 1970s, with the belief that proactive strategies and effective community partnerships might prevent and solve crimes, and remains relatively popular today (Stein & Griffith, 2017). Characterized by a service style of policing, police agencies directly solicit citizen input to identify and solve those underlying social problems that cause crime (Braga, Papachristos, & Hureau, 2014; Jackson, 2006; Morabito, 2010; Sherman, Gartin, & Buerger, 1989; Weisburd, Bushway, Lum, & Yang, 2004). Strategies include, but are not limited to, aiding the sick and distraught, organizing community crime prevention programs, and referring persons to domestic violence centers or drug abuse programs rather than making arrests (Moore & Trojanowicz, 1988). Although the crime reducing effects of community-oriented policing are limited, some researchers have found increased citizen satisfaction and trust in police (Sherman & Eck, 2002; Skogan & Frydl, 2004).

To increase police and community interaction and problem solving, community policing requires organizational decentralization, with more flattened hierarchical police departments, and the increased use of participative management which provides more professional development of frontline officers to support their involvement in more decision making (Cordner, 1999; Trojanowicz, Kappeler, Gaines, & Bucqueroux, 1998). Police leaders must be able to facilitate and maintain partnerships between officers and the communities they serve in an effort to establish and maintain peaceful neighborhoods (Kochel, 2012; Silver & Miller, 2004).

These changes in policing initially led to resistance by community members and by police themselves as they feared cultural change (Bohm, Reynolds, & Holms, 2000; Stone & Travis, 2011; Weisburd, Mastrofski, McNally, Greenspan, & Willis, 2003). However, according to Williams (2002), the implementation of both servant leadership and community policing encourages trust-building, diverse group integration, and empowerment. Often requiring heavy investment in retraining, seminars, and retreats, middle managers must be coached and reeducated, and police leaders must convince line officers to see themselves

differently (Oettmeier & Wycoff, 1994; Trojanowicz, Kappeler, Gaines, & Bucqueroux, 1998).

### **Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership was defined by Robert Greenleaf (1991) in his seminal essay, as “the servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (p. 13). One key test to the implementation of this leadership theory is what Greenleaf identifies as the best test for servant leadership, which is whether those who are served grow as persons (Greenleaf, 2002). Servant leadership practice has found merit, resulting in positive organizational outcomes, and has been adopted by some of the most recognizable and profitable companies in the United States, such as Marriott, Wal-Mart, Chick-Fil-A, Southwest Airlines, and AFLAC ([modernservantleader.com](http://modernservantleader.com)).

Servant leadership has also been extensively studied (Yigit & Bozkurt, 2017), yet researchers have not found consensus on one definition and have used various theoretical models and assessment instruments to test the construct (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Dierendonck & Liden, 2019). Each of these instruments have key characteristics, and researchers have advanced various theoretical models seeking to test the antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes of servant leadership. While they all have merit, the theory of servant leadership used in this study was developed by Liden, Wayne, Zhao and Henderson (2008). Their servant leadership construct includes seven factors of servant leadership, with a focus on character and behaviors, and also on determination of other concerns and conceptual skills: (a) emotional healing, (b) creating value for the community, (c) helping subordinates grow and succeed, (d) conceptual skills, (e) putting subordinates first, (f) behaving ethically, and (g) empowering. We believe that this best reflects critical police department attributes and is consistent with established literature.

### **Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction has been described as “an affective (i.e., emotional) reaction to one’s job, resulting from the incumbent’s comparison of actual outcomes with those that are desired (expected, deserved, and so on)” (Cranny, Smith & Stone, 1992). It has also been defined as the feelings individuals have for their jobs (Brodke et al., 2009), how individuals appraise their jobs based on a pleasurable or positive state of emotion (Osbourne, 2015), and an attitude people have about liking or disliking their jobs (Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1975).

Job satisfaction has also been extensively studied because when positive, it can lead to positive organizational outcomes, such as higher job performance (Guo, Li, & Wu, 2015). Job satisfaction can also serve as a buffer against high turnover in the workplace and other negative influences such as stress (van Saane, Sluiter,

Verbeek, & Frings-Dresen, 2003). On the other hand, low levels of job satisfaction can adversely affect job performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono & Patton, 2001). Research also shows that poor levels of job satisfaction in law enforcement can “indirectly impact police-community relations by portraying a negative image of the police and adversely affect the quality of services and damage their image in the public” (Lokesh, Patra, & Venkatesan, 2016, p. 56). Despite the importance of job satisfaction, studies in police departments have been sparse (Lokesh et al., 2016).

