negotiation and conflict management research

Negotiation and Conflict Management Research

Servant Leadership, Third-Party Behavior, and Emotional Exhaustion of Followers

Innocentina-Marie O. Obi [1], Katalien Bollen,[1] Hillie Aaldering [2], Wouter Robijn[1] and Martin C. Euwema [1]

1 Department of Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Professional Learning, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
2 Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Keywords
servant leadership, female leadership, third-party behaviors, team conflict, emotional exhaustion.

Correspondence
Innocentina-Marie O. Obi, Department of Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Professional Learning, Dekenstraat 2, Bus 3725, BE-3000 Leuven, Belgium; e-mail: Innocentina.obi@kuleuven.be.

doi: 10.1111/ncmr.12184

Abstract

Conflicts are ubiquitous in all life's domain where people live and perform interdependent tasks, including convents. Managing conflicts among followers is an essential responsibility of leaders. The way leaders behave while managing such conflicts have received little academic attention; available studies have focused on business contexts. This study aimed to examine the relationship between servant leadership, and emotional exhaustion through team conflicts, and further investigates the mediating role of leaders' third-party conflict behaviors such as avoiding, forcing, and problem-solving. Data were gathered from 453 religious sisters (followers), in 166 convents, in a Catholic Women Religious Institute mostly based in Nigeria. Structural equation modeling confirmed that servant leadership was associated with reduced team conflicts through leaders' third-party behaviors. Further findings showed that perceived servant leadership was negatively related to emotional exhaustion through a nonforcing expression. We discussed theoretical and practical implications.

Introduction

Conflicts are a reality in all domains of life such as religious communities, work, organizations, and family settings. Conflicts occur between two or more individuals when at least one party feels irritated, obstructed or frustrated by the other(s) due to incompatibility of interests or needs, values or goals (Elgoibar, Euwema, & Munduate, 2017). In teams, conflicts arise when there are perceived differences among team members, which can have detrimental impacts (De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012) on team well-being. In organizational settings, also in local religious communities, or convents, conflicts occur at two levels: hierarchical, between a leader and (one or more of) the religious sisters, and among religious sisters. Specifically, given the interdependent and interactive nature of community life, conflicts in the local religious communities may happen due to incompatibility of interests, viewpoints, and diverse personalities, limited resources, and defending individuals' position. Similarly, Rahim (2002) highlighted that conflicts occur among individuals due to limited resources, different beliefs, and opinions.

We consider four conflict types in this study—relationship, task, process, and status conflicts (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001), which will be aggregated into a single variable of team conflicts. Meta-analytic findings by De Wit et al. (2012) showed that task conflict during the brainstorming or idea generation phase is beneficial; however, the benefit diminishes if dispute management is not constructive. Unresolved conflicts typically have detrimental effects on individuals' well-being as evidenced by stress, psychosomatic complaints, anxiety, anger and tension, sadness, and guilt (Bendersky & Hays, 2012;

Bollen & Euwema, 2015; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Dijkstra, Van Dierendonck, Evers, & De Dreu, 2005; Rispens & Demerouti, 2016; Römer, Rispens, Giebels, & Euwema, 2012). Conflicts are associated with reduced performance (Bendersky & Hays, 2012) and increased emotional exhaustion (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). They can be harmful to team outcomes (Costa, Passos, & Bakker, 2015) if not properly managed. Therefore, leaders' ability to effectively manage followers' conflicts is crucial for followers' well-being.

Research has associated specific leadership behaviors to conflictmanagement, indicating the effectiveness of ethical and transformational leadership (Babalola, Stouten, Euwema, & Ovadje, 2018; Kessler, Bruursema, Rodopman, & Spector, 2013; Saeed, Almas, Anis-ul-Haq, & Niazi, 2014). We expand these works by investigating the role of servant leadership (leading by serving others) in managing followers' conflicts. Servant leaders help to improve followers' psychological health and reduce burnout (Babakus, Yavas, & Ashill, 2010; Rivkin, Diestel, & Schmidt, 2014). Yet, the mediating role of team conflict, and leaders' third-party conflict behaviors—avoiding, forcing, and problem-solving in this relationship, is relatively lacking. Our sample of interest is religious sisters, who live and work 24/7 together in local religious communities. This unique environment is susceptible to conflicts, which can have negative impacts on religious sisters' social and psychological well-being if not adequately managed. According to Giebels and Janssen (2005), conflict management behaviors impact individuals, groups, teams, and organizations.

We further examine emotional exhaustion, as it depicts a core dimension of burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), a chronic stress-related syndrome. Burnout comprises emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Yet, emotional exhaustion is the most widely reported and the most thoroughly investigated, as the core dimension of burnout syndrome (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), which has emerged as a critical social and health issue (Dubale et al., 2019) in diverse organizations (Cooper, Knight, Frazier, & Law, 2019). Emotional exhaustion is relevant for this study as it enables the understanding of the chronic stress and energy depletion that religious sisters experience due to conflicts that are not constructively managed. Given the need to improve followers' well-being, research has indicated the crucial role of leaders, especially in (followers') conflict situations (Römer et al., 2012; Zhao, Thatcher, & Jehn, 2019).

The aims of the current study are threefold: (a) examine the relationship between religious sisters' perception of servant leadership and frequency of team conflict, and the degree of emotional exhaustion; (b) investigate the extent these relationships are mediated by leaders' third-party conflict behavior—avoiding, forcing, and problem-solving; (c) and explore whether team conflict mediates the relationship between the perceived servant leadership and the level of emotional exhaustion experienced by followers.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on servant leadership (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019), conflict management, and leaders' third-party conflict behaviors (Römer et al., 2012; Gross, Neuman, Adair, & Wallace, 2019), and well-being (emotional exhaustion) in two ways. First, while extant studies establish a negative relationship between servant leadership and burnout (Babakus et al., 2010; Rivkin, Diestel, & Schmidt, 2014), this study sheds light on the leaders' third-party conflict behaviors as the underlying psychological mechanisms explaining the relationships between servant leadership and team conflict, as well as servant leadership, and emotional exhaustion. Finally, most studies on (servant) leadership, conflict management, third-party interventions, and well-being (Jit, Sharma, & Kawatra, 2016; Poitras et al., 2015; Römer et al., 2012) were conducted in the Western business contexts. We extend research by investigating local religious communities of women in a Nigerian-based Religious Institute, a context that has been underrepresented in the literature.

Setting the Scene: Religious Community (Convent) in the Nigerian Context

Convent in this context refers to a local religious community within Catholic Women Religious Institutes (CWRI) where women who professed to be religious live community life (Eze, Lingegger, & Rakoczy, 2016; Obi & Bollen, 2017). A local religious community comprises 2–20 or more sisters living together, each with an officially designated leader. Leadership structure in CWRI is top-down hierarchical, including the general level, the regional level, the provincial level, and the local level. Daily community activities in convents

include prayers, meals, recreation, and engaging in daily regular tasks that are assigned and supervised by the community leader. Examples include cooking, cleaning, and laundry, taking care of the sick and aged members, taking care of the orphans, bursary, and accounting duties. We focus on the local community level. Religious sisters also typically work beyond the convents and have professional jobs, including medical (physicians, nurses), education (school teachers and leaders), and social and pastoral works. Life in the local religious community characterizes regular communication, interaction, and interdependenceand these situations are susceptible to conflicts. We applied the following terms interchangeably: Local religious communities refer to convents; religious sisters or sisters or community members refer to followers, and local community leaders are the local superiors. (Religious community refers to the broader Institute.) Religious sisters live and work in local religious communities situated in a national context.

The cross-cultural definition of Nigeria as a collectivist society (Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) depicts outstanding communal characteristics. These features include integrating to one's family and community, caring, mutual trust, listening, and mutual respect, forgiveness, building peace, integrity, and common good, oneness, fairness, and interdependence. In line with this assertion, African theorist, Metz (2018), describes the African community based on two core features: first, considering oneself as part of the whole community through sharing, and finally, achieving the common good of all through serving the community. Specifically, Nigerian culture is evident in the African leadership philosophy of *Ubuntu*—a concept that denotes humanity, especially humanity toward others (a person is a person through the other person). The idea of *Ubuntu* additionally depicts a notion of social sensitivity and personal responsibility for collective well-being, which summarizes the ideal leadership in African countries/context. The *Ubuntu* African common terminology has different related expressions in diverse African nations such as *Ujamaa* in Tanzania, *African Humanism* in Zambia, *Conscientism* in Ghana, and *Community* in Nigeria (see Heussen-Montgomery, & Jordans, 2020). Similarly, a new paradigm shift in leadership is gradually emerging in Nigerian nation, where the commonly used authoritarian and distrustful ledaership behavior is giving way to a person-oriented style (Nwankwo, Heussen-Montgomery, & Jordans, 2020). It follows that a leader in the Nigerian or African cultural background ideally renders service to community well-being, including managing (followers') conflicts constructively as soon as these emerge.

