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Examining the Experience of Nepotism in a Protestant Church

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The research literature reveals a number of studies conducted on unethical behavior, including nepotism, within the broader nonprofit sector. However, the effect of faith community leadership nepotism on parishioners has not been studied. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to fill a gap in the literature by exploring parishioner perceptions of leadership nepotism through the lens of servant leadership. Specific to this study, it was unknown whether parishioners of a Protestant church view nepotism as having a positive, negative, or neutral impact related to leadership performance. Specifically, the study explored parishioner impacts related to 5 elements of servant leadership: (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) stewardship, and (e) building community. Individual interviews were conducted with 9 parishioners from 1 church where nepotism was known to exist. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to identify and extract patterns and themes. Among the findings, the data revealed the presence of servant leadership characteristics found in leadership, which appeared to mitigate the negative influence of nepotism. The study may provide faith community leadership with information that can be used to create and implement important policies related to nepotism.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my loving mother, Vivian B. Austin, my precious godmother, the late Jessie M. Burse; and my loving and supportive siblings and friends. To my son, Austin Waggener and his bride, Nikki, thank you for your emotional and financial support, and limitless encouragement. To my little sister, my fellow-Bruin, my pie-face baby, the late Melanie C. Austin-Thomas. You never doubted. You are forever in my heart. Thank you all for persevering with me and for your continued belief in me and my dreams.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The concept of nepotism, when individuals in power or authority show favoritism in the hiring of relatives and friends, is neither a rare or recent occurrence (Jones & Stout, 2015). It is so commonplace "it seems that organizations and societies cannot live with nepotism and yet cannot live without it" (Calvard & Raipaul-Baptiste, 2015, p. 32). Employing a phenomenological research design, I conducted this qualitative study to contribute to the body of knowledge by offering insight into how nepotism (by church leadership) is perceived by members in the environment of a Protestant church. In this study, I explored if, and to what degree, parishioners of a single Protestant church in which leadership nepotism exists, identify any of five elements of servant leadership (i.e., listening, empathy, healing, stewardship, and building community) when describing whether they believe nepotism has had positive, negative, or neutral impacts on the congregation. In this study leaders were defined as those holding the office of pastors, elders, and deacons with the responsibilities of shepherding, overseeing, guiding, teaching, and admonishing that were originally detailed in the Holy Bible (Acts 15:1-2, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5-9).

The possibility of actions that may be considered unethical, including nepotism, is perceived as a potential point of weakness, resulting in federal laws that were established with the intent of protecting nonprofit funds (Internal Revenue Service, 2009). It is illegal for all 501(c)(3) tax exempt organizations, including churches and religious organizations, to participate in any "activities that result in inurement of the church's or religious organization's income or assets to insiders" (Internal Revenue Service, p. 5). According to the Internal Revenue Code that governs 501(c)(3) organizations, examples of inurement include compensation that is considered unreasonable when compared to like work or qualification or the giving of organization-owned property to insiders for less than the fair market value (Internal Revenue Service, p. 5). The regulations further prohibit that anyone other than the mission-defined stakeholders are the greatest beneficiaries of the work done by the organization; this prohibition extends to the creator of the organization and the creator's family ("Inurement/Private Benefit," 2012). Failure to adhere to these rules could jeopardize a church's tax-exempt status, resulting not only in the organization having to pay taxes but could also result in member contributions not being considered tax-deductible (Internal Revenue Service, 2009). Church leaders through their management and governance of the organization are required by law and expected by the public to put the mission of the organization and the welfare of the stakeholders it is mandated to serve above any personal or unfair gain (Jeavons, 2005).

For church members and church donors, there may be concerns regarding the qualifications of those hired. They may not know who is accountable for hiring decisions. Accountability denotes the relationship between individuals and organizations and the process by which they are held answerable and responsible to each other (Argandona, 2009); this is important when considering the potential influences of a religious nonprofit or church. These organizations are maintained and supported by members as well as other donors and stakeholders. It is reasonable to expect that the decisions made regarding hiring be those considered best for the entire organization.

In this chapter, I will provide the framework of the study, beginning with the introduction and background. This will be followed by a presentation of the problem statement, nature of the study, research question, and purpose of the study. Theoretical framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations will then be discussed, and the chapter will conclude with a discussion surrounding the significance of the study and a summary**.**

Background

Nepotism was first documented in the Middle Ages, when Catholic popes and other elite clerics who were not allowed to marry and therefore denied legitimate offspring, resorted to awarding prestigious positions within the church to their illegitimate sons or nephews and other relatives (Bellow, 2003, Denemark, 2008). According to Cowan (2012), the Church was adversely affected by the financial problems caused by nepotism; however, it was deemed culturally appropriate to put the financial care of an individual's family above all. The defining movement that came to be known as the Protestant Reformation responded to many questionable church practices including popes and cardinals who lived like royalty, simony (i.e., selling Church positions), pluralism, clerical immorality, the selling of indulgences, and nepotism (Cowan, 2012; de Lang, 2016).

Nepotism is generally perceived as being negative, especially since, perhaps due to its history, "the term itself implies that nepotism is a bad thing" (Riggio & Saggi, 2015, p. 19). Pearce (2015) asserted in an employment environment there is "strong evidence to support…that nepotism and cronyism… produces poorer organizational performance" (p. 41), while Padgett, Padgett, and Morris (2015) suggested negative outcomes may even extend to those who received the preferential treatment. However, Calvard and Raipaul-Baptiste (2015) asserted that the perpetuation of nepotistic behaviors is due to a history of family-produced pressure to show "altruism, generosity, and gratitude" (p. 32) to family members while expecting the same in return. It is further suggested that the benefits of trust, loyalty, and human capital transfer, that can result when children and family friends are exposed to certain career-specific knowledge and skills, can outweigh the perceived negatives (Jones & Stout, 2015). This could be especially relevant in the context of a church with strong familial ties to leadership. Additionally, there is some evidence that by certain measures, family-run businesses perform better than non-family-run businesses (Padgett et al., 2015). Research on nepotism has been addressed within the disciplines of anthropology (Kragh, 2012), organizational behavior (Spranger, Colarelli, Dimotakis, Jacoby, & Avery, 2012) and industrial and organizational psychology (Biermeier-Hanson, 2015; Jones & Stout, 2015; Riggio & Saggi, 2015) but little within religious communities.

Churches enjoy nonprofit status with 501(c) (3) privileges but are not required to incorporate or file to become exempt (Hall, 2005). A nonprofit organization is a place where it might be assumed that all infrastructure components, including appointments, hiring, and employee compensation decisions would be ethical, specifically benefiting organization membership and community stakeholders, not the family members or friends of the highest levels of leadership (Jeavons, 2005; Montague, 2013). Nepotism is questionable if the hired family member is not, or may not be, the most qualified for a position (Bellow, 2003, Padgett et al., 2015). Conduct by organization leadership may become suspect if it appears inconsistent with ethical behavior, including the possible misuse of contributions (Jeavons, 2005).

