Emerging Leaders: The Roles of Flourishing and Religiosity in Millennials' Leadership Development Activity

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Confronted by today's epidemic of corporate meltdowns, broken institutional paradigms, unethical decision-making, and demand for innovative competencies in order to remain competitive, educators and researchers are challenged to examine how today's future leaders develop the skill and will to be effective. Whether labeled GenY, Generation Next, Generation Tech or Millennials (i.e. individuals born between 1982 and 2003), this group of change agents differs in attitudes, behaviors, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations from older generations (e.g. Taylor & Keeter, 2010; Twenge, Campbell & Freeman, 2012). The scholarly debate on the role of meaning making (Park, 2005) describes the Millennial on a continuum from being community-minded and actively seeking meaning (e.g. Drath & Palus, 1994; Gehrke, 2008) to being less interested in meaning making and purpose (Twenge et al., 2012). This study examines the relationships between two meaning making constructs, flourishing and religiosity, and proactive leadership development in college students (*N*=282). Both flourishing and religiosity were significantly related to leadership development, and the relationship between flourishing and leadership development was partially accounted for by perceived climate for leadership development. Our study has implications for both researchers and educators as we seek to understand how Millennials develop into values-based leaders.

Key words/phrases: leadership development, flourishing, diversity, religiosity, spirituality

Confronted by today's epidemic of corporate meltdowns, broken institutional paradigms, unethical decision making, and demand for innovative competencies in order to remain competitive, managers and college educators are challenged to re-evaluate the training and development pedagogy currently in place. Specifically, we need to better understand the motivations and beliefs of the emerging leaders who will be charged with problem-solving and finding solutions to these conditions. While leadership as a research stream is robust, empirical research measuring the antecedents and drivers to leadership for Millennials (i.e. individuals born between 1982 and 2003) is scant, and what evidence does exist is contradictory. Our study is designed to better understand Millennials as emerging leaders by addressing the importance of the relationship between the intrinsic motivators of flourishing and religiosity and Millennials' leadership development activities.

Today's university students are learning and questioning the role of the leader and their future in this society as change agents and champions of values that are more consistent with their belief systems. Leaders are confronted by demands for problem-solving, continuous innovation, technology, diverse workforce and changing relationships and values requiring new levels of competencies, knowledge, skills and experience unprecedented in workplace history. Thus, an opportunity exists to re-examine leadership as it applies to our new environmental and societal contexts and to factor in the faces of our emerging leaders.

THE MILLENNIAL DIFFERENCE

Whether you label them GenY, Baby Busters, Generation Next, Generation Tech or Millennials, this group of change agents is implicated in a scholarly dialogue about how their attitudes and behaviors differ as compared to their predecessors, the Baby Boomers (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2010; Twenge, Campbell & Freeman, 2012). Millennials are regarded as sheltered, confident, optimistic, team-oriented, achievement-focused, pressured, and more conventional than rebellious (Kowske, Rasch, & Willey, 2010). Labeling Millennials as both assertive with strong self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2001) and narcissistic

(Twenge et al., 2008), older workers report finding Millennials difficult to interact with, engaging a sense of entitlement (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Despite such definitive portrayals, the patterns of difference are not entirely clear. Some researchers report that Millennials are more meaning-driven, socially conscious, caring and community-minded (Epstein & Howes, 2008; Winograd & Hais, 2011) than Baby Boomers at the same age. In contrast, Twenge et al. (2012) found that Millennials rated finding purpose and meaning less important compared to Boomers at the same age. Similarly, researchers have debated viewpoints on the roles of religiosity and civic-mindedness in Millennials' decision-making and sensemaking. Millennials are reported to be more likely to get their parents to track down a legislator or authority figure to correct something that they deem as inappropriate (Eneagwali, 2011), to stand up for their own beliefs, and to fight against injustice (Downing, 2006). In terms of trends on religious attitudes, Howe and Strauss (2000) forecasted a return to traditional values by the Millennials. Further, Dromheller (2005) discovered a pervasive growth in the Millennial generation finding religious gratification and replacing institutional religion through popular media culture including programs such as CBS's TV series "Touched by an Angel", movies (e.g. *The Passion of the Christ*), and radio programs (e.g. "Focus on the Family" with James Dobson). In contrast, the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life (2010) reported that Millennials "are the least overtly religious American generation in modern times. One-in-four are unaffiliated with any religion", which is a sharp decline from Baby Boomers at the same age (Taylor & Keeter, 2010, p. 2). Despite this, the Pew report also concluded that Millennials' religious beliefs and practices remained fairly traditional. In other words, even if they did not attend religious services as frequently as their predecessors or affiliate with narrow labels of faith designation, they remained tied to general beliefs and practices.