When conflicts occur among religious sisters, local community leaders have the onus to intervene and manage the conflict constructively . These leaders may apply the community principle of mutual respect and demonstrate effective and efficient third-party behaviors to help resolve these conflicts. If the conflicts among the religious sisters remain unresolved, it could escalate, thereby lead to sisters' experience of emotional exhaustion, and negatively impact the religious community living environment. Besides, given the religious and spiritual values they uphold, religious sisters may be most receptive to the servant leaders as the third-party in mediating their team conflicts. We discuss in the following sections the relationships between emotional exhaustion due to unresolved conflicts, servant leadership, team conflict, and the mediating roles of third-party conflict behavior.

Emotional Exhaustion, Servant Leadership, and Team Conflict

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the extent to which an individual is depleted or lacked physical and psychological resources to handle interpersonal stressors (Maslach et al., 2001). Individuals experiencing emotional exhaustion feel overstretched, as this drains their physical and mental capacities. At the individual level, the experience of emotional exhaustion appears in such unhealthy tendencies as anxiety, depression, and other illnesses (Bianchi, Schonfeld, & Laurent, 2015; Weigl et al., 2016), which confirms its reliable prediction of stress-related health outcomes (Maslach et al., 2001). At the organizational level, the essential characteristics of emotional exhaustion include the desire to quit employment or job, absenteeism, and low morale (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion for religious sisters may imply the level of feeling drained

of energy. This emotional drain manifests itself in disinterestedness and low morale in engaging in activities associated with the religious community life, which can heighten one's desire to abandon the spiritual or religious life. Altruistic leadership, such as servant leadership, through its prioritizing followers' well-being and psychological needs, can ameliorate followers' level of emotional exhaustion.

Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership has been in existence, evident in the over 2000-year-old, Biblical teachings of Jesus Christ to his followers that anyone who wants to be first (or to lead) must be a servant to others (Mark 10: 42–45). In the 1970s, Greenleaf introduced servant leadership to organizations, as leading through serving followers , characterized by prioritizing followers' needs and well-being, while developing followers to attain thier optimal potential, and achieve the highest possible outcome (Greenleaf, 1977). Building on Greenleaf, Eva et al. (2019) defined servant leadership as "an (a) other-oriented approach to leadership (b) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower's individual needs and interests, (c) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (p. 114). Servant leaders are primarily servants to each of their unique followers. In this regard, servant leadership is beneficial to followers' physical health and psychological well-being.

Besides, Liden et al. (2015) identified seven key characteristics of servant leadership: first, *emotional healing* characterized by the care of followers' concern, personal problems, and well-being; second, *creating values for the community*, for example, leaders' involvement in helping followers to become active community members, while enhancing other communities beyond the immediate community; third, *conceptual skills* refer to a servant leader's show of proficiency in solving work-related problems with a sufficient level of understanding of the organization; fourth, *empowering* followers is the extent that the leader entrusts followers with responsibility, allows them autonomy to function, and promotes decision-making influences; fifth, *helping followers grow and succeed* captures the degree to which the leader encourages followers to achieve their maximum potential and excel in their vocation; six, *putting followers first*, which is prioritizing followers' needs ; and seven, *behaving ethically*, bydemonstrating honesty, trustworthy behaviors, and serving as a model of integrity.

One of the critical potentials of servant leadership is emotional healing. According to Liden and colleagues (2015), servant leaders who espouse this quality show respect for and care about followers' challenges, concerns, and well-being. Emotional healing shown by the leader motivates followers to vent their concernsthis stimulates emotional maturity (Eva et al., 2019) and followers' ability to handle frustrations and stress in a positive way. Servant leaders can offer emotional healing to their followers by engaging in empathetic listening, holding a kind attitude, and providing support to their followers—social, emotional, and financial (Jit, Sharma, & Kawatra, 2017). Serving behaviors such as conceptual skills, helping followers grow and succeed, and empowering followers (Liden et al., 2015) attenuate followers' emotional exhaustion, which is typically triggered when demands of interpersonal communications exceed individuals' capacities or resources to handle the conflicts (Maslach et al., 2001). Subsequently, research has shown that servant leadership improved psychological well-being and relates negatively to various emotional strain (Rivkin et al., 2014). Considering the theory on servant leadership, and its potential benefits, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a. The perceived use of servant leadership will be negatively related to followers' level of emotional exhaustion experience.

Servant Leadership and Team Conflict

An essential characteristic of convents is a high level of interdependence, regular interaction, and shared goals, effective communication, task allocation, and community living as a core value. These qualities align with the description of a team. Similar to groups in organizational settings, conflicts, the extent to

which team members experience real or imaginary incompatibility in goals, values, needs, and interests (Van de Vliert, 1997), often challenge religious community collaboration. Teams perform well with low levels of conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001), but team conflicts often inhibit successful team functioning (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012), leading to the increased level of stress (Römer, 2017) and anxiety. Similar situations are probable in convents. Research has differentiated various types of conflict in teams . The commonest examples researched include relationship, task, process, and status conflicts. Relationship conflicts refer to disagreement about nonwork issues or personal issues, such as, dislike that occurs among team members, personality differences ,interpersonalincompatibilities, and a feeling of tension and frustration. Task conflicts are awareness of disagreements in ideas and viewpoints regarding specific tasks. Process conflicts are disagreement about responsibilities and the logistics required to solve work problems (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Status conflicts refer to disputes over individuals' relative status (i.e., respect, prestige) position within the groups' social hierarchy (Bendersky & Hays, 2012). Conflicts are commonplace in convents, due largely to its nature of community life and different personalities.

Meta-analytic evidence (De Wit et al., 2012) found relationship, task, and process conflicts to be detrimental to individuals' psychological well-being and team functioning, and similar results emerged for status conflict (Bendersky & Hays, 2012). Greer and Dannals (2017) have strongly argued that team conflicts (relationship, task, process and status conflicts) are often difficult to differentiate, given their strong intercorrelations. Greer, Saygi, Aaldering, and De Dreu (2012) hold the same view. This view might be particularly true in convents. Given the nature of the community living, group tasks, and task allocations and other processes, it may seem difficult to distinguish conflict types. In this study, we integrate the four conflict types into a single measurement of team conflict in local religious communities, representing the amount of friction that each follower perceives. Leaders play an essential role in managing (followers) conflicts (Zhao et al., 2019).

Servant leaders prioritize followers' well-being and needs (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2015). In convents, leaders' roles include helping community members connect to other community members, and resolving relationship, task and logistic issues, while encouraging community members to become active in the life and work of their local religious communities. Servant leaders encourage followers to actively participate in the community (Liden et al., 2015), which may inspire collaboration, cooperation, and cohesion in convents. Religious sisters who perceive their community leaders as exhibiting, as well as encouraging servant leadership qualities such as open and effective communication, are likely to experience fewer team conflicts. Research indicates that servant leaders encourage team members to discuss their disagreements directly (Wong, Liu, Wang, & Tjosvold, 2018). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b. The perceived use of servant leadership will be negatively related to the amount of team conflict experienced by followers.

Servant Leadership and Emotional Exhaustion: The Mediating Role of Team Conflict

This study argues that servant leadership negatively relates to emotional exhaustion and to team conflict. Consequently, we propose that decreased team conflicts should mediate the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. Servant leaders foster followers' open discussion of their differences, frustrations, and disagreements (Wong et al., 2018) through exhibiting ethical and moral standards such as honesty, integrity, and trust (Liden et al., 2015). In this regard, followers become willing and capable of collaborating in their life and work relationships, including readiness to discuss thier hurts, and feelings of obstructions. These readiness to collaborate will likely de-escalate team conflict (Gelfand et al., 2012), and subsequently, curb followers' feelings of emotional exhaustion. As servant leaders inspire team consensus (Wong et al., 2018) rather than team conflict, and we argue that the negative relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion will occur indirectly through reduced team conflict, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1c. The amount of team conflict that followers experience will mediate the relationship between perceived use of servant leadership and the level of emotional exhaustion of followers.