The question is not solely about what the money is spent on, but also about who is doing the spending. In some instances, it is family members who are either on staff, a member of the board, or who may be bequeathed the ministry following the pastor's retirement. Collin, Ahlberg, and Gabrielsson (2011) posited that in family firms, members of the family are given preference. This is true for both current and future family members. The assumption is that nepotism is the obvious byproduct. Mulder (2008) further observed that in a firm that is not family owned, once the decision is made to allow nepotism, additional family members should be expected to join the organization. To help guard against corruption there are specific rules that regulate how receipts and assets, usually comprised primarily of donated funds, should be allocated in tax exempt organizations in the United States; namely that the funds should support the mission-defined beneficiaries of the organization (Inurement, 2012). These rules also govern churches and do not in theory support a lavish lifestyle enjoyed by organization management or their families (Swanson, 2012).

Problem Statement

Research indicates that the presence of nepotism has an effect on an environment, whether the negative consequence when favor granted to friends and family results in questions of fairness, poor organizational performance, and conflicts of interest (Calvard & Rajpaul-Baptiste, 2015; Pearce, 2015), or the positive outcomes that can result when a family business enjoys the benefits resulting from social connection, knowledge transfer, and familial indebtedness (Bellow, 2003; Jones, 2016; Jones & Stout, 2015). Most of the nepotism research focuses on employees in the private and public sector, much less so on nonprofits or non-employee populations. The effect of nepotism on parishioners has received little, if any, attention from Protestant churches specifically or investigation by researchers in public policy or related disciplines.

Although leaders in nonprofit organizations hold positions of public trust, perhaps none more so than in churches, within the nonprofit sector there is evidence of behaviors, including nepotism, that might be considered unethical (Jeavons, 2005, 2008; Luoma, 2010; Montague, 2013). However, according to Richardson (2012), while ethical leadership requires good communication, moral judgment, honesty, consistent modeling of fairness, and valuing the contribution of others, those attributes often exist behind the scenes, "mostly out of sight" (p. 14). Although Richardson suggested that "integrity should be its own reward" (p. 12); nevertheless, if what might otherwise be experienced as ethical leadership is instead either obscured or negatively altered by the presence of nepotism, that may serve as an indication of the need for church policy addressing nepotistic practices.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore parishioner perceptions of the relationship between nepotism and servant leadership in their openly nepotistic Protestant church. Creswell (2007) wrote that a phenomenological approach was best when "it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (p. 60). This justified using a phenomenological research method for this study.

Research Question

The following research question developed for this study was created to facilitate an understanding of congregation members' personal experience with nepotism in the context of their church and to gain insights on its impact:

> To what degree do parishioners in a Protestant church where leader nepotism is present, perceive the impact on the congregation as positive, negative, or neutral related to five elements of servant leadership?

Theoretical Framework

The theory of servant leadership provided the framework of this study. Servant leadership is considered a form of positive leadership that emphasizes "ethical and moral behavior" (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2018, p. 501) and considers the leader as servant to followers rather than "master" (p. 25). Although there is a large amount of research on nepotism, there is little contemporary literature that specifically addresses its impact on members in a contemporary church environment. In this study, I expressly focused on the following five characteristics of servant leadership as gleaned from the

Spears's (2010) list of 10: (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) stewardship, and (e) building community (Hoch et al., 2018). These characteristics are most suitable for a church environment and most closely align with the responsibilities outlined in the Holy Bible (Acts 15:1-2, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5-9) for pastors, elders, and deacons. In this study, I documented if parishioners noted any of these five elements of servant leadership when describing whether nepotism impacts their congregation in a negative, positive, or neutral manner.

Because this study dealt with parishioners' perceptions of ethical leadership within a nepotistic environment, the theoretical framework I employed for this study was relative to ethical leadership, specifically servant leadership. Although there are several ethical leadership approaches, servant leadership was chosen because of its other focus. According to Dion (2012), the servant leader's focus is on service, specifically to the follower.

Nature of the Study

According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative approach allows the study of between 12-15 individuals at one church to gain an understanding of their "common or shared experiences" of a particular phenomenon (p. 60). This method of inquiry depends on interpreting meaning from descriptions shared by persons who have experienced the phenomenon to uncover "the essences or structures of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Understanding how parishioners experience nepotism in an environment influenced by behaviors consistent with servant leadership was the focus of this phenomenological study. According to Moustakas (1994), the meaning of a thing is included in its description. I chose this research design because of its ability to extract the meaning of several participants' experience regarding nepotism (see Creswell, 2007) as opposed to either generating theory, focusing on one individual's life or "the behaviors of a culture-sharing group" (Creswell, 2007, p. 95), although the later may add depth if used in a future study.

According to Yin (2011), a phenomenological research approach goes beyond studying the event to include their "political, historical, and sociocultural contexts" (p. 14). The idea of social construction and its concern how knowledge is integrated into cultural values and practices and its understanding that socially constructed meanings are "always fluid and dynamic" (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013, p. 2) provided the method by which interviews were organized. In addition to comprehensive interviews, storytelling and narratives may provide information that is as rich as possible regarding each parishioner's lived experience.

Definitions

Cronyism: Favoritism specifically within a network of insiders (Jones & Stout, 2015).

Favoritism: Using connections to gain unmerited favor, including jobs specifically directed towards friends and associates as opposed to those who are outside of a person's social group (Bramoullé, 2016).

Inurement: When net earnings or assets of any 501(c) (3) organization are directed to benefit the creator, creator's family, officers, or any other individuals who have a personal or private interest in the organization ("Inurement/Private Benefit," 2012; Silk, 2005).

Nepotism: Showing unmerited favoritism to relatives and friends in a work environment (Jones & Stout, 2015).

Protestant: A branch of Christianity resulting from reformers protesting some components of the Roman Catholic Church and those in authority. Followers reject the need for a priest as mediator or the idea of papal authority. Rather, the believer receives salvation through an act of grace by God. This grace produces in its recipient the faith in God and salvation that converts them into a believer (Kurth, 1998).

Assumptions

I assumed the selected parishioners from one church where it was known that nepotism existed would all have some experience with nepotism. Because they were given assurances that their responses will be strictly confidential and they would have discretion on choice of interview time and location, I assumed that they responded truthfully about their experience and perceptions. Participants were those who are considered members, rather than attendees, according to the standard set by the church (e.g., for at least 2 years). It was also assumed that exploring the lived experiences of participants would provide data that were rich in context.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was to analyze the lived experiences of parishioners of a Protestant church in relation to nepotism. I selected the participants for this study from one church and assumed they self-described as Protestant as evidenced by their membership in a Protestant church. Twelve to 15 individuals were targeted for interviews; however, the final study included nine participants who were members of a Protestant church where nepotism was known to exist and servant leadership was suspected. The church size was medium, described as between 75 and 300 families (Renhoof & Owens, 2012) or between 501–1000 members (Arthur & Rensleigh, 2015) because I thought that this would provide a greater opportunity of obtaining the desired number of participants. Participants were over the age of 18 years old, not current employees of the church, related to senior leadership of the church, or known to me. I made recruitment open to all interested parties and conducted it so that it did not target one particular segment of the congregation over another.