Beyond religious beliefs and practices, Millennials are approaching their daily life, information processing, and socialization activities differently because of technology (Wisniewski, 2010). We note a changing landscape in socialization as Millennials no longer have the same boundaries faced by Baby Boomers. Socialization, a major leadership competency in the workplace, is expanded drastically with the access of Internet connection (Smith & Forbes, 2001). Thus, we have moved from the "we" society of the Baby Boomers who often claim a small, intimate circle of close friends and associates to the "me" society of the Millennials (Twenge et al., 2012), often boasting of thousands of friends who track their lives and engage in regular outreach via the internet.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND MILLENNIALS

Research on flourishing and religiosity is particularly relevant to leadership development as these constructs are emerging topics in the discipline, they can influence organizational performance (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004), and they are featured prominently in servant leadership and authentic leadership theories (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 1970). Further, the conceptual difference between spirituality and religiosity and their impact on leadership and management practices have received minimal attention. We seek to fill this gap by examining religiosity (distinguished from spirituality) alongside flourishing in order to understand their relationships with the leadership development activities of Millennials.

Day (2001) defined leadership development as the endeavor to expand the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes. Educational programs and courses directed toward training future leaders and improving leadership skills are extensive and diverse in the mode of instruction, comprising formal coursework in college settings as well as short-term workshops (Doh, 2003). The debate concerning the need to redefine leadership in management education for the 21st century is ongoing (Nevins & Stumpf, 1999). Wisniewski (2010) identified the significant differences in the 20th and 21st century classroom as the movement away from the behaviorist paradigm toward a constructivist one where student engagement is paramount. This change is consistent with the framework of how Millennials process information. Although the inclination or drive to develop leadership competencies will vary among people based on individual characteristics (Cameron et al., 2006); mentors (Conger, 1989, 1996); and skills (Bartlett, 1998; Doh, 2003), the general consensus is that leadership can be taught and learned (Hitt & Tyler, 1991; Nevins & Stumpf, 1999). However, the methods of teaching leadership need to focus on creating experiences that are meaningful to students (Doh, 2001; Stumpf, 1995).

Leadership development builds capacity for adaptability across a wide range of situations (Houijberg, Hart, & Dodge, 1997); navigation of the loss of sensemaking (Weick, 1993); and the development of interpersonal social awareness and social skills (Gardner, 1993). Leadership development initiatives often fail in organizations because the manager's needs and values are not in alignment with organizational needs and

values (Fernandez & Hogan, 2002; Shanley, 2007), and training emphasizes individual skills and abilities instead of building a connection between leaders and others in the organization (Day, 2001). When the core values are clarified, congruent, and harmoniously balanced with the interests and power among all the stakeholders, there is a match between the individual and organizational fit which can result in a sense of internal meaning making and flourishing (Fernandez & Hogan, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2000).

FLOURISHING AS A PATHWAY TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Intrinsic values are important to understand leadership as they explain the focus and direction of an individual's actions. This individual to organizational fit achieved by having aligned values and goals serves as a foundation for flourishing and success (Fernandez & Hogan, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2000). Flourishing, a key component of our focal institution's mission statement, served as the departure point for our inquiry into Millennials' leadership development activity. Flourishing refers to a state of optimal mental health, and is related to a wide array of individual and societal benefits (Keyes, 2007). Mental health entails far more than the absence of mental illness. People who are flourishing both feel good and do good, experiencing frequent positive emotions and making constructive contributions to the world around them (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011). Flourishing is comprised of three facets: emotional well-being (i.e. frequency of positive affect), social well-being (i.e. relation of self to society), and psychological well-being (i.e. personal worth, competence and purpose). Thus, flourishing encompasses both *hedonia* (happiness) and *eudaimonia* (human potential) (Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1989).

Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory can account for the positive effects of flourishing. Positive emotion, which is frequently experienced by flourishers (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011), broadens attention and prompts engagement in an expanded repertoire of behaviors and physical, intellectual and social resources that enable people to recognize and take advantage of new opportunities. Fredrickson et al. (2008) formally tested the "build" component of broaden-and-build theory, establishing that positive emotions are linked to accrual of cognitive, psychological, social and physical resources. Essentially, positive emotions activate pathways for skill development by signaling that it is safe to explore one's environment. Researchers have linked positive directed emotions and benevolent values to playing a fundamental role in developing authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Therefore, we extend this knowledge to flourishing as a positive predictor of leadership development.