Servant Leadership and Leaders' Third-Party Conflict Behavior

Important leadership skill is to handle conflicts between followers constructively, which will impact the extent of followers' conflicts and well-being. A leader's third-party behavior refers to the leader's response to followers' conflicts, which the leader was aware of or was informed about (Römer et al., 2012). Here, our study interest is explicitly focused on leaders' behavior when they act as third parties in the conflict between their followers. The most typical conflict behaviors of leaders include avoiding, forcing, and problem-solving (Gelfand et al., 2012; Römer, 2017). For example, leaders may decide not to get involved in followers' conflict (avoiding), or they may opt to impose a solution on conflicting parties (forcing) to end the disputes. Moreover, leaders may further seek to understand both parties' underlying issues of concerns, in other to work together with them toward an acceptable solution (problem-solving). Although Jit, Sharma, and Kawatra (2016) found strategies through which servant leaders like to handle conflicts, research is yet to examine servant leadership and leader's third-party behaviors in followers' conflicts.

Servant Leadership and Leaders' Third-Party Avoiding, Forcing, and Problem-Solving in Followers' Conflicts

Conflict avoiding behavior has become an essential subject of interest in conflict management studies (Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2012). Avoiding occurs when a leader opts not to get involved in the conflict (Römer et al., 2012). Leaders may avoid followers' conflicts due to several reasons: (a) They do not focus on the interpersonal relations and are hardly aware of the tensions and conflicts, (b) the issues at hand do not seem to matter to them or are seen as trivial, (c) leaders might consider managing conflicts the responsibility of the conflicting parties, (d) they might be afraid to get too much involved and become partial, (e) they feel incapable of handling the conflicts due to lack of proper skills (Römer, 2017; Van de Vliert, 1997), (f) or they believe intervening is not their role, and avoiding is a proper approach. Leaders' avoiding strategy leaves followers in conflicts unattended, which frustrates conflicting parties, as they feel that their leaders do not take their issues seriously (Römer, 2017). Individuals in conflict usually view their leaders' avoiding approach as a lack of support (Römer et al., 2012). This perception by the followers may be due to leaders' inability to facilitate open, fair, and honest dialogue in conflict situations (Gelfand et al., 2012), thereby fueling conflict escalation and unfavorable health outcomes for followers. In other words, conflict communication research has highlighted that (leaders') lack of communication or opting not to communicate (in followers' conflicts) is synonymous with communication (Wang et al., 2012). These studies have focused on Western contexts and may be subject to cultural biases.

Although avoiding conflicts in collectivist contexts is often seen as appropriate compared with Western individualistic cultures, research findings on avoiding behavior in collectivist settings have been inconsistent. Ohbuchi and Atsumi (2010) suggested that avoiding conflict promotes group harmony and interdependent group identity, but impedes personal interests and justice. Yang and Li (2017) found that leaders' avoiding behavior in the Chinese context improves followers' perception of fairness, trust, and emotional well-being, while Chen, Liu, and Tjosvold (2005) demonstrated that avoiding conflict has a significant negative relation with productive or constructive conflict in the Chinese context.

This study contends that followers' perception of servant leadership will negatively relate to leaders' avoiding behavior in followers' conflicts. Servant leaders prioritize each individual's needs and well-being (Van Dierendonck, 2011), and leaders' avoiding behavior in conflict situations does not serve such a goal. Servant leadership is altruistic, considering followers' needs before the leader's needs (Liden et al., 2015) while empowering followers' autonomy to air their views, especially in conflict moments.

Motivation to serve followers inspires servant leaders to intervene in followers' conflicts instead of avoiding them. In line with this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis :

Hypothesis 2a. The perceived use of servant leadership will be negatively related to leaders' avoiding behavior as a third party in followers' conflicts.

Forcing behavior occurs when a leader imposes a preferred solution to disputants in other to end their conflicts (Römer et al., 2012). A forcing leader provokes adverse outcomes in followers such as anxiety, strain, depression, stress and bullying (Baillien, Bollen, Euwema, & De Witte, 2014; Way, Jimmieson, & Bordia, 2016). Römer (2017) found that a forcing leader may be a new party in the conflict, and followers may further turn against a forcing leader. A leader's forcing behavior may not benefit followers in disputes. Servant leaders opt for credible conviction of followers via empowering rather than coercive (force) compliance. Followers will thus likely perceive their servant leaders not to engage in forcing behavior or in the detrimental use of power, as these contradict the core characteristic of serving others by empowering them. Consistent with this line of thought, we hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 2b. The perceived use of servant leadershipwill be negatively related to leaders' forcing behavior as a third party in the followers' conflicts.

Problem solving is defined as leaders' search for underlying concerns of the parties in conflict while seeking for a favorable solution that addresses all parties' concerns (Römer et al., 2012) with the help of these parties. Some leaders engage in problem-solving of followers' conflicts by addressing the underlying issues towards an amicable resolution (Jit et al., 2016; Römer et al., 2012). Achieving problem-solving behavior involves engaging in open and sincere dialogue and nonjudgmental listening (Tjsovold, Wong, & Chen, 2019). The conceptual skills of servant leaders enable them to exhibit competence in solving work-related issues (Liden et al., 2015). Problem-solving aligns with the ethical behaviors of servant leaders (Liden et al., 2015), which highlights building consensus with the group instead of relying on one's status (Spears & Lawrence, 2016). Servant leaders, while prioritizing followers, motivate them to repair their dysfunctional relationships, and address their conflicts effectively and efficiently (Jit et al., 2017). Servant leaders build community (Liden et al., 2015), by enhancing interpersonal relationships, through addressing followers' concerns by using effective communication strategy. Subsequently, we propose that servant leadership motivates followers to discuss their conflicts constructively by listening to others' opinions. We thus propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2c. The perceived use of servant leadership will be positively related to leaders' problem-solving behavior as a third party in the followers' conflicts.

Servant Leadership and Team Conflict: The Mediating Role of Leaders' Third-Party Conflict Behavior

The way servant leaders handle followers' conflicts may indirectly affect how each follower experiences team conflict. As argued above, we expect servant leadership to foster problem-solving, and to relate negatively to avoiding and forcing behaviors in playing a third-party role in followers' conflicts. In other words, we expect servant leaders who neither avoid conflicts nor impose solutions in their followers' conflicts to reduce the amount of team conflict experience of their followers. Avoiding or forcing behaviors may risk fueling further conflicts as parties' underlying concerns are not taken into account. Servant leaders who engage in problem-solving strategy will likely reduce team conflict experience for two reasons: first, the leader listens to parties' needs and values while seeking an amicable solution; this serves as a prerequisite toward problem-solving. Finally, servant leaders are role models toward constructive conflict management behaviors (Jit et al., 2016). They empower parties to develop (learn) conflict

management skills (Van Dierendonck, 2011) thereby reducing the intensity of their conflict experience. When parties in conflict perceive that their leaders utilize problem-solving behavior, by exhibiting honesty, and fairness, while facilitating effective dialogue, they will likely collaborate toward effectively resolving their disputes. We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. The perceived leaders' nonuse of third-party avoiding (H3a), forcing (H3b), and the use of problem-solving (H3c) will mediate the negative relationship between the perceived use of servant leadership and amount of team conflict.

Servant Leadership and Emotional Exhaustion: The Mediating Role of Leaders' Third-Party Conflict Behavior

We argue that leaders' third-party conflict behaviors will mediate the relationship between servant leadership and followers' level of emotional exhaustion. Research has shown that avoiding and forcing responses are associated with decreased well-being, evidenced by sleep disturbance and anxiety (Way et al., 2016), and stress (Römer, 2017). Servant leaders who intervene in followers' conflicts, reduce followers' emotional exhaustion. Similarly, research indicates leaders' third-party avoiding and forcing behaviors to heighten the conflict–stress relationship, while those who engage in problem-solving attenuate the conflict–stress link (Römer et al., 2012). While prolonged stress triggers emotional exhaustion (Cooper et al., 2019; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), leaders, who exhibit behaviors such as listening with empathy, and nonforcing behaviors (i.e., not forcing a resolution), could mitigate followers' emotional exhaustion. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. The perceived servant leaders' third-party, nonavoiding (H4a), and nonforcing (H4b), and the use of problem-solving (H4c) behaviors will mediate the negative relationship between the perceived use of servant leadership and emotional exhaustion.