Limitations

Only persons self-identified as a member of one identified Protestant church, where nepotism was known to exist, were included in this study (see Classification of Protestant Denominations, 2013). I employed this delimitation to combat the appearance of bias (e.g., if individuals were chosen from different Protestant congregations, it could have suggested that participants were handpicked). Because the church and I were not known to each other, there may have been information concerning the dynamics of relationships at the church that I was unaware of. The sample was limited to face-to-face interviews with a small number of participants in a metropolitan area in the western geographical area of the United States. Because participants were volunteers from those attending one church, the results from what was a predominately urban area may not be representative of more rural areas or other cities or areas of the United States. The proposed 12-15 participants and final total of nine participants may not be representative of all ethnic and socioeconomic groups or of every Protestant denomination. Another limitation of this study was how well the participants represent the greater population of parishioners in Protestant churches. Subsequent studies using a quantitative approach may produce additional statistical data that could supplement the research produced by this study.

Significance

While there is no denying the existence and potential impact of nepotism in family and nonfamily businesses in the private and public sectors, with this study I sought to discover and explore experiences specific to the existence and impact of nepotism in the not-for-profit environment of a Protestant church. The significance of this study is that the research results fill a gap in the research concerning how members of a church perceive and experience nepotism. Although findings could reinforce the necessity for additional public policy measures, they may also highlight the potential benefit of ethical leadership in this environment. The results may additionally inform hiring practices and governance issues such as refining church by-laws.

Summary and Transition

In this study, I described the experience of nepotism in an environment that represents private expressions of faith and public extensions of service while being influenced by the presence of servant leadership. In this phenomenological study, I explored parishioner perceptions of the relationship between nepotism and servant leadership in one openly nepotistic Protestant church. The research question addressed to what degree parishioners in a Protestant church where leader nepotism is present perceive the impact on the congregation as positive, negative, or neutral and whether their perception is influenced by what can be associated with elements of servant leadership. Servant leadership provided the theoretical framework of this study; it is considered a form of positive leadership that emphasizes “ethical and moral behavior” (Hoch et al., 2018, p. 1). I expressly focused on the five of several characteristics of servant leadership that appeared as most appropriate for a church environment and documented if parishioners noted any of these five elements of servant leadership when describing whether nepotism impacts their congregation. Nine individuals were interviewed who were members of the Protestant church where nepotism was known to exist and servant leadership was suspected.

In Chapter 2, I will present a critical examination of available literature regarding nepotism and ethical leadership. Extant literature specific to the experience of nepotism in Protestant churches is limited. However, much of the literature is relevant.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of parishioners in a Protestant church where nepotism was known to exist. I further examined whether the experience of nepotism affects parishioner perceptions of ethical leadership, specifically servant leadership. Empirical research specific to the presence or experience of nepotism in contemporary Protestant churches is scarce. Consequently, research depicting nepotism across sectors has also been employed to further illustrate the prevalence of the phenomenon, including factors specific to Protestantism. Additionally, most of the existing literature concerning ethical leadership theory, except for that focused specifically on servant leadership, is not obviously inclusive of members in a church setting. That is, most of the existing literature exists only within the context of an employee/follower relationship rather than that of a spiritual leader and member; in other words, a place of employment versus an environment of choice. However, the literature does offer an approach to considering the impact of ethical leadership in an environment where the position of follower might not be limited to that of an employee but also apply to that of organization member.

In this literature review, after a description of my literature search strategy, I will first identify the characteristics of Protestantism, followed by examples of nepotism and its outcomes in the private and public sectors. This will be followed by documented instances of nepotism in a church environment. Utilizing the findings of predominately peer-reviewed research, completed dissertations, books, newspaper articles, and applicable court cases, I will focus on the idea that ethical leadership and management are integral to the success of every organization in this chapter. This is especially important in the case of nonprofit organizations that risk losing the public trust. As a part of this examination of ethical leadership, several previous studies have explored servant leadership, including its functions, characteristics, and competencies**.** The idea of kin selection will be introduced, which is based on a theory that suggests humans, much like animals, may be genetically predisposed to favor kin over non-kin (Stewart-Williams, 2008). I will then present research related to family influence on organization management and corporate performance. The literature review will conclude with discussions on accountability, ethical hiring practices, and perceptions of nepotism.

Literature Search Strategy

I used many sources of information to conduct this literature review. The libraries of Walden University, Pepperdine University, the University of California at Los Angeles as well as Google Scholar were used to access the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Business Source Premier, Expanded Academic ASAP, Political Science Complete, ProQuest, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Sagepub, and ScienceDirect. I searched the databases using the following keyword search terms: *nepotism, nepotism and church, perceptions of nepotism, business ethics, ethics and church, church and governance, clergy, business succession, corruption, cronyism, ethical and decision making, ethical leadership, faith-based, ethics, fairness, integrity, altruism, kinship, servant leadership, social connections, family business, family firms, work-family relationship, favoritism, Protestant, Protestantism, Protestant church* *member expectations*, *succession and churches*, *hiring and church*, *nonprofits*, *nonprofit leadership,* and *not-for-profit organizations.* Many of the articles that I discovered using these terms also provided further references. An additional, more recent search of key terms produced articles that had not yet been published at the time of the initial search of resources for the study; however, none of the searches revealed studies on the experience of nepotism in a Protestant church environment, with or without the added potential influence of servant leadership.

Theoretical Foundation

Servant leadership was the theoretical framework for this study. Servant leadership is considered a form of positive, ethical leadership that emphasizes ”ethical and moral behavior” (Hoch et al., 2018, p. 501). Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008) considered servant leadership as emerging as “more relevant and timely …than other value-laden leadership approaches” (p. 402). Coetzer, Bussin, and Geldenhuys (2017) confirmed that servant leadership considers not only ethical, but all facets of leadership, earning a position among respected leadership theories and constructs., According to Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), Greenleaf (1970) is credited with defining servant leadership as comprised of those who make a deliberate choice to “put other people’s needs, aspirations and interests above their own… to serve first as opposed to lead” (p. 57). The ideas of unselfish serving, putting other’s needs first (Greenleaf, 1970; Van Dierendonck, 2010), viewing themselves as altruists (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), and valuing integrity (Bacha & Walker, 2013) may mitigate the negative outcomes associated with nepotism.

Characteristics of Protestantism

The Holy Bible, considered the “model of the Godly life” for Protestant believers (Appelbaum, 2013, p. 318), consistently focused on the concept of family and the importance of familial relationships. In the Holy Scriptures, a man and his wife are instructed to unite and “become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24 New International Version) and “be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28), which means to have children, to essentially become a family. Family members are to be responsible for each other, to be their “keeper” (Genesis 4:9-10). Further, there is a communal component to the concept of family as demonstrated by the acknowledgment of tribes (Genesis 49:28) and evidence that God’s covenant with Abraham was with the entire family, including servants, and not just with Abraham as an individual (Genesis 17:12-13). There is additionally a theological concept of family as when God is referenced as “Father” (James 1:27) or when Jesus elevated the idea of spiritual family over that of physical family with the proclamation that “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46-50). The family unit is not only foundational to the perpetuation of human cultivation, it is an integral component of the life of a Christian following the Protestant tradition.

There are responsibilities charged to those chosen or appointed as shepherds or pastors, those who lead the spiritual family, “God’s flock” (1 Peter 5:2). They are to be “overseers” (Acts 20:28), trustworthy, respectable, hospitable, and able to teach (1 Timothy 3:1-13). These leaders are to be “shepherds after [God’s] own heart” (Jeremiah 3:15) and they should rule “like one who serves,” like Christ (Luke 22:26-27). The scriptures suggest these overseers should possess attributes that appear to closely mirror those ascribed to ethical leaders demonstrating concern for the people they lead while building trust, being honorable, focusing on service, and giving “individualized consideration” (Dion, 2012, p. 8).