Hypothesis 1: Flourishing is positively related to Millennials' leadership development activity.

RELIGIOSITY AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Religion has been used as a framework for interpreting life events or meaning making to understand the world and others (Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1985). There is a strong connection between spiritual beliefs, values (specifically interconnectedness and compassion), leadership activities (Yasuno, 2004), and vision and commitment to performance (Fry, 2003). Additionally, intrinsic religiosity, defined as a deeply rooted sacred belief and an internalized norm and standard that results in expectations of what is right or wrong, is negatively associated with likelihood to engage in unethical behavior (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007) or manipulation strategies (Watson, Morris & Hood, 1998). These core beliefs and values are important to understanding leadership choices as they help to explain the focus and direction of individual's actions (Fernandez & Hogan, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2000).

Our focus on religiosity rather than spirituality warrants mention. Since the early 20th century, researchers have debated the definitions and operationalization of the constructs 'religion' and 'spirituality' with varying results (Coe, 1900; James, 1902, 1961). Hill et al. (2000) posited that both have broad and intertwined natures, and yet others construe the two as separate constructs (e.g. Fuller, 2001). Spirituality is identified as a multidimensional construct that reflects one's interconnectedness with self, others, the entire universe, and higher power (Mitroff & Denton, 1999); a search for the sacred (Pargament, 1997); and represents a foundation of meaning and values from which one conceptualizes the world. Spirituality is a process of meaning making — engaging in the human experience in an inclusive way (Parks, 2000) — and is not contingent on religious path or belief (Fowler, 1981). Contrastingly, religion includes more functional elements and ritual and "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (Pargament, 1997, p. 32).

Spirituality, often more conceptually related to flourishing, is seen as universal and inclusive and looks inward to an awareness of more universal values. In contrast, religion is often viewed as more divisive and intolerant

(Mitroff & Denton, 1999) and yet those pursuing religious paths can be driven to more moral and civic engagement. Problem-solving competency is a major factor in effective leadership development, and religion can affect problem-solving (Pargament et al., 1988). In particular, intrinsic religion (Hoge, 1972) is used for emotional support, redefining difficulties, and problem-solving efforts. Allport and Ross (1967) conceptualized intrinsic religion as a belief system that is internalized and in evidence when someone "lives his religion," contrasted with extrinsic religion where individuals use religious activities to be more engaged in the community or to meet more external expectations. Considering this intrinsic perspective, we posit that religiosity will also relate to leadership development activity.

Hypothesis 2: Millennials' religiosity is positively related to leadership development activity.

PERCEIVED CLIMATE FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Extending the broaden-and-build rationale to leadership development, we propose that the extent to which students are flourishing will positively influence their perceptions of whether the campus climate promotes leadership development. The expanded array of personal resources that are a hallmark of flourishing suggest that flourishing individuals read the environment in a more positive way, seeing more opportunities and fewer barriers to action. The positive emotions associated with flourishing contribute to an opportunity-oriented mindset that sets the stage for personal growth and development (Fredrickson, 2001).

Whereas flourishing aligns with the broaden-and-build perspective, and thus suggests an "opening" of experience, religiosity is associated with a narrower mindset. For instance, Saroglou's (2002) meta-analysis isolated a small but significant negative relationship between religiousness and Openness to Experience. Thus, we did not expect to find the proposed pathway between religiosity and positive climate perceptions.

Hypothesis 3: Flourishing is positively related to perceived climate for development activity.

Applying the rationale afforded by Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory, we further propose that the effect of flourishing on leadership development activity is mediated by perceived climate for development activity. Flourishing individuals' expanded mindset fosters perceptions that leadership development is feasible, and this perceived climate of support paves the way for development activity.

Hypothesis 4: Perceived climate for development activity mediates the relationship between flourishing and engagement in leadership development activity.

Finally, given that this is the first investigation, to our knowledge, to jointly examine the roles of flourishing and religiosity in Millennials' leadership development, we sought to establish whether flourishing and religiosity are unique predictors of development activity.

Research Question: Do flourishing and religiosity account for unique variance in leadership development activity?

METHOD

Sample and procedure

Nearly two months into the fall semester, all new first-year students at a liberal arts institution in the Midwest of the United States received an email invitation to complete an online survey. Participants (*N* = 282, 30% response rate) completed the survey in a single sitting at their leisure. The majority (77.8%) of participants were female; the mean age was 18.28 (*SD* = .47). In exchange for completion of the survey, participants were entered into a drawing for a $10 gift card. Students represented a wide range of majors (e.g. Business, Pharmacy, Arts, Ecology).