### **Servant Leadership and Job Satisfaction**

Given the interest in servant leadership and the importance of job satisfaction, it has been important to study these concepts together. Researchers have found servant leadership being significantly positively related to positive work outcomes such as job satisfaction (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), turnover intention (Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko & Roberts, 2009), employee job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors (Parris & Peachy, 2015). Servant leadership has also shown a higher correlation with job satisfaction, than ethical, authentic, and transformational leadership (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2015).

### **Coppell Police Department**

In 2011, when Mac Tristan took the helm as the new Chief of the City of Coppell Police Department, the department was going through a pivotal time in its history. The department was reeling from at least three issues: (a) the murder of the mayor’s daughter and the subsequent suicide of the mayor, (b) public criticism for lack of adequate training in the department, and (c) an external investigation of allegations of theft of drug money by some Coppell police officers (Lucero, 2011). The three-prong policing and management philosophy introduced by Chief Tristan for the Coppell Police Department brought together the critical elements of community policing, and servant leadership in giving consideration to the humanity of the police at every level and the citizens they serve (Tristan, 2012). Servant leadership as employed in the Coppell Police Department capitalized on creating value for the community, empowering the police officers, helping them to grow and succeed, and behaving ethically (Green, Rodriguez, Wheeler, Baggerly-Hinojosa, 2015). Almost eight years after he started, Chief Tristan proclaimed, “We have changed everything about how we police our community. Today we look different, we behave different and we police with a purpose; with a servant leadership mindset” (Staff Report, *Coppell Gazette*, 2018).

The Coppell Police Department’s servant leadership culture gained attention from its citizens, various media outlets, researchers and attendees at

various conferences (Atterberry, 2018; Isenberg, 2016). For example, the authors were intrigued by a presentation from Coppell PD at the 2017 Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership conference. In that presentation, Chief Tristan and a representative group of line officers shared how much the department had changed, based on developing and sustaining servant leadership principles. The officers asserted that community relations had improved and that they had positive impressions of their daily police work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Setting**

The research setting for this study is the City of Coppell Police Department, Coppell, TX, USA, with 49 police officers serving the community. Coppell is 14.7 square miles, located about 20 miles from Dallas, TX. It has 15,212 households, and 41,290 residents who are 63% white, 25% Asian and 6% African American (2019 Adjusted Claritas with NCTCOG Population Estimates). The median household income is \$127,934, placing it as one of the wealthiest cities in Texas.

### **Population and Sample**

Two members of the research team met with the senior leadership Coppell PD to introduce the research project and answer any questions and hear examples of their servant leadership stories. Although there were 49 police officers at the time of the study, nine (9) persons serving in higher-level management roles were not asked to directly participate in the study: the five-member Command Staff (Chief, two Deputy Chiefs, and two Captains) and four others serving in the roles of Deputy Chief or Captains for the Support Services, Investigations, or Patrol Divisions. Five mid-level supervisors in the ranks of sergeant or corporal, 35 line/patrol officers, and five traffic officers were invited to participate via email ( $N = 40$ ). Presentation of the study was made to the line officers in two groups early in the morning as one shift closed, and the other was beginning. Sample questions were shared as well as clarification that the questionnaires would be sent via email the following day. Since we asked the officers to assess their leader with respect to servant leadership, anonymity of the responses was important. We addressed this by assuring the officers that their responses would be kept confidential, and that they could complete the questionnaires at their convenience via the link provided in their emailed invitations.