Nepotism

While the issue of nepotism, showing favoritism in the hiring of relatives and friends, is not unique to a societal subdivision, usually within an employment context it may be experienced, accepted, or tolerated differently depending on the sector and the presence or absence of merit. In this section, I will first briefly detail the concept of nepotism as instituted in private sector family businesses. Then, I will detail examples of nepotism in the public sector, followed by instances of nepotism in Protestant churches.

Private Sector

In the private sector, a person is born into the family business and their family ties can guarantee lifetime membership (Bowman-Upton, 1991; Finelli, 2011; Spranger et al., 2012). Individuals may experience this dynamic when seeking services at the family-owned dry cleaners or in a business environment where a son or daughter is obviously being groomed to lead the family enterprise. In this setting, a consumer or colleague may consider that family members are enjoying a unique training opportunity that could easily benefit both the business and clients in the future. In one study, when nonfamily employees were questioned about the frequency of promotion, approximately half thought family members were promoted more quickly, although many understood: “Blood’s thicker than water” (Finelli, 2011, p. 174). These situations may only become untenable, according to Bellow (2003), when the “beneficiary is manifestly unqualified” (p. 11). Any rules to moderate or manage nepotism in this sector would be policy set by family members for the running of the family business as opposed to regulations set by the government or influenced by nonmembers (Finelli, 2011). Riggio and Saggi (2015) suggested that implementing best practices that ensure fair, standardized, hiring methods that are applied equally to all, including relatives and friends, would go far to alleviate negative employee perceptions of any favoritism, including nepotism and cronyism. The authors further posited that objective processes that “ensure that the most qualified individuals are hired and promoted” would also allow the organization to take advantage of any social connections (Riggio & Saggi, 2015, p. 20).

Public Sector

There are restrictions against nepotistic behaviors for those in public service positions. Some of these restrictions began in the 19th century when a merit-based federal civil service was created with the aim of removing family connections from the path to public employment (Bellows, 2003). However, the public sector is not immune to nepotism as evidenced by an example detailed in the July 2012 report issued by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of the Inspector General (OIG). Evidence also supports the existence of a quid pro quo relationship between some officials and their relatives, with some directors hiring each other’s children (OIG, 2012). There is substantiation that friends and relatives were hired for summer clerkships and other internships with the result that six out of 11 positions were held by Justice Management Division (JMD) relatives during one period in 2010 (OIG, 2012).

Nevertheless, the laws concerning nepotism in the federal government are clear. According to Section § 2302(b)(7) of Title 5 of the United States Code, nepotism is prohibited (OIG, 2012, p. 14). There is also a federal nepotism statute, 5 U.S.C. §3110(b), that restricts the actions of public officials regarding the hiring of relatives. Additional statutes and regulations within the JMD, including those in the Standards of Ethical Conduct, govern everything from the granting of illegal preferences, conflict of interest, and use of public office for private gain (OIG, 2012). The current report of violations was the third of its kind, with previous OIG investigations conducted in 2004 and 2008 (OIG). In each instance, different directors holding the identical position as their guilty predecessors were each found to have participated in improper hiring practices (OIG, 2012). The "remedial ethics training and the establishment of a zero-tolerance policy for future violations" (OIG, 2012, p. 2) that was recommended in the 2008 report notwithstanding, the person responsible for implementing the training was also found deficient. At the very least, it appears that in the JMD there were/are persons in positions of influence who do not consider the rules as applicable to them.

Evidence from the JMD further indicates that nepotism is an acceptable part of the work environment, in a contradiction that is apparently not obvious to some who work there. Resume shopping, especially of the children of employees, is considered commonplace, despite the statutes and regulations against it (OIG, 2012). In fact, at least one person is quoted in the report as believing "there is no rule against [nepotism]" (p. 53). Even after being shown the rules, that same employee volunteered that "there is a lot of nepotism in the government" and admitted that rules governing nepotism were “certainly not upheld” (p. 53). The rules were in fact broken. Persons without the necessary qualifications were hired for positions that, in some cases, had been manipulated to accommodate them. It is more than likely that someone with the necessary qualifications did not get hired and may not have even been given the opportunity to apply. This situation mattered enough to a former employee of the DOJ that he reported it to Congressman Frank R. Wolf, who in turn contacted the OIG (OIG, 2012). Twenty-two witnesses also informed the final report. The tenor of the workplace was obviously affected, even if no one publicly responded to it until pressed by the presence of the investigation.

Examples of nepotism in the public sector exist on local levels as when it was discovered that in the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) that allowances were made for the relatives of department employees during the recruit screening process when they were offered coaching opportunities that other candidates were not, according to Lopez and Welsh (2014), in their *Los Angeles Times* article. The authors further reported these connected applicants were advised to have their applications submitted within the first 2 minutes following the opening of the filing window. Critics do not feel that it is a coincidence that almost 25% of the 70 recruits hired were related to existing LAFD personnel (Lopez & Welsh, 2014). On the state level, under the leadership of Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey, questions surfaced regarding how things were being handled at the nonprofit Drumthwacket Foundation. This foundation was established to restore and maintain the governor’s mansion in Princeton, NJ (Wilkie, 2014). Although the sitting governor is always the honorary chairman, Christie's wife was named president during his tenure, a position that did not exist previously (Wilkie).

Examples of nepotism on the federal level are not limited to agencies like the DOJ but have also included the office of president of the United States, on more than one occasion. In 1961 John Kennedy appointed his brother Robert Kennedy to the position of attorney general and his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to run the Peace Corps while during President Clinton's term the president appointed his wife Hilary to chair the task force on national healthcare (Last Man, 2017). The Clinton appointment happened despite the anti-nepotism statute that was put in place in 1967 (Kuhner, (2017). A more recent instance of nepotism at the highest level is within the presidency of Donald Trump whose children and son-in-law were given positions of influence; his daughter Ivanka Trump was named as an assistant to the president, his son-in-law, Jared Kushner became senior advisor (Kuhner, (2017). The knowledge that Jared Kushner had no experience in politics prior to Trump's campaign (Last Man, 2017) at the very least leaves room for questions concerning qualifications.

Nepotism in the public sector may be discouraged or in some instances even prohibited but it seems it is also condoned.

Nepotism within churches

Although little empirical research is available regarding the specific experience of nepotism in a contemporary Protestant church environment as being either negative or positive, the incidence of nepotism in this setting is not rare. According to Bellow (2003), the succession of the pastorate from father to son has happened often, going back to the founders of the Lutheran Church in America by the Muhlenbergs of Pennsylvania and the religious dynasty started by the Mathers of Boston. Bellow (2003) further offered the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., with his famous Baptist preacher father and the minister children of Billy Graham as examples of the continuing tradition of considering ministry as the family business.

However, there are more recent examples of Protestant churches sharing attributes considered commonplace within family businesses. Joel Osteen became the senior pastor of the Lakeview church that his father founded and led for 40 years (Miller & Carlin 2010). It is worth noting that the membership of Lakeview church has increased from approximately 6,000 to a reported more than 41,000, all since 1999 when the son assumed the senior position (Miller & Carlin, 2010). In some Protestant churches and church-run organizations the progeny of senior ministers is obtaining positions of high responsibility, and in some cases, visibility to match.