Method

Sample and Procedure

This study consisted of a survey among religious sisters in local religious communities of a Catholic Women Religious Institute based in Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa. Data collection was between 2016 and 2017, from religious sisters who did not occupy a leadership position. Initially, 777 sisters received a survey, either online or via paper and pencil. Finally, 453 respondents completed the questionnaire (response rate 58.3%), of which 56 were online, and 397 were via paper and pencil. Respondents were Nigerians and came from 166 of 221 local religious communities of the Institute spread in Africa (n = 407), Europe, and North America (n = 46). The number of years in the religious profession in the institute ranged between one and 51 years (M = 18.92, SD = 10.14), with an average tenure in a convent of 4.77 years (SD = 3.06). Age ranged between 20 and 70 (age as such was not measured). Respondents had varying educational backgrounds, and the majority held a bachelor's degree (30.9%) and master's degree (26.5%). Others had secondary vocational education (17.2%), a senior secondary certificate in education (12.4%), a higher national diploma (9.5%), and a doctoral degree (3.5%). Most of the sisters (88%) are working, while 11.9 % are studying. Their dominant fields of work were education (60.3%), medical care (17.4%), and accounting (7.7%). The local religious communities had an average size of 7 community members (SD = 6.16), including the local community leader.

Measurement

All constructs were assessed via a questionnaire using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Some of these constructs were slightly adapted to suit the religious community context.

Servant Leadership

Followers assessed the extent to which the community leader engages in servant leadership using the 7-dimension (7 items) servant leadership scale ("SL–7": Liden et al., 2015). The item, "My leader puts my best interest ahead of his/her own" was adapted to "My superior puts my best interest before her own" (Cronbach's alpha = .66).

Team Conflict

A 13-item team conflict scale was adapted from Jehn and Mannix's (2001) to fit the context of religious communities. Specifically, four types of conflict were measured: task, relationship, process conflict, and status conflict: relationship conflict (3 items), for example, "sisters in my community often experienced relationship conflict" (α = .63); task conflict (3 items), for example, "sisters in my community experienced conflict of ideas" (α = .77); process conflict (3 items), for example, "sisters in my community often disagree about resource allocation" (α = .85); and status conflict (4 items) (Bendersky & Hays, 2012), for example, "sisters in my community competed for influence" (α = .79). Cronbach's alpha for all team conflict items together is .91, providing good reason to use them as one concept.

To determine whether it is feasible to use a general team conflict scale or the different types of conflict scales separately, before the primary analysis, we compared two measurement models. The results are described below in the result section. We used team conflict as an individual variable, representing the level to which each religious sister independently perceives the amount of team conflict in the local religious community.

Leader's Third-party Conflict Behaviors

We used Römer et al. (2012) scale (an adapted version of the Dutch test for conflict handling: DUTCH, Van de Vliert, 1997) to assess leaders' third-party behavior in followers' conflict, measuring avoiding (4 items), forcing (3 items), and problem-solving (3 items). The wordings were slightly changed to fit the religious community. A sample item for avoiding is "My local superior tries not to get involved" (Cronbach's alpha = .79) and for forcing is "My local superior enforces a decision to the conflicting sisters" (Cronbach's alpha = .73). A sample item for problem-solving is "My local superior examine issues until a solution is found that really satisfies each sister that is involved in the conflict" (Cronbach's alpha = .77).

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion was measured with a 5-item version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Students' Survey (MBI-SS) (Schaufeli et al., 2002), for example "I feel emotionally drained from my work" (Cronbach's alpha = .85).

Strategy for Statistical Analysis

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to estimate the hypothesized model and test all hypotheses simultaneously. We conducted the analyses using SEM in R, version 3.3.3 with the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) version 0.6-1.1132 and lavaan.survey package (Oberski, 2014), controlling for dependence in the data by looking at teams as clusters because some of the participants belonged to the same local communities and thus rated the same leader. The use of this package in R allows us to estimate our concepts

over the clusters, with no explicit modeling of the effect of the clusters or teams themselves, as the main interest of this study is the individual and not the team. As the proposed model is rather large, we reduced the number of parameters by using parcels for servant leadership and team conflict and come as close as possible to the recommendation of three indicators for each construct (Little, Rhemtulla, Gibson, & Schoemann, 2013). This approach is preferable over using more indicators as it reduces type I errors and minimizes the prospect of a-priori model misspecification (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Other latent constructs (each of the leaders' third-party behaviors and emotional exhaustion) consisted of five or fewer items and were operationalized based on their items rather than parcels.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Before testing our hypotheses, we tested different measurement models with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the dimensionality of the variables under study. Model 1 was constructed based on the six latent variables discussed in the literature section: servant leadership, leaders' third-party avoiding, forcing and problem-solving, team conflict, and emotional exhaustion. This was compared to a measurement model (Model 2) where the four types of conflicts do not load on a latent team conflict construct but are four separate constructs found in the literature (i.e., relationship, task, process, and status conflicts) and a single-factor model (Model 0), which indicates that there is no distinction between the variables based on common method bias.

The single-factor model (Model 0) could not be accepted due to its low goodness-of-fit indices (χ^2 = 1,725.985 (209); CFI = .52; TLI = .47; RMSEA = .13; SRMR = .13). Both multifactor models yielded acceptable goodness-of-fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999): Model 1; χ^2 = 315.921 (194); CFI = .96; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .04; Model 2; χ^2 = 682.795 (398); CFI = .94; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .04. A Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square difference test revealed a significant better fit for the first model where the four conflict types are collapsed on one latent construct (ΔSBS-χ^2 (204) = 366.89; ($p < .001$)); hence, we proceeded analyses with this model. Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, Pearson's correlation coefficients, and scale reliabilities among studied variables.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations of Studied Variables

Measure	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Tenure (in the convents)	4.77	3.06	–							
2. Educational level	3.53	1.44	.52***	–						
3. Servant leadership	4.80	0.87	−.00	−.02	*(.66)*					
4. Third-party avoiding	3.43	1.40	.06	.13**	−.28***	*(.79)*				
5. Third-party forcing	3.61	1.20	−.07	−.04	−.21***	.50***	*(.73)*			
6. Third-party problem-solving	4.43	1.49	−.02	−.13**	.50***	−.43***	−.17***	*(.77)*		
7. Team conflict	3.84	1.27	.10*	.20***	−.19***	.54***	.35***	−.34***	*(.91)*	
8. Emotional exhaustion	2.35	1.15	−.03	−.03	−.12**	.18***	.28***	−.10*	.15**	*(.85)*

Notes. *$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$; Cronbach's alpha coefficients are written in parenthesis on the diagonal.