Measures

Flourishing was assessed via the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (Keyes, 2009), a 14-item scale (α = .92) that measures three facets of well-being: emotional (e.g. "interested in life"), psychological (e.g. "life has a sense of direction or meaning to it"), and social (e.g. "people are basically good"). Participants reported the frequency of their feelings over the past two weeks (1 = *never,* 6 = *every day*).

Religiosity was assessed with a scale modified from Worthington et al.'s (2003) 10-item Religious Commitment Inventory. Participants responded to 8 items (α= .96) on a scale where 1 = *not at all true of me* and 5 = *totally true of me*. A sample item reads, "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life". Climate for leadership development was assessed with a scale modified from Williams and Leuke (1999). Participants responded to five items on a scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree* (α = .83). A sample item reads, "My peers are supportive of my efforts to improve my leadership abilities."

Leadership development activity was assessed with a 7-item scale developed by Williams et al. (n.d.). Responses are provided on a scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree* (α = .81). A sample item reads, "I have identified another student that I use as my role model for developing my leadership skills." All items reflect optional development activities as opposed to leadership development that is formally prescribed by a program of study.

RESULTS

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. We conducted our focal analyses using continuous scoring on the flourishing scale (Keyes, 2009).

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

	M	*SD*	Flourishing	Religiosity	Perceived Climate for Development
Flourishing	52.41	11.25	--		
Religiosity	2.12	0.77	.10	--	
Perceived Climate for Development	3.80	0.61	.24**	.10	--
Leadership Development Activity	3.13	0.73	.30**	.24**	.48**

Note: ** p < .01

In order to test Hypotheses 1-3, we examined the bivariate correlations between the focal variables. In support of Hypothesis 1, we observed a significant positive correlation between flourishing and leadership development, r (282) = .30, p < .01. In support of Hypothesis 2, we observed a significant positive correlation between religiosity and leadership development, r (282) = .24, p < .01. In support of Hypothesis 3, we found a strong positive relationship between flourishing and perceived climate for development, r (282) = .48, p < .01.

To test the hypothesis that perceived climate for leadership development mediates the effect of flourishing on leadership development activity (Hypothesis 4), we utilized an SPSS macro created by Preacher and Hayes (2004) that facilitates estimation of the indirect effect both with a normal theory approach (i.e. the Sobel test) and with a bootstrap approach to obtain confidence intervals. Flourishing had an indirect positive effect on leadership development (.01), Sobel z = 3.63 (p < .001). Bootstrap results confirmed the Sobel test with a 99% confidence interval not containing zero (.002, .013). The indirect effect is summarized in Figure 1.
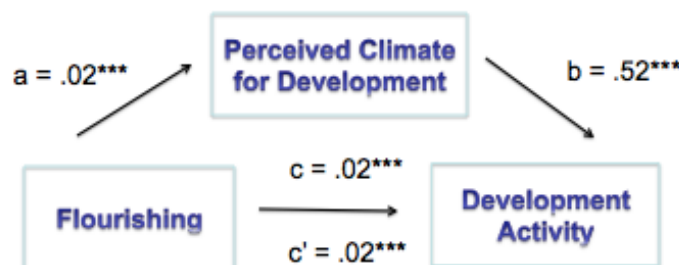

Figure 1: Test for mediation in Hypothesis 4

We investigated our exploratory research question using hierarchical multiple regression. Both flourishing (β = .02, t = 5.17, p < .001) and religiosity (β = .12, t = 3.69, p < .001) were significant predictors of leadership development when jointly entered into the prediction model (R^2 = .12).

DISCUSSION

Although considerable debate surrounds Millennial research, there is mounting evidence that traditional management and education paradigms are less applicable to today's learner and tomorrow's leader. We sought to identify the antecedents of leadership development activity in Millennials. Specifically, we examined the roles of flourishing and religiosity in how college students make sense of the context for leadership development and pursue leadership development activities. In line with broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001), our results suggest that individuals who are flourishing perceive more supportive environments for leadership development and seek out more leadership development activities. Further, we established that perceived climate for leadership development is a more proximal predictor of leadership development activity than flourishing itself. Religiosity is also positively implicated in leadership development activity, but religiosity and flourishing were not related, thereby indirectly supporting the argument that spirituality and religiosity are distinct constructs (Dy-Liacco et al., 2009).