When the Crystal Cathedral, a Protestant church founded in the 1950s by Robert H. Schuller in Garden Grove, California, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in October 2010, documents detailed over $50 million in debt and included almost 20 pages of insider wages paid during the 12 months preceding the filing (*In re Crystal Cathedral Ministries*, 2010, Swanson, 2012b). Of note is the discovery that while other employees and upwards of 100 vendors of the former megachurch were either laid off or not paid during this period, over $1.8 million was paid to insiders who included the founder's five children and their spouses, a total of 20 family members (Sewell & Santa Cruz, 2010; Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2014). Sometime before the bankruptcy, Pastor Schuller's son, Reverend Robert A. Schuller was given the reins of the church he had been groomed to lead (Santa Cruz, 2010). The younger Schuller had some changes in mind, including reducing the number of family members on the board "for more transparency" (Santa Cruz, 2010, p. 3). However, his tenure was short-lived (Santa Cruz, 2010). He explained that his sisters and their husbands, who were board members and/or on staff, did not want to take direction from him and possibly lose positions they had become accustomed to (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2014). The effect is the appearance of a family-led church placing the protection and care of family members above matters that may have benefited the church as a whole.

Sometimes there is the question of how much power gets transferred when a person assumes a position formerly held by a relative. There are questions regarding accountability and governance that naturally surface when addressing the question of power (Hartley, 2012). The idea of who has the power becomes increasingly important in an environment that allows the nepotistic transfer of the most dominant positions (Hartley, 2012).

There are examples of churches and ministries that are handled as if they are legacies to be shared with family members or left to willing progeny (Bellow, 2003; Hartley, 2012; Koteskey, 2011). Their existence might be interpreted as evidence of acceptance, resignation, or something yet undetermined. The above examples, and others like them, describe a legal, organizational, and perhaps even relational viewpoint but they do not describe the experience of the persons involved. The leaders, their progeny, and other family members; the employees, board and organization members; the community at large, as well as other stakeholders who cannot benefit from the taxes that are not required of these exempt organizations; may all experience nepotism differently. At one end of the nepotism argument Jones and Stout (2015) argued that the advantages of social connection outweigh what they term “the common stereotype” (p. 9) of nepotism. The authors point to the benefits of children who have abilities and career choices that are aligned with their parents and the human capital transfer that occurs when children and friends have been previously exposed to knowledge and skills that are specific to an industry or occupation. Pearce (2015) suggested, if employees perceive that advancement is determined by personal relationships the result is the perception that rewards are not tied to performance, distrust of coworkers, cheating, less job satisfaction and less commitment; along with greater dissatisfaction, and fearfulness. Pearce further reported that the negative perceptions associated with nepotism continue for years even after formal merit-based system are later instituted. However, because of a lack of research in other than an employment context it is not yet known if these variables can be assumed transferrable to participants in a voluntary organization, such as parishioners in a church.

Leadership and Nepotism

The concept of leadership encompasses several different aspects. This review will include an overview of ethical leadership in general as well as the specifics of servant leadership. The first section reviews what conduct, and behaviors can be construed as ethical and the place for ethical integrity in leadership. The second section explores the origin and organizational application of servant leadership theory. This includes how ethics and morals contribute to an understanding of servant leadership as opposed to a leadership model focused on personal power and self-serving control. The last section compiles and details the functions, characteristics, and competencies of servant leadership and identifies those chosen to represent the purposes of this study.

Ethical Leadership. An ethical framework and resulting ethical climate are desirable in all business settings, but arguably none so much as in a nonprofit. McCambridge (2013) posited that nonprofits are not seen as removed from the influence of corporate interests and evidence of corporate unethical behavior ultimately "puts the interests of ordinary and particularly marginalized people at risk" (p. 346). McCambridge further asserted that the level of faith in the integrity of nonprofits may be diminishing as public confidence erodes. An organization that enjoys a reputation supported by ethical values is positioned for trust relationships both inside and outside of its physical parameters. DeVore and Martin (2008) reason that an individual's belief system is synonymous with the ethics and values that are informed by one's family values "and through the influences of ethical people" (p. 11). Maxwell (2003) suggested it is as simple as a leader "asking the question 'How would I like to be treated in this situation?" (p. 16).

Ethical leadership is evidenced when a leader models through actions, communication, and relationships, the personally-held values of honesty and integrity that can be internalized by employees and reinforced by decision-making that is experienced as fair (Brown & Trevino, 2006). It is important to emphasize the value of the trust relationships that can result when a leader is perceived by others as being ethical; followers and subordinates may be willing to work harder for an ethical leader and be willing to emulate behavior they come to esteem (Brown & Trevino, 2006). According to Brown and Trevino (2006), “Ethical leaders are characterized as … principled individuals who make fair and balanced decisions” (p. 597), and although not specifically addressed by the authors it does beg the question of whether subordinates might perceive and experience nepotism as being unfair and thus unethical.

There are several different leadership approaches. Dion (2012) considered eight: directive leadership, self-leadership, authentic leadership, transactional leadership, shared leadership, servant leadership, charismatic leadership and transformational leadership. However, Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008) considered servant leadership as emerging as “more relevant and timely …than other value-laden leadership approaches” (p, 402). Coetzer, Bussin, and Geldenhuys (2017) confirmed “servant leadership has evolved as a reputable leadership theory and construct…that encompasses all aspects of leadership, including ethical” (p.1).

Servant leadership. According to Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), Greenleaf (1970) is credited with defining servant leadership as comprised of those who make a deliberate choice to “put other people’s needs, aspirations and interests above their own… to serve first as opposed to lead” (p. 57). The servant leader focuses on the needs of the follower, and then the organization before their own through the approach that ultimately impacts the moral and ethical development of both leaders and followers (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008; Zhang, Kwong Kwan, Everett, & Jian, 2012). Although the idea of servant leadership is not exclusive to nonprofits, it is consistent with the idea of serving in this sector, especially when considering Protestant churches although Greenleaf’s inspiration did not originate in religion (Greenleaf, 1970). Shirin (2014) suggested that with the servant leader's primary focus on the follower and on service, this way of leading in a nonprofit may be sustainable. Shirin (2014) further submitted "the idea of unconditional concern for the other seems to resonate with Christian spirituality" (p. 19). Sendjaya and Sarros include Jesus Christ's model of servant leadership as demonstrated by the occasion of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, thereby engaging in a task that was considered demeaning and only charged to a servant or the lowest-ranking guest (Shirin, 2014). Despite his position as Teacher and Lord, Jesus redefined the function of leadership as emphasizing what power can do to help others rather than as a station over others (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

Tidball (2012) noted that Jesus Christ further mandated that his followers, referenced as disciples, emulate this style of leading even to the point of sacrificial service. This can pose a challenge for present day church leaders and pastors who struggle to achieve a balance between the roles of caretaker and person-in-charge to the end that they may defer to one extreme or the other (Tidball, 2012). The Tidball study suggested a resolution of the tension exists in adopting a model in which leaders position themselves as father-figures. Within this context pastors can lead as a loving, responsible parent who seeks the best for the family they are charged to care for and persuade to become the best they can be. Although the title "Father" is not traditionally used in Protestant churches, as it is in Catholic churches, the idea of church leader as father figure does not appear disparate to the idea of servant leader. However, the challenge may still exist when the church leader must make decisions that favor the entire church family that he is responsible for by calling and employment, or show partiality to members of his personal family. Shirin (2014) advised “Ministers need to make sure they do not nourish themselves at the expense of their flock” (p. 22).