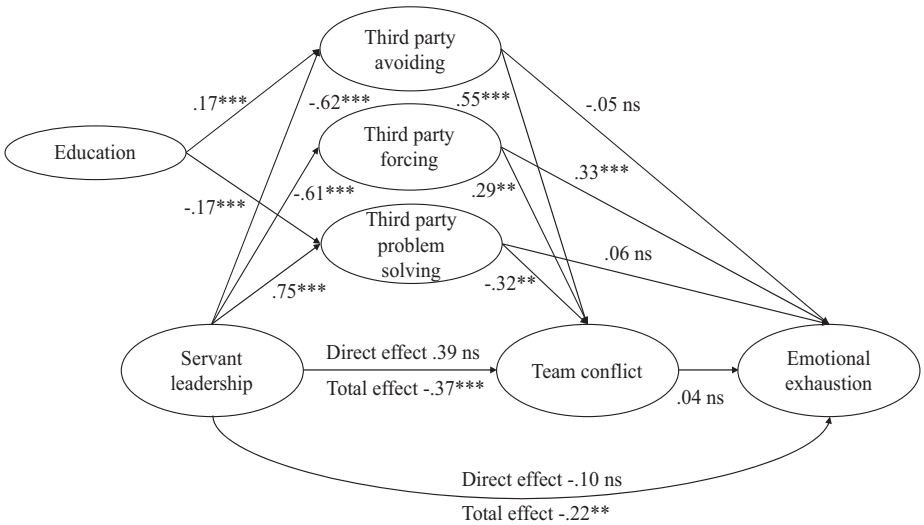

Figure 1. Structural model with SEM standardized parameter estimates. $N = 453$ follower ratings, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Hypotheses Testing

To test our proposed hypotheses, all predicted relationships were designed into a structural model (Figure 1). This allows for clear interpreting of all the hypotheses by examining the direct and total effects. To interpret Hypothesis 1a and 1b, besides the direct effect (i.e., the pathway from the predictor to the outcome while controlling for the mediating variables), the total effect (i.e., the sum of the direct effect and all the indirect effects of the mediating variables) was calculated. The control variable education was significantly related to avoiding and problem-solving and was thus retained in the final structural model. The model yielded excellent goodness-of-fit indices with $\chi^2 = 451.352$ (217); CFI = .93; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .06. All indicators loaded significantly on their respective latent variables. Mediation analysis was performed based on the recommendations of Hayes (2009), and Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) to establish whether or not there is indirect effect.

Concerning Hypothesis 1a, the total effect (combination of direct and indirect effects, including all the mediational paths to each of the three third-party behaviors and team conflict) between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion was significant (standardized estimate = −.22, $p < .01$). However, when looking only at the direct effect, there was no significant relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.10$ ns). A similar effect was found for Hypothesis 1b on the relationship between servant leadership, and team conflict. The total effect was significant (standardized estimate = −.37, $p < .001$), but no significant direct effect was found ($\beta = .39$ ns). Hypothesis 1a and 1b is supported, but given the difference between the direct and total effects it is clear that there are underlying mechanisms for this relationship, which are reported below for Hypotheses 3 and 4. Regarding Hypothesis 1c, there was no indirect effect (mediation) of servant leadership on emotional exhaustion through team conflict (standardized estimate = .02; ns). Thus, this hypothesis was not confirmed.

Supporting Hypothesis 2, which proposes a direct relationship between servant leadership and leaders' third-party behavior: Servant leadership (H2a) relates negatively to leaders' third-party avoiding ($\beta = -.62$, $p < .001$), and (H2b) forcing ($\beta = -.61$, $p < .001$), as well as (H2c) positively related to leaders' third-party problem-solving behavior ($\beta = .75$, $p < .001$). In turn, leaders' third-party conflict behaviors significantly relate to team conflict (avoiding, $\beta = .55$, $p < .001$; forcing, $\beta = .29$, $p < .01$; problem-solving, $\beta = -.32$, $p < .01$).

Table 2
Results of Structural Equation Modeling of Standardized Indirect Effects with Insignificant Effects

Indirect effects	Hypothesis	Standardized estimate
SL → TP avoiding → Team conflict	3a	−.34***
SL → TP forcing → Team conflict	3b	−.18***
SL → TP Problem-solving → Team conflict	3c	−.24**
SL → TP forcing → Emotional exhaustion	4b	−.20**
SL → TP avoiding → Emotional exhaustion	4a	.03 ns
SL → TP problem-solving → Emotional exhaustion	4c	.04 ns

Notes. ns = nonsignificant; SL = servant leadership; TP = third-party.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

To test the mediation Hypotheses H3 and H4, we performed Sobel tests (Sobel, 1982). For H3, all three predictions were confirmed, as leaders' third-party (H3a) avoiding (standardized estimate = −.34, $p < .001$), (H3b) forcing (standardized estimate = −.18; $p < .01$), and (H3c) problem-solving (standardized estimate = −.24, $p < .01$) behaviors mediate the relationship between servant leadership and team conflict . Hypothesis 4a, 4b, and 4c proposed the leaders' third-party conflict behavior to mediate the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. Following the same Sobel tests for establishing mediation, our data supported only Hypothesis 4b; leaders' third-party forcing behavior mediates the relation between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion (standardized estimate = −0.20, $p < .01$). The Sobel tests for the leaders' third-party avoiding and problem-solving behaviors were not significant (Table 2).

Discussion

The current study examined the relationship between servant leadership, team conflict, and emotional exhaustion of followers (religious sisters). Interestingly, findings provide strong support for the mediating role of leaders' third-party conflict behaviors—avoiding, forcing, and problem-solving in the proposed relationships. Specifically, we found that servant leadership utilizes neither avoiding nor forcing behaviors but applies problem-solving when managing followers' conflicts as a third-party, and as a result, reduces followers' team conflict. Further findings showed that servant leadership's nonforcing behavior mediated the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. However, a mediation model proposing team conflict to explain the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion in this study was not supported. These findings advance extant research on servant leadership, team conflict, and well-being (emotional exhaustion).

Theoretical Implications

The present study sheds light on the relevance of studying servant leadership in relation to resolving team conflicts and attenuating emotional exhaustion, via the leaders' third-party conflict behaviors, in an underrepresented context in the literature—convents.

Analyses revealed three key findings: First, we established direct relationships between servant leadership and each of the leader's third-party avoiding (negative), forcing (negative), and problem-solving (positive). These results indicate that the more sisters perceive their local community leaders as servants, the less they see avoiding and forcing behaviors, and the more they understand the leader's problem-solving strategy: seeking for parties' underlying concerns when the leader intervenes as a third-party in their conflicts. These findings corroborate previous qualitative study by Jit, Sharma and Kawatra (2016)

that servant leaders opt for kind, participative, and persuasive strategies in conflicts, such that in followers' conflicts, they impartially seek for the parties' main concerns (initial diagnosis).

Second, we found that leaders' third-party conflict behaviors mediate the negative relationship between servant leadership and team conflict. Leaders who avoid conflicts or impose a solution in their followers' conflicts potentially fuel followers' team conflict experience, while leaders who apply problem-solving reduce team conflict. These results suggest that as long as religious sisters have servant leaders in convents, they experience reduced team conflicts due to the leaders' display of serving behaviors through problem-solving rather than avoiding or imposing a solution. These results aligned with the previous findings indicating that leaders' third-party avoiding and forcing responses strengthen interpersonal conflicts, while their problem-solving reduces conflict (Römer, 2017).

Third, further analysis showed the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion to be mediated only by the leaders' forcing behavior in a third-party role. This finding suggests that sisters' perception of servant leadership is associated with relief in their level of emotional exhaustion experience, as the leaders display no forcing behavior. This result supports prior research suggesting that leaders' third-party forcing behavior harms followers' well-being by intensifying individuals' stress levels (Römer, 2017), anxiety, and depression (Way et al., 2016). Our results show that conflicts among religious sisters in convents are a reality, yet are not necessarily destructive with servant leaders as third parties.

Overall, these are crucial findings given that they enable us to determine how and to what extent servant leadership improves collaborating, integrating, or problem-solving local religious communities by reducing team conflict and followers' emotional exhaustion experience. Notably, this study extends research on (servant) leadership and leaders' third-party conflict behavior (Jit et al., 2016; Römer et al., 2012), and on servant leadership and team conflict (Wong et al., 2018). It further strengthens research on servant leadership and followers' health and well-being (Rivkin et al., 2014; Wu, Qiu, Dooley, & Ma, 2020).

The present findings add to confirm the theorizing that servant leadership prioritizes serving followers' needs and well-being (Greenleaf, 1977; Obi & Bollen, 2017; Van Dierendonck, 2011), which here include reducing team conflict through problem-solving and by using a nonforcing strategy to curb sisters' emotional exhaustion experience. Overall, these results extend the emerging literature on the vital role of leadership as a third-party in followers' conflicts (Poitras et al., 2015; Römer, 2017), with particular reference to servant leadership and problem-solving. Our results suggest that conflict management literature needs to integrate servant leadership competencies (e.g., emotional healing, empowering, listening, ethical behavior, empathy) in constructing problem-solving conflict-handling skills.