Thirty-three of the 40 mid-level supervisors and line officers indicated a desire to participate in the study and submitted the requested questionnaires (described below); however two potential participants were removed from consideration since all three questionnaires were not complete. Consequently, we

obtained a total of  $n = 31$  participants, resulting in an overall response rate of 77.5%. Most responses were from male officers (93.5%), the majority of which were identified by race as White (81.3%), and many were 36 years of age or older (68.8%). Educational attainment data revealed that 46.9% had a bachelor's degree and 37.2% had less than four years of college or associate degrees. In terms of policing experience, about half (48.4%) of the participants had been in policing for 10 years or less, and the rest (51.6%) had more than 10 years of policing experience. For policing experience specifically in Coppell, about 58% had 10 years or less of policing experience, and about 42% had over 10 years' experience. In considering the relatively small sample size ( $n = 31$ ) and seemingly high levels of homogeneity in the sample for race, gender, policing experience, and education, the researchers opted to consider this study as a purely descriptive study, exploratory in nature. Consequently, multiple-regression analyses were not performed. Furthermore, the small number of items per level in the instruments used for measuring components of servant leadership or job satisfaction led to rejection of t-test analyses as well.

### **Instrumentation**

Participants completed three measures that were used for this study. The first was a general demographic questionnaire, which captured age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, the officers' overall years in policing, and years in policing in the Coppell Police Department. The other two measures were questionnaires for line officers and mid-level supervisors to share their perceptions of their immediate supervisor as a servant leader, and their perceptions of their satisfaction with their current job with Coppell Police Department.

We assessed line officers' perceptions of the servant leadership of their supervisors using the *Servant Leadership Scale* (Liden et al., 2008). The SLS is a 28-item questionnaire, which evaluates seven concepts with seven items each that are characteristic of servant leaders: (a) conceptual skills ( $\alpha = .94$ ), (b) empowering others ( $\alpha = .95$ ), (c) helping subordinates grow and succeed ( $\alpha = .96$ ), (d) putting subordinates first ( $\alpha = .94$ ), (e) behaving ethically ( $\alpha = .95$ ), (f) emotional healing ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and (g) creating value for the community ( $\alpha = .90$ ). We chose this psychometrically sound measure among the validated servant leadership scales because it best captured the servant leadership attributes important to police department roles. Examples of survey items are: "He/She does what he/she can to make others' jobs easier" and "He/She holds high ethical standards." Each item is rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha in the current study was .96.

We assessed line officers' feelings of job satisfaction using the *Job Descriptive Index (JDI)* (Department of Psychology at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, 2009). The JDI is a 72-item questionnaire of five



facets that measure job satisfaction with specific aspects of a job: (a) coworkers or people on the job ( $\alpha = .91$ ), (b) work on the present job ( $\alpha = .89$ ), (c) pay ( $\alpha = .93$ ), (d) opportunities for promotion ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and (e) supervision ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Example of survey items are: "Think of the kind of supervision that you get on your job. How well does each of the following words or phrases describe this? Supportive. Hard to please. Impolite. Praises good work." Each item is rated based upon a three-choice response: Yes, No, Cannot Decide. Cronbach's alpha of the JDI facets in the current study ranged from .89 to .93 as indicated above.

Included with the JDI, is the *Job in General (JIG)* questionnaire, used to further assess job satisfaction as a single construct. The JIG is an 18-item questionnaire that also measures job satisfaction, yet in a broader, more general sense by asking participants their overall satisfaction with the job. Example of a survey item is: "Think of your job in general. All in all, what is it like most of the time? Pleasant. Bad. Great Waste of time." Cronbach's alpha in the current study was .95.

## FINDINGS

The researchers used Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze the data. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among servant leadership subscales and job satisfaction. Cronbach alpha statistics were reported earlier in the sections describing the measurement tools. The data shows that line officers in the Coppell Police Department perceive their supervisors as servant leaders overall, and on each of the seven components identified earlier. In a range of 0.0 (no relationship) to 1.0 (strongest possible relationship) the correlations ( $r$ ) ranged from  $r = 0.542$  (emotional healing) to  $r = .901$  (subordinates grow and succeed). Each result was statistically significant. Also, there is a statistically significant relationship between the line officers' perceptions of their leaders as servant leaders, and their overall job satisfaction in general, where  $r = .656$ .

The means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among job satisfaction subscales and overall servant leadership are presented in Table 2. The data shows that line officers in the Coppell Police Department are satisfied overall with their jobs, and with each facet previously identified, except pay (although  $r = .313$  was not statistically significant). Three areas comparing job satisfaction subsets did not show statistically significant results: pay and work on present job ( $r = .304$ ), promotion and pay ( $r = .226$ ) and supervision and promotion ( $r = .351$ ).