Servant leaders are character-driven to put the needs of others first (Greenleaf, 1970). It does not appear to be a role they undertake, but rather who they are. They may be the leader, but they seek first to serve; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora (2008) posited being the leader is in fact why they serve. They are servant-first rather than leader-first; being the leader is also how they serve. Van Dierendonck (2010) contended that the two concepts of leading and serving become almost interchangeable, so that “being a servant allows a person to lead; being a leader implies a person serves” (p. 1231). Jones’ (2012) research further suggested that those actions may in part also be responsible for better performance from employees, resulting in tangible benefits for an organization, including reduced turnover, increased profitability, and a more developed sense of trust. The trust is experienced as reciprocal; the leader trusts the follower and the follower responds with trust in the leader, as opposed to the organization (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). This may be due to the servant leaders’ focus on the good of the followers; including trusting them to do what is required for the business (Van Dierendonck, 2010).

The servant leader, in part by virtue of their unselfish motivation to put the needs of others first, and their view of themselves as stewards and moral persons (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), are understood to share many of the characteristics of ethical leaders (Jones, 2012). The servant leader demonstrates concern for others and assumes the responsibility of role modeling as described by Brown and Trevino (2006) and may encourage trust relationships (Jones, 2012; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Sendjaya and Sarros agreed with Graham (1991) who argued that servant leadership exceeded Bass' (1985) previously promoted leader model in two ways: "(1) its recognition of the leader's social responsibilities to serve those people who are marginalized by a system, and (2) its dedication to followers' needs and interests, as opposed to those of their own or their organization" (p. 62). Additionally, Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora, (2008) more recently confirmed that servant leaders were in fact "more likely …to serve marginalized people" (p. 403). Sendjaya et al. (2008) further posited that a servant leader's dedication to follower's needs extends to leading followers "for the follower's own good" as compared to a goal "to inspire followers to pursue organizational goals" (p.403).

A selfless, sacrificial, and, honest leader is understandably desirable specifically in a church; however, the perpetuation of an ethical work environment may require specific training on ethics and previous exposure to leadership behaviors that extend beyond the assumptions of a church leader's calling. Although the Engelbrecht, Van Aswegen, and Theron (2005) study targeted medium to large private sector companies in South Africa, the results may be generalizable to a church or religious nonprofit environment that esteems an ethical climate, including evidence of ethical values and consistency between the walk and the talk of its leaders. A more recent study also included examining the value of displayed consistency between leader's words and actions, confirming that followers are influenced by the modeling of ethical behavior with the result that they will then emulate it (Van Aswegen & Engelbrecht, 2009). Integral to the concept of ethical leadership are the ideas of honesty and fairness, specifically as directed toward employees and other followers (Caldwell et al., 2012). In fact, it has been suggested that leaders who obviously favor one employee over another are perceived as less fair (Bacha & Walker, 2013).

However, Brown and Trevino (2006) share Bass's (1985) argument that whether a leader is ethical depends on their motivation, suggesting that at minimum leaders possess "an ethical orientation" (p. 599). Jeavons (2012) shared that the motivation of leaders to behave ethically should extend beyond "honesty…is the best policy" (p, 210) to include "see(ing) themselves as servants of others" (p, 221). This leadership behavior may be necessary to help employees and followers understand what may be desired and required if they are a part of an organization that is service-focused. Jeavons added that "here the notion of 'servant leadership' (Greenleaf, 1977) takes on both profound significance and immediate salience" (p.221). For O'Neill (2012) it simply boiled down to whether organization members can consistently answer yes to three questions: "Am I treated with respect and dignity by everyone… without… qualification?" (p. 11). Am I given the tools and development opportunities I need to contribute and feel fulfilled? And finally, are my contributions recognized? (p. 11).

A review of several studies that include behaviors and/or characteristics of servant leadership revealed some, if not total agreement. The Bakar and McCann (2015) study lists seven types of servant leadership behaviors: "behaving ethically, providing emotional healing, putting subordinates first, helping subordinates grow and succeed, empowering employees, creating value for the community, and providing conceptual skills that extend beyond other leadership approaches" (p. 6). Coetzer, Bussin, and

Geldenhuys (2017) attributed eight characteristics to the servant leader: “authenticity, humility, compassion, accountability, courage, altruism, integrity, and listening” (p. 6). Hoch et al., (2018) credit Spears (2010) with the 10 characteristics they reference. Spears based his thoughts on Greenleaf’s writings and identified: “listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community.” (p. 6.) As noted previously, the current study will focus on the following five characteristics: (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) stewardship, and (e) building community. These characteristics are a best fit for a church environment and most closely align with the responsibilities outlined in the Holy Bible for pastors and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5-9, Acts 15:1-2).

Forms and Functions of Family in Organizations

Any consideration of nepotism must include a look at both the organizational and familial/relational aspects of the preferential treatment. The majority of businesses in the United States are family-owned or controlled (Memili, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau 2002). In fact, almost 80% of businesses in the western world are considered family businesses (Schmidts & Shepherd, 2013) and as such family business is in a position to influence business norms (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003). Additionally, the Office of Justice Programs estimates there are more than 350,000 religious congregations in the United States, generating an estimated $81 billion annually (Office of Justice, 2011). Religious nonprofits are generally concerned with spirituality as well as programs that serve a public need, especially as it pertains to the underserved. For profit businesses are concerned with the processes that support attracting and retaining profits. Family businesses are generally family first, with an eye toward perpetuation; and governments focus on issues of power, protection, and matters of social welfare (Mitchell, Agle, Chrisman, & Spence, 2011). Some religious organizations appear to function almost as a hybrid organism with overlapping functions of three types of organizations: religious (nonprofit), business, and family. This can be especially challenging when different business types have "distinct objectives as well as sets of assumptions about the way organizations should function" (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 236).

Nonprofit Organizations and Policy

Letts, Ryan and Grossman (1999) quoted Vista Consulting principal, Alice Howard as saying that "When you're in the behavioral change business or human-service field, it's hard to measure results" (p. 124). That is especially difficult when there is seldom enough money and an employee's personal commitment threatens to wane. This is perhaps truer of the nonprofit sector, including churches, than any other and yet the mission, reputation, and need of professional processes are at least as important in the sector that exists to serve the underserved. Letts et al., 1999) offer the nonprofit board functions at the point where the public trust and organizational performance meets, and as such they are responsible for the very important responsibilities of planning, results, governance, and policy that are needed to meet organization/stakeholder goals.

Concerns over nonprofit board roles and responsibilities as well as issues surrounding accountability provided the impetus for a study by Brudney and Nobbie (2002) to test the effectiveness of the Carver and Carver (1990) Policy Governance Model. In this model, the board directs the organization through policies that it develops.