Contrary to our expectations, neither the servant leaders' nonavoiding behavior nor their use of problem-solving in followers' conflicts could explain the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. One possible explanation for these nonsignificant findings could be due to cultural contexts and contingency factors. Given the collectivist context of our sample, one may argue that the nonavoiding behavior of a servant leader as a third-party may impact emotional exhaustion less. Research showed that organizational and societal factors impact leaders' behavior as third parties in followers' conflicts (Römer, 2017), such that individuals from diverse cultures will tend to prioritize various sets of values and practices. Hence, cultures may clash in the face of conflicts (De Dreu, Kluwer, Euwema, & Van der Vegt, 2017). To be specific, avoiding conflict in some collectivist contexts was found to boost followers' attitudes and behaviors (Yang & Li, 2017). Thus, the national (Nigeria) and organizational (CWRI) contexts of this research might have influenced this finding.

Another possible explanation could be that results on leaders' forcing behavior have been consistent across cultures and studies. These results have led to a general conclusion that leaders' forcing behavior in followers' conflicts (relationship, task, and process) harms followers' well-being such as high increase in stress (Römer et al., 2012), anxiety,depression, and bullying (Way et al., 2016). Hence, the nonforcing approach of a servant leader in this study curbs the level of emotional exhaustion such that avoiding and problem-solving behaviors could offer no other explanation as to the reason for the relationships.

One further feasible explanation for the lack of mediation of leaders' avoiding and problem-solving strategies in the servant leadership–emotional exhaustion relationships may likely be that effects differ depending on conflict types. For example, avoiding could be more effective in managing relationship conflicts, while in managing task conflicts, problem-solving appears more effective (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Guerra, Martínez, Munduate, & Medina, 2005). More importantly, our data fit better with a one-factor model for the different conflict types, rendering credence to our findings on a general level. Future research may consider a contingency approach, illuminating whether different leadership behaviors are more or less helpful depending on the type of conflict that followers experience. Leaders and conflict managers should, like servant leaders, refrain from forcing response in conflicts. Such behavior possesses the highest risk of triggering emotional exhaustion.

Another finding contrary to our expectation was that team conflict could not mediate the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. Presumably, it was not just the experience of conflict but how leaders manage conflicts in convents that impact followers' well-being. Researching servant leadership in leaders' third-party behavior in convents is timely. Our study aligns with several findings emphasizing the relevance of leaders as third parties in conflicts between followers. These studies highlighted that direct leaders (Römer, 2017), and institutional third-party mediators (Bollen, Euwema, & Munduate, 2016), intervene in conflicts. Additionally, peers as peacemakers (Zhang, Bollen, Pei, & Euwema, 2018), women in the third-party peer role (Benharda, Brett, & Lempereur, 2013), and women religious leaders, specifically, local community leaders in convents, are capable of handling conflicts in beneficial ways. Moreover, productive conflict management occurs in family firms (Alvarado-Alvarez, Armadans, & Parada, 2020) as well. While some research has adopted the integration of cooperative and competitive strategies in conflict management (Euwema, García, Munduate, Elgoibar, & Pender, 2015), we underline the value of servant leadership and problem-solving behaviors to religious sisters' conflicts, establishing that local community leaders in convents demonstrate serving behaviors and problem-solving in conflict situations. Indeed, this study confirms recent theorizing that servant leadership is appropriate for female religious institutes in Nigeria (Obi & Bollen, 2017), including for advancing problem solving third-party conflict behavior for individuals' wellbeing.

Regarding female leadership and culture, the present findings strengthen prior research that women of all cultures prefer person-oriented third-party intervention (Giebels & Yang, 2009) in conflict situations. Our study results suggest that women in religious community life (in Nigeria) prefer relational oriented leadership behavior, such as servant leadership, and problem-solving third-party strategy in (followers') conflicts rather than forcing and/or avoiding. This research builds a robust theoretical bridge between servant leadership, team conflicts, and emotional exhaustion via leaders' third-party conflict behaviors. The study further builds a connecting bridge between servant leadership and the indigenous African understanding of administration (Metz, 2018). We also respond to a call that researchers explore further on the mediating processes through which servant leadership relate to relevant outcomes (Eva et al., 2019). This study builds a generalizing (inclusive) bridge by studying a different sample—religious sisters within a CWRI, in Nigeria, a sub-Saharan African context.

Potential Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has some potential limitations, and hence, suggestions for further research. First, our unique sample showed that constructs from business organizations could generalize to a different type of organization, suggesting that human behaviors are inherently the same. However, future research might explore more diverse organizations and develop constructs based on religious communities, as well as replicate our findings.

Second, given the cross-sectional design of this study, no causal claim can be made regarding the direction of the relationship between the studied variables. Also, all variables were measured on the

individual follower level, suggesting a potential common method bias. However, using standardized and rigorously developed instruments reduces common method variance (Spector, 1987), as we did in this study. Spector (2019) noted some strategies for optimizing the use of cross-sectional designs, including the control variables to rule out extraneous variables, which we also did. Following Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003), assuring anonymity to participants reduces common method bias. We guaranteed anonymity to our respondents and used different wordings for different variables.

The theoretically grounded direction of our hypotheses and the empirically convincing findings lend credence to the predicted paths of the relationships in our model. We examined team conflict and emotional exhaustion experience of religious sisters. It seems logical that we evaluate sisters' perceptions of leaders' behavior. This evaluation is more important for our research question than the way leaders perceived their behavior. For example, if a leader in this study understands herself as a servant, but a follower does not recognize so, this might neither be viewed as supportive nor curb sisters' level of emotional exhaustion. The way followers perceive their leaders is vital in defining leaders' (third-party) behaviors, and not only leaders' perceptions are crucial (Bollen & Euwema, 2015; Römer, 2017). Yet, future research could integrate leader and followers' perceptions.

Third, this research examines leaders' third-party behaviors: avoiding, forcing, and problem-solving. A future study could explore other conflict-handling styles: accommodating and compromising in religious communities, and also investigate these in conflicts between leaders and followers. Notably, our choice of avoiding, forcing, and problem-solving leader behaviors depicts what leaders usually do in followers' conflicts, that is, conflicts of which leaders are not a part (Römer, 2017). Accommodating and compromising are typical behaviors by the conflicting parties themselves. Finally, servant leaders' nonavoiding and problem-solving behaviors did not mediate the servant leadership–emotional exhaustion relationship in this study. Future research could explore to gain more insight into the reason behind this result. Also, team conflict did not explain the servant leadership–emotional exhaustion relationship in this study. Future research could focus on specific conflict types.

Practical Implications

The results of this study offer concrete contributions to conflict management research and practice, to organizations, and leaders of religious institutes, HR managers, and nongovernmental organizations. To maintain problem-solving as well as physically and psychologically healthy individuals, the results of this study imply that CWRI could benefit from practicing servant leadership and problem-solving behaviors in followers' conflicts in convents. This study highlights that at any moment, leaders should resist avoiding or forcing behaviors in handling followers' conflicts and instead display problem-solving. To develop and enhance servant leadership practices and problem-solving, reduced team conflict, and decreased emotional exhaustion, we suggest establishing training programs and interventions on servant leadership and conflict management skills for leaders at all levels of the institute. The leadership training program should be ongoing, and should encompass community members as they are potential leaders, as well as those candidates in formation.

Leadership training programs should emphasize serving behaviors and problem-solving competencies that enable leaders to serve followers , and resolve challenges associated with religious community life and responsibilities. The application should help develop practical and open communication skills. These skills will enhance information sharing and discussing conflicts with respect, mutual trust, fairness, and honest behaviors toward promoting psychologically healthy individuals in convents. Leaders should inspire followers to manage conflicts constructively by themselves by creating conducive environments. In selecting leaders , essential considerations should go to those sisters that demonstrate serving behaviors, strong ethical and altruistic tendencies, spiritual, and relational characters, with the ability to demonstrate problem-solving skills in conflict situations for collaborative and problem-solving religious communities.