To summarize, our findings suggest that flourishing and religiosity both impact leadership development, with flourishing being mediated by perceived organizational climate, and do not interact at the aggregate level. It warrants mention that in an exploratory analysis, we observed a significant interaction between the psychological well-being subscale of flourishing and religiosity on perceived climate for leadership development. Specifically, the relationship between psychological well-being and climate for leadership development was stronger for more religious participants, suggesting that religiosity and flourishing may be more or less interrelated depending on how the constructs are operationalized. Thus, religiosity may qualify the influence of flourishing on perceived opportunities for leadership development under certain conditions.

Future Research and Implications

Our study is limited by its cross-sectional design and self-reports of leadership development activity. Future research could employ longitudinal designs (e.g. Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002) to examine whether states such as flourishing and more enduring aspects of individuals such as religiosity are implicated in "upward spirals" of leadership development and well-being (Keyes, Hysom, & Lupo, 2000). The generalizability of our findings also warrants consideration as our prevalence rate of flourishing (70%) was considerably higher than that reported elsewhere (e.g. Keyes, 2002). Future research should also expand the criterion space to look at not only extent of engagement in leadership development but also qualitative differences in what leadership means to Millennials and whether there are differences in objective reports of leadership effectiveness as reported by advisors and other figures. We position flourishing and religiosity as potential predictors of long-term leadership success, and thus we need to turn to alternative dependent variables to establish this connection and to understand how Millennials derive meaning from their leadership development experiences. Furthermore, we need to incorporate spirituality in order to parse the effects of spirituality and religiosity on leadership development. Moving beyond self-administered questionnaires and turning to qualitative research approaches will further these goals and enhance our understanding of the process and the specific circumstances that facilitate leadership develop in Millennials (e.g. Bryman, 2004).

Our results carry implications for leadership education for higher education and management practitioners, offering a glimpse into the phenomenon of leadership development within the college student experience. Whereas most literature on leadership development has been presented from a business or manager perspective, it is important to examine existing leadership theories relative to the Millennials as this group of emerging leaders think, feel, act and interact differently than their predecessors (e.g. Twenge et al., 2012).

Our findings suggest that flourishing as a positive state of well-being impacts a person's ability to see the organizational climate as being receptive and supportive. With both of these factors in place, students were more willing to engage in leadership development activities. On the other hand, students who were identified as religious also were proactive in leadership development activities but were not impacted as much by their perception of the climate for leadership development. This has direct implications for building leadership skills in the area of diversity competency. As workforce diversity increases, leaders are increasingly required to respond to colleagues, customers and market situations with flexibility, openness to differences, awareness, and sensitivity to ethics (Frusti, Niesen, & Campton, 2003). Thus, our finding that flourishing individuals read

the environment in a more positive manner hints that flourishing is a particularly important state to cultivate.

To this end, educators and managers would benefit from program designs, training and curriculum that help participants expand their flourishing propensity. Suggestions include creating interventions and environments that support experiential education and build inclusivity within the environment. In the classroom, this would include integration of case studies where topics about values, meaning making, civic engagement, authentic and servant leadership styles are utilized to stimulate discussion groups, role playing exercises, and self-reflection exercises. In essence, these programs could provide a viable and intentional leadership development climate focused on building openness, sensitivity, and flexibility among its participants. Managers can provide on-boarding, mentoring, and early career development opportunities to further enhance these development areas once Millennials join the workforce. Our results provide a basis from which educators and managers can work when establishing leadership development curricula focusing on proactive engagement and experiential education versus exclusively theory-based or transactional knowledge transfer. Additional interventions include a focus on discerning the leadership calling early among students and implementing strategies to build diversity competencies; integrating self-reflection exercises and story-telling pedagogy to stimulate exploration of meaning; and introducing emerging leadership theories with meaning making at their base such as authentic and servant leadership.

The ultimate goal of leadership development is to shape wise leaders who are apt to do the "right thing". Through an Aristotelian lens, wisdom can be regarded as the underlying strength—the "master virtue"—without which other strengths could not be harnessed (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Thus, practical wisdom is about knowing what to aim at, and aiming at the right thing. We maintain that there is deep value in understanding the factors that precipitate engagement in and authentic leadership development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Altogether, we argue that it is critical to begin to understand how the "me" focus that is supposedly characteristic of Millennials translates into the "we" focus that is a key component of contemporary leadership theories. Our results suggest that assessing Millennials' flourishing and religiosity helps us understand where future managers are on their path to leadership effectiveness and, more essentially, to wisdom.

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