The first policy area, called Ends, is loosely comparable to the organization mission and these policies are developed with the thought of who will ultimately benefit from organization efforts. Means are the policies that dictate how the work gets done; they dictate the governance process, the board-staff linkage, and executive limitations. For instance, if a policy were developed to address nepotism, it would be a means policy, perhaps by establishing a goal of limiting familial hiring or one establishing the qualification of all hires. Brudney and Nobbie found that although successful implementation of the model required a significant commitment of time and resources, both board members and organization CEOs liked operating under the model, which could be an indication of future success.

In a nonprofit organization, including a church, meeting the regulations concerning local, state, and federal laws may ultimately be the responsibility of the board (Kennelly, 2012). This would necessarily include the regulations concerning receiving and retaining tax exemption, nonprofit status. All tax-exempt organizations, including churches, are also required to maintain records necessary to justify their claim for exemption in the event of an audit, according to the Internal Revenue Service (2009). A nonprofit, tax exempt organization, including a church, may benefit from the influence of servant leadership, especially the elements of stewardship, and building community as continuing to value and evaluate the organization's legitimacy benefits the mission-defined recipients of the organization.

Family Influence

Family matters are at the heart of research into the implications of nepotism. Definitions for what constitutes a family firm include percentage of ownership and board membership (Chrisman, Chua, Pearson, and Barnett, 2012). However, Long and Mathews (2011) contend that intent and actions specifically directed toward maintaining control of the firm across generations are necessary to consider a business a family firm (Bracci, 2011). Ironically, it is the presence of multiple generations of family members and their corresponding different perspectives that can bring about conflict (Aronoff, 2009; Chrisman et al., 2012). Schmidts & Shepherd, (2013) share evidence that the percentage of family firms that survive to three generations is only 10%. It has also been suggested that less or lower levels of intra-family conflict, in addition to family members' identification with the business, might mitigate what appears to be a dismal survival rate.

Understandably some private sector, trade-specific publications feature a decidedly pro-family, and pro-nepotism, point of view. Royer, Simons, Boyd, and Rafferty (2008) looked at family owned businesses in terms of considering whether to choose a family member as a successor. This article sheds some light on reasons to choose a family member for an important position aside from the obvious familial relationship, noting "the transfer of success-relevant idiosyncratic knowledge" (p. 17), also known as intellectual capital, along with the values of trust, altruism, and honesty (Bracci & Vagnoni, 2011). Jaskiewicz, Uhlenbruck, Balkin, and Reay (2013) warn that even though transferring this tacit knowledge is undeniably beneficial to a family firm; a process dependent, they argue, on reciprocal (rather than entitlement) nepotism, management of it can be difficult and costly. Royer et al. (2011) additionally caution that when the knowledge necessary is of a technical or industry-specific nature, family members and external candidates should be required to undertake the same assessment. Grensing-Pophal (2008) focused on a fourth-generation construction management firm whose owner admits that “nepotism is encouraged across the board” (p. 65), meaning that it is not limited to just the owner’s family. This is not to imply that family members are guaranteed an unmerited job, in fact the owner’s children will be required to work elsewhere first; they need to be “the best person for the job” (Grensing-Pophal, 2008, p. 64).

Whether someone is the best person for the job may not always be the first consideration when family is involved. Stewart-Williams (2008) examined kin selection theory, which helps to explain altruistic tendencies among relatives, and extended research on behavior between kin vs. non-kin. Data confirms that the phenomenon of people helping kin more than non-kin is not unique to a specific culture or religion (Kragh, 2012) and in fact is not unique in humans, having been documented in nonhuman species as well (Stewart-Williams, 2008). There is also evidence of a relational hierarchy that extends to include friends and romantic partners. The Stewart-Williams study found support for the hypotheses, confirming that both romantic partners and friends averaged more help than siblings. However, they also found that when the cost of giving help increases, the amount of help directed to friends or romantic partners, as opposed to siblings, decreases.

Even though nepotism is generally considered negative in American culture (Bellow, 2003), Finelli's (2011) research suggested that whether outcomes of nepotism are considered beneficial or problematic may depend on what policies and practices are instituted. According to Finelli, research has identified factors that resulted in the perception that nepotism is negative or problematic including concerns about hiring and promoting unqualified family members as well as limited advancement for nonfamily members, resulting in resentment of those with family connections. Finelli suggested problematic issues, where identified, can be addressed by developing policies and practices that are experienced as fair, open, and equal. Being upfront and honest about values, the core values of the organization, and nonfamily employee's value to the business, should be openly communicated. Conversely whether nepotism is considered beneficial or positive could ultimately depend on the success of the family member. The Finelli study revealed customers responded positively to family members, assuming they had authority. The study also found employees were dedicated, loyal, and had a "sense of ownership "(p. 250) due to nepotism. But even when aspects of nepotism are considered positive and contributing toward an environment where the family business thrives, consideration should still be given to developing policies and practices. For instance, a process may need to be in place to address the situation of aging owners or other family members of power. Conflict or a power struggle could result between existing family members and nonfamily members alike if an unqualified family member is brought in.

Whether considered constructive or challenging, nepotism is essential for the viability of the family business (Bellow, 2003; Mulder, 2008). Finelli (2011) explained that "in the family business, family and business can never really be separated – membership to one implies membership to the other" (p. 39) thereby concurring with Collin et al., (2011) that nepotism in this situation should not come as a surprise. That may also be true of a church environment. When a new church, not unlike many start-up organizations, depends predominately on family members and close friends for early financial and staffing support, dependence on social connection preference in general or nepotism specifically can result (Biermeier-Hanson, 2015). However, the needs of a growing church may eventually outpace the skills of initial personnel. The challenge is to establish policy that is both fair and flexible, especially those that limit hiring of persons not defensibly qualified for any open position, regardless of familial ties (Arasli & Tumer, 2008; Finelli, 2011).

Organizational Values

The organizational values deemed integral to a discourse on nepotism include accountability, hiring practices, and the resulting stakeholder perceptions regarding the ethics of organization actions. All organizations should be held accountable to some governing entity. Depending on the sector, that could be a board, family members, legislature, or members of the community. Regardless of sector or company size, because employees are vital to every company's pursuits, a fair and equitable process of matching job responsibilities to an employee's qualifications becomes crucial (Alder & Gilbert, 2006; Jones & Stout, 2015). At stake is the organization's reputation. Perceptions of unethical behavior can affect employee satisfaction, stakeholder confidence, member or potential donor trust, and/or the respect of the community.

The idea of accountability is one of responsibility or answerability. Although nonprofits may be “*perceived* to be more trustworthy” (Malloy & Agarwal, 2010, p. 4) than public or private service providers due in part to the types of leaders the sector is thought to attract; nonprofits do not share the same accountability requirements as public sector agencies (Malloy & Agarwal, 2010). Public organizations and their leaders are answerable to the public and enacted federal and state laws (Malloy & Agarwal, 2010; Pelletier & Bligh, 2008). In the case of a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization accountability relationships exist between the organization and its mission, the board, members, paid staff, volunteers, other stakeholders, and the governing agencies that conferred the nonprofit, tax-exempt status (Filing, n.d.; Malloy & Agarwal, 2010). To this end the IRS mandates the completion and filing of the 990 forms for certain nonprofit organizations, although it is not mandatory for churches (Filing, n.d). According to Gold (2009), the goal is to encourage transparency.