Conclusion

Managing followers' conflicts as a third party is a crucial responsibility of leaders, specifically local community leaders. Our empirical findings show that local community leaders in convents whom their followers perceived as exhibiting servant leadership behaviors manage their followers' conflicts constructively through problem-solving rather than through avoiding or forcing behaviors when performing their third-party role. These leaders promote followers' well-being by reducing followers' level of emotional exhaustion experience through nonforcing behavior. Overall, the present study advances our understanding of literature by adding to the growing evidence on how servant leaders manage followers' conflict as third parties in convents—an underrepresented research domain. In other to reduce team conflicts, this study particularly highlights the need for organizations to recognize the benefits of practicing servant leadership and problem-solving behaviors, and to refrain from both avoiding conflicts and forcing a solution while playing a third-party role. Indeed, practising leading others by serving them, reducing conflicts in teams, and curbing emotional exhaustion through the leaders' third-party behaviors are not limited to individuals in business contexts but are similarly alive in convents. The current study highlights the critical role of local community leaders in convents—serving behaviors, problem-solving, promoting the well-being of religious sisters, and improving healthy and quality religious communities.

References

Alvarado-Alvarez, C., Armadans, I., & Parada, M. J. (2020). Tracing the roots of constructive conflict management in family firms. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *13*(2), 105–126. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12164

Babakus, E., Yavas, U., & Ashill, N.J. (2010). Service worker burnout and turnover intentions: Roles of person-job fit, servant leadership, and customer orientation. *Services Marketing Quarterly*, *32*(1), 17–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332969.2011.533091

Babalola, M. T., Stouten, J., Euwema, M. C., & Ovadje, F. (2018). The relation between ethical leadership and workplace conflicts: The mediating role of employee resolution efficacy. *Journal of Management*, *44*, 2037–2063. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316638163

Baillien, E., Bollen, K., Euwema, M., & De Witte, H. (2014). Conflicts and conflict management styles as precursors of workplace bullying: A two-wave longitudinal study. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *23*, 511–524. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2012.752899

Bendersky, C., & Hays, N. A. (2012). Status conflict in groups. *Organization Science*, *23*(2), 323–340. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1110.0734

Benharda, I., Brett, J. M., & Lempereur, A. (2013). Gender and role in conflict management: Female and male managers as third parties. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *6*(2), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12004

Bianchi, R., Schonfeld, I. S., & Laurent, E. (2015). Burnout–depression overlap: A review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *36*, 28–41. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2015.01.004

Bollen, K., & Euwema, M. (2015). Angry at your boss: Who cares? Anger recognition and mediation effectiveness. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *24*(2), 256–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2014.895327

Bollen, K., Euwema, M., & Munduate, L. (2016). Promoting effective workplace mediation. In K. Bollen, M. Euwema, & L. Munduate (Eds.), *Advancing workplace mediation through integration of theory and practice* (pp. 1-17). Berlin, Germany: Springer.

Chen, G., Liu, C., & Tjosvold, D. (2005). Conflict management for effective top management teams and innovation in China. *Journal of Management Studies*, *42*(2), 277–300. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00497.x

Cooper, M. L., Knight, M. E., Frazier, M. L., & Law, D. W. (2019). Conflict management style and exhaustion in public accounting. *Managerial Auditing Journal*, *34*(2), 118–141. https://doi.org/10.1108/MAJ-09-2017-1643

Costa, P. L., Passos, A. M., & Bakker, A. B. (2015). Direct and contextual influence of team conflict on team resources, team work engagement, and team performance. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *8*(4), 211–227. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12061

De Dreu, C. K., Kluwer, E. S., Euwema, M. S., & Van der Vegt, G. S. (2017). Conflict and culture across time and space: Work and legacy of Evert van de Vliert. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *10*(2), 141–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12092

De Dreu, C. K., & Van Vianen, A. E. (2001). Managing relationship conflict and the effectiveness of organizational teams. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *22*, 309–328. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.71

De Dreu, C. K., & Weingart, L. R. (2003). Task versus relationship conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *88*, 741–749. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.4.741

De Wit, F. R., Greer, L. L., & Jehn, K. A. (2012). The paradox of intragroup conflict: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *97*, 360. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024844

Dijkstra, M. T., van Dierendonck, D., Evers, A., & De Dreu, C. K. (2005). Conflict and well-being at work: The moderating role of personality. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *20*(2), 87–140. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940510579740

Dubale, B. W., Friedman, L. E., Chemali, Z., Denninger, J. W., Mehta, D. H., Alem, A., et al. (2019). Systematic review of burnout among healthcare providers in sub-Saharan Africa. *BMC Public Health*, *19*, 1247. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7566-7

Elgoibar, P., Euwema, M., & Munduate, L. (2017). Conflict management. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of psychology* (pp. 1–28). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.5

Euwema, M., García, A. B., Munduate, L., Elgoibar, P., & Pender, E. (2015). Employee representatives in European organizations. In M. C. Euwema, L. Munduate, P. Elgoibar, E. Pender, & A. B. Garcia (Eds.), *Promoting social dialogue in European organizations* (pp. 1–17). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer International. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08605-7_1.

Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *30*(1), 111–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.07.004

Eze, C., Lingegger, G. C., & Rakoczy, S. (2016). Power relations influencing Catholic religious sisters' identity construction: A study of intersubjective exchange in religious community living. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, *4*(5), 104–199. https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v4i5.1526

Gelfand, M. J., Leslie, L. M., Keller, K., & de Dreu, C. (2012). Conflict cultures in organizations: How leaders shape conflict cultures and their organizational-level consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *97*, 1131–1147. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029993

Giebels, E., & Janssen, O. (2005). Conflict stress and reduced wellbeing at work: The buffering effect of third-party help. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *14*, 137–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/13594320444000236

Giebels, E., & Yang, H. (2009). Preferences for third-party help in workplace conflict: A cross-cultural comparison of Chinese and Dutch employees. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *2*, 344–362. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-4716.2009.00044.x

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.

Greer, L. L., & Dannals, J. E. (2017). Conflict in teams. In *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of team dynamics, teamwork, and collaborative working* (pp. 317–344). Somerset, NY: John Wiley & Sons Publishing.

Greer, L. L., Saygi, O., Aaldering, H., & de Dreu, C. K. (2012). Conflict in medical teams: Opportunity or danger? *Medical Education*, *46*, 935–942. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.2012.04321.x

Gross, M. A., Neuman, E. J., Adair, W. L., & Wallace, M. (2019). NCMR's first decade: An empirical examination. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *12*(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12143

Guerra, J. M., Martínez, I., Munduate, L., & Medina, F. J. (2005). A contingency perspective on the study of the consequences of conflict types: The role of organizational culture. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *14*(2), 157–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/13594320444000245

Hayes, A. F. (2009). Beyond Baron and Kenny: Statistical mediation analysis in the new millennium. *Communication Monographs*, *76*, 408–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750903310360

Heussen-Montgomery, E. M., & Jordans, E. (2020). Leadership in Africa: Past, present, and future perspectives. In E. Jordans, B. Ng'weno, & H. Spencer-Oatey (Eds.), *Developing global leaders* (pp. 29–58). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillian. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14606-1

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.

House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., & Gupta, V. (Eds.) (2004). *Culture, leadership, and organizations: The GLOBE study of 62 societies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hu, L., & Bentler, P.M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit Indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling*, *6*(1), 1–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705519909540118

Jehn, K. A. (1995). A multimethod examination of the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *40*, 256–282. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393638

Jehn, K. A., & Mannix, E. A. (2001). The dynamic nature of conflict: A longitudinal study of intragroup conflict and group performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, *44*(2), 238–251. https://doi.org/10.5465/3069453

Jit, R., Sharma, C. S., & Kawatra, M. (2016). Servant leadership and conflict resolution: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *27*, 591–612. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-12-2015-0086

Jit, R., Sharma, C. S., & Kawatra, M. (2017). Healing a broken spirit: Role of servant leadership. *Vikalpa*, *42*(2), 80–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/0256090917703754

Kessler, S. R., Bruursema, K., Rodopman, B., & Spector, P. E. (2013). Leadership, interpersonal conflict, and counterproductive work behavior: An examination of the stressor–strain process. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *6*(3), 180–190. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12009

Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Meuser, J. D., Hu, J., Wu, J., & Liao, C. (2015). Servant leadership: Validation of a short form of the SL-28. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *26*(2), 254–269. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.12.002

Little, T. D., Rhemtulla, M., Gibson, K., & Schoemann, A. M. (2013). Why the items versus parcels controversy needn't be one. *Psychological Methods*, *18*(3), 285–300. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033266

Little, T.D., Cunningham, W.A., Shahar, G., & Widaman, K.F. (2002). To parcel or not to parcel: Exploring the question, weighing the merits. *Structural Equation Modeling*, *9*(2), 151–173. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15328007SEM0902_1

Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The measurement of experienced burnout. *Journal of organizational behavior*, *2*(2), 99–113. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030020205

Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001). Job burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *52*, 397–422. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.397

Maslach, C. & Leiter, M. P. (2016) Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, *15*(2), 103–111. https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311

Metz, T. (2018). An African theory of good leadership. *African Journal of Business Ethics*, *12*(2), 36-53https://doi.org/10.15249/12-2-204

Nwankwo, I., Heussen-Montgomery, E. M., & Jordans, E. (2020). Leadership and culture in corporate organizations in Nigeria. In E. Jordans, B. Ng'weno, & H. Spencer-Oatey (Eds.), *Developing global leaders* (pp. 133–175). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14606-1

Oberski, D. (2014). Lavaan. survey: An R package for complex survey analysis of structural equation models. *Journal of Statistical Software*, *57*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v057.i01

Obi, I., & Bollen, K. (2017). Inclusive HRM in West Africa? Women's religious congregations in Nigeria. In A. Arenas, D. Di Marco, L. Munduate, & M. Euwema (Eds.), *Shaping inclusive workplaces through social dialogue* (pp. 239–250). Cham, Switzerland: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66393-7_16

Ohbuchi, K. I., & Atsumi, E. (2010). Avoidance brings Japanese employees what they care about in conflict management: Its functionality and "good member" image. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *3*(2), 117–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-4716.2010.00052.x

Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J. Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of applied psychology*, *88*, 879. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879

Poitras, J., Hill, K., Hamel, V., & Pelletier, F. B. (2015). Managerial mediation competency: A mixed-method study. *Negotiation Journal*, *31*(2), 105–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12085

Rahim, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *13*(3), 206–235. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.437684

Rispens, S., & Demerouti, E. (2016). Conflict at work, negative emotions, and performance: A diary study. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *9*(2), 103–119. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12069

Rivkin, W., Diestel, S., & Schmidt, K. H. (2014). The positive relationship between servant leadership and employees' psychological health: A multi-method approach. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, *28*(1–2), 52–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/239700221402800104

Römer, M. (2017). *None of my business? Leaders as third parties in employees' conflict*. Doctoral Dissertation: KU Leuven. Retrieved from https://lirias.kuleuven.be/handle/123456789/586371

Römer, M., Rispens, S., Giebels, E., & Euwema, M. C. (2012). A helping hand? The moderating role of leaders' conflict management behavior on the conflict–stress relationship of employees. *Negotiation Journal*, *28*(3), 253–277. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1571-9979.2012.00340.x

Rosseel, Y. (2012). Lavaan: An R package for structural equation modelling and more. *Journal of Statistical Software*, *48*(2), 1–36.

Saeed, T., Almas, S., Anis-ul-Haq, M., & Niazi, G. S. K. (2014). Leadership styles: relationship with conflict management styles. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *25*(3), 214–225. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-12-2012-0091

Schaufeli, W. B., Martinez, I. M., Pinto, A. M., Salanova, M., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). Burnout and engagement in university students: A cross-national study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *33*, 464–481. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022102033005003

Sobel, M.E. (1982). Asymptotic confidence intervals for indirect effects in structural equation models. In S. Leinhart (Ed.), *Sociological methodology, 13* (pp. 290–312). San Francisco: Josse-Base.

Spears, L. C., & Lawrence, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Practicing servant-leadership: Succeeding through trust, bravery, and forgiveness*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

Spector, P. E. (1987). Method variance as an artifact in self-reported affect and perceptions at work: Myth or significant problem? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *72*, 438. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.72.3.438

Spector, P. E. (2019). Do not cross me: Optimizing the use of cross-sectional designs. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *34*(2), 125–137. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-018-09613-8

Tjosvold, D., Wong, A. S. & Chen, N. Y. F.(2019) Managing conflict for effective leadership and organizations. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.240

Van de Vliert, E. (1997). *Complex interpersonal conflict behavior: Theoretical Frontiers.* Hove, UK: Psychology Press.

Van Dierendonck, D. (2011). Servant leadership: A review and synthesis. *Journal of Management*, *37*, 1228–1261. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310380462

Wang, Q., Fink, E. L., & Cai, D. A. (2012). The effect of conflict goals on avoidance strategies: What does not communicating communicate? *Human Communication Research*, *38*(2), 222–252. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2011.01421.x

Way, K. A., Jimmieson, N. L., & Bordia, P. (2016). Shared perceptions of supervisor conflict management style: A cross-level moderator of relationship conflict and employee outcomes. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *27*(1), 25–49. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-07-2014-0046

Weigl, M., Stab, N., Herms, I., Angerer, P., Hacker, W., & Glaser, J. (2016). The associations of supervisor support and work overload with burnout and depression: a cross- sectional study in two nursing settings. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *72*, 1774–1788. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.12948

Wong, A., Liu, Y., Wang, X., & Tjosvold, D. (2018). Servant leadership for team conflict management, co-ordination, and customer relationships. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, *56*(2), 238–259. https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12135

Wu, H., Qiu, S., Dooley, L. M., & Ma, C. (2020). The relationship between challenge and hindrance stressors and emotional exhaustion: The moderating role of perceived servant leadership. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(1), 282. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17010282

Yang, I., & Li, M. (2017). Can absent leadership be positive in team conflicts? *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *28*(2), 146–165. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-12-2015-0083

Zhang, X., Bollen, K., Pei, R., & Euwema, M. C. (2018). Peacemaking at the workplace: A systematic review. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *11*(3), 204–224. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12128

Zhang, Y., Zheng, Y., Zhang, L., Xu, S., Liu, X., & Chen, W. (2019). A meta-analytic review of the consequences of servant leadership: The moderating roles of cultural factors. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10490-018-9639-z

Zhao, E. Y., Thatcher, S. M., & Jehn, K. A. (2019). Instigating, engaging in, and managing group conflict: A review of the literature addressing the critical role of the leader in group conflict. *Academy of Management Annals*, *13* (1), 112–147. https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2016.0153

Zhao, X., Lynch, J. G., Jr, & Chen, Q. (2010). Reconsidering Baron and Kenny: Myths and truths about mediation analysis. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *37*(2), 197–206. https://doi.org/10.1086/651257

Innocentina-Marie O. Obi is a PhD student at KU Leuven, Belgium. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Theology at the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), Port Harcourt, Nigeria, and her Master's degree in Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven, Belgium. Innocentina-Marie is currently finalizing her PhD in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, in the Department of Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Professional Learning at KU Leuven, Belgium. Her research interests focus on (servant) leadership, and conflict management, third-party conflict behavior, trust, and well-being. Innocentina-Marie is a Catholic Nun.

Katalien Bollen obtained her PhD at KU Leuven ("Mediation in hierarchical labor conflicts"). Currently, Katalien works as Senior Expert Family & Business Dynamics. She supports families in their communication and conflict skills in order to improve mutual understanding and learning. Katalien is affiliated to the University of Leuven, where she teaches and co-supervises PhD students. Her research interests focus on processes and online tools that foster empowerment and cooperation (e.g., mediation, coaching, negotiation, leadership). Katalien is Fellow of the Leuven Centre for Collaborative Management (LCM) and involved in different executive master's programs on mediation.

Hillie Aaldering works as an assistant professor at the department of work and organizational psychology at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her research is focused on understanding the psychology of individuals in conflicts, both within and between groups, and especially on promoting cooperation through conflict handling and negotiations. She uses both experimental games and field studies in her research. She has published in leading journals in the field of social and organizational psychology on these topics.

Wouter Robijn is a PhD candidate at KU Leuven (Belgium). His research focuses on leadership, team processes, and well-being. He is currently finishing his PhD on engaging leadership from a conflict management perspective. Besides his academic work, he also works as a trainer and coach with a focus on leadership development and team coaching.

Martin C. Euwema is a full professor in organizational psychology at KU Leuven (Belgium), co-director of the Leuven Centre for collaborative management, and chair of the research group occupational and organizational psychology and professional learning (O2L). He is past president of the International Association for Conflict Management (IACM). Martin's interests are conflict management and mediation, organizational change, and (international) leadership. He has a wide experience as consultant and mediator.