Table 1  
*Means, standard deviations, and correlations of Servant Leadership (SL-28 Subscales) and Job Satisfaction*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
SL	22.03	6.03							
1. CS	23.39	5.43							
2. E	22.26	6.09	.62***						
3. SG	21.97	6.58	.90***	.72***					
4. SF	19.58	6.17	.87***	.63***	.82***				
5. EB	24.29	5.40	.85***	.62***	.75***	.85***			
6. EH	22.03	5.98	.91***	.54**	.86***	.86***	.76**		
7. CV	20.68	5.84	.84***	.66***	.81***	.80***	.76***	.80***	
JiG	49.32	10.54	.79***	.31	.61***	.54**	.65***	.69***	.66***

*Note:*  $N = 31$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Key:

1. CS = Conceptual skills
2. E = Empowering
3. SG = Subordinates grow and succeed
4. SF = Subordinates first
5. EB = Ethical behavior
6. EH = Emotional healing
7. CV = Creating value for the community
8. SL = Servant Leadership
9. JiG = Job in General (Job Satisfaction)

Table 2  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Job Satisfaction (JDI Subscales) and Servant Leadership*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	JiG
JDI Facets								
1. People on Job	44.48	11.98						
2. Work on Present Job	45.20	10.30	.61***					
3. Pay	42.58	16.62	.57***	.30				
4. Promotion	27.61	18.37	.40*	.49**	.23			
5. Supervision	44.48	11.23	.63***	.66***	.38**	.35		
Job in General (JiG)	49.32	10.54	.77***	.68***	.31	.41*	.54**	
Servant Leadership	22.03	6.03	.71***	.50**	.55**	.41*	.76***	.66***

*Note:*  $N = 31$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

Our results show that the line officers of Coppell Police Department perceive their supervisors as servant leaders, and they are satisfied with their jobs overall. Since the job facets with relatively low correlations were not statistically significant, it would appear that the issues of pay and work on the present job, supervision and promotion, and promotion and pay are not major issues with the line officers.

The strength of the current study is that we collected data directly from the line officers on their perceptions of the servant leadership of their supervisors. About 40% of the officers were hired prior to Chief Tristan's hiring, and therefore had perspectives prior to the introduction of servant leadership. This proportion provides a good mix of perspectives from both groups. Survey information reported by the officers appeared conclusive based upon their stories (narratives) they shared during the introductory group interviews, and the responses of the community in various news stories (in print and in other available media). However, no additional qualitative information was gathered in this study during the initial exploratory phase of the investigation to help provide tangible, specific actions by superiors thought to be indicative of servant leaders. Further study is encouraged in this area.

Another limitation of our study is that we collected data of servant leadership and job satisfaction from line officers in one single police department. This could raise the question as to whether the findings were generalizable and applicable to other police departments. This is especially questionable, given the small size of the City of Coppell, and its high median household income. In comparison, the Dallas-Ft. Worth-Arlington, Texas metro area, with over 7 million people, had a median household income of less than half that of Coppell (2017). However, this was a descriptive and exploratory field study to examine phenomenon in one specific police department that espoused and implemented servant leadership. A claim to be substantiated in a future phase of this research might be that servant leadership was an implemented and infused innovation in light of the adoption of servant leadership for other aspects of city government in Coppell. Therefore, while this study provides preliminary data, it may be useful in implementing servant leadership in larger police departments in more populated cities.

Another observation is that the servant leadership culture of the Coppell Police Department can be attributable to the introduction of the concept to the department by the Chief of Police in 2011. In December 2018, this architect of the change in the department retired, and was replaced by a new chief (<http://www.coppelltx.gov/news-media/news/coppellnamesnewchiefofpolice>). As the new chief, former Deputy Chief Barton, served under Chief Tristan, and embraced the philosophy of servant leadership. Early signs indicated the spirit of servant leadership continues. Further study could be done to validate our findings. Nevertheless, from a practical standpoint, the finding of this study is useful to organizations that seek to model the practices of Coppell Police Department in creating a culture of servant leadership.

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