An example of the need for transparency in governance was presented when Pelletier and Bligh (2008) examined the ramifications of unethical leadership behavior, specifically employee reactions, in a public agency environment. The research illuminated the results of corruption or what employees perceived as unethical treatment/behavior, including nepotism and cronyism. In this study employees had emotional and negative reactions to organization politics and were left without full confidence in leader’s decisions regarding selection and promotions (Pelletier & Bligh, 2008).

Hiring Practices

Alder and Gilbert (2006) considered employment law and the ethical perspectives of hiring. The authors offered that although ethics and law are not synonymous, they focus on some of the same concerns and ideals. The idea of fairness in hiring requires examining both legal and ethical aspects of the process. Although Alder and Gilbert do not make any recommendations that are specific to the nonprofit sector in general or churches specifically, they do make recommendations that might be generalizable across sectors. On the legal side, Alder and Gilbert suggested making an objective assessment of all applicants and a concerted effort to give all equal treatment. Argandona (2009) came to a similar conclusion, with recommendations addressed specifically to not-for-profits, including establishing “appropriate pay policy, transparent …competitive hiring, (and) appropriate promotion criteria…” (p. 139).

When considering hiring from an ethical viewpoint Alder and Gilbert (2006) advised that ethics answers the question of what is right or wrong from a social or interpersonal value standpoint and these values in turn dictate ethical rules of behavior. The focus is on results; on consequences. In a hiring situation, this means hiring the best person, meaning most qualified candidate, without respect to personal or familial relationship, with the presumed result of a better functioning company and ultimately a better served customer, stockholder, or stakeholder. Complications present when consequences are not obvious or, as Johnson (2009) warned, the decision-maker gives more weight to the consequences that are more personally favorable, “confus(ing) the ‘greatest good’ with …selfish interests” (p. 139). It could be argued that this includes situations where “some companies encourage their employees to ask friends to apply for open positions” (Jaskiewicz et al., 2013, p. 135) if those relationships are given more weight than personal qualification for the position.

There are some obvious differences in what may qualify as leadership and organizational success across sectors. For instance, the private sector might be more influenced by issues surrounding competition, product development, and other marketplace issues. But employing best practices should be a goal whether aiming to increase profits for stockholders or achieve profits in order to adequately serve stakeholders. For those entities that truly value the human resource incorporating fair, ethical hiring practices could prove beneficial to an organization no matter the sector.

Congregation Member Expectations

A search of the literature relative to Protestant congregation member expectations around nepotism specifically or the hiring process in general revealed a limited amount of information. Mission leaders are instructed to handle potential nepotistic situations with thoughtful consideration by the reminder that “what people perceive becomes the ‘reality’ to which they react” (Koteskey, 2011, p. 257). The inference is that those involved in Christian missionary service expect and deserve leadership with integrity. Hartley (2012) referenced church congregation members when he shared the observation “that the question of succession is always at the backs of the congregations’ mind, whether everything else within the church is going well” (p. 56). This suggests that the congregation is concerned with hiring issues, if only those specifically pertaining to succession, which is the pastoral transition process. Since in some instances this includes passing the senior pastorate from father to son, those instances also involve nepotism.

Congregants' expectations regarding succession would be necessarily influenced by church policy and the governance structure. For instance, whether the process is governed by the board, a search committee, a vote by the entire membership, or an appointment by the outgoing pastor could determine what the members expect, i.e. an opportunity to express their opinion or reliance on either tradition or church authority (Hartley, 2012). In a survey of pastors who were on the receiving end of father-to-son succession the challenges included congregation acceptance and "willingness to commit to the transition process" (p. 82). The idea of participating in nepotism was another named challenge; however, the conclusion was that any resistance by congregation members was resolved "by (members) being prayerful and…supporting the ministry's activities" (p. 83).

Perceptions

Ethical behavior should be the goal of all organizations; however, it is critical in organizations that rely on the public trust (Barth, 2010; Jeavons, 2005, 2012; O'Neill, 2009). O'Connell and Bligh (2009) examined public perceptions of unethical behavior and followed the process as one agency implemented changes in organization climate that served to change the public's opinion. According to the authors, because "leaders are influential (they) have the opportunity to help create a positive ethical climate in their organizations or perpetuate an unethical climate" (p. 214). The case selected by O'Connell and Bligh was the city and county of Denver, Colorado, as opposed to a nonprofit or a Protestant Church. However, the examples of ethical transgressions along with the subsequent reactions are germane across sectors. The agency's response included establishing an ethics code and installing and supporting an ethical leader as the basis of reinforcing an ethical climate.

Nepotism was so prevalent in the case study organization it was considered rampant and ultimately led to the resignation of the civil service commission director as well as the mayor drawing ire for giving a contract to a company that employed his daughter (O'Connell & Bligh, 2009). Other ethical lapses included accepting bribes, shoplifting, and questionable contract bidding; however, the most reported negative public responses came in connection to the giving of jobs to friends and family. In one instance, a city leader was accused of hiring over 40 friends and relatives (O'Connell & Bligh, 2009). It was in response to public complaints that a new ethics code and a Board of Ethics were instituted and eventually a leader who was deemed ethical was elected.

Stakeholders want equity; they want to feel that they can trust leadership and that matters are being handled fairly. O'Connell and Bligh (2009) state leaders should first avoid the appearance of injustice by going above and beyond legal guidelines, even asking for help in navigating ethical issues that are not obvious. Secondly, use an ethics board so that ethical decisions are not made in a vacuum or by routinely following ethics policies, but instead include a dialogue that in turn encourages re-examination of established norms (O'Connell & Bligh, 2009). Thirdly, O'Connell and Bligh's research suggested the need for transparency between the leader's creation of an ethical climate both inside and outside the organization. Whether the goal is to be proactive or to rebuild after scandal, the data indicated that the community responded positively to evidence that agency leadership was ethical. Barth (2010) recognized the value of a code of ethics and further suggested that establishing an external advisory board and other actions taken with the goal of promoting community and public accountability might dilute an environment where bureaucracy and hierarchical authority have lost sight of organization mission.

Summary and Conclusions

According to the literature, there is evidence that nepotism is not an infrequent occurrence across sectors. Although it was identified by some researchers as an example of unethical behavior (Van Aswegen & Engelbrecht, 2009), the positive benefits resulting from social connection, knowledge transfer, and familial indebtedness need also be included in an in-depth discussion on the impact of nepotism (Bellow, 2003; Jones, 2016; Jones & Stout, 2015). Dyer (2006) shared the research of Anderson and Reeb (2003, p. 1324) who found that “family firms are significantly better performers than nonfamily firms” (p. 253).

Although anecdotal examples of nepotism in churches were not difficult to find, the subject of nepotism and churches was addressed only nominally in the literature. As of this writing no research on nepotism in a non-employment, church, or social environment had been identified. What remained was a discussion of what constitutes an ethical climate in the workplace, including leadership and hiring practices, alluding to a question of whether treating a church as a quasi-family business can be ethical and in the best interest of staff, members, and outside donors. Jeavons (2012) suggested it is crucial for leaders in religious and humanitarian organizations to realize that their leadership decisions are comprised of both ethical and practical components. Thoms (2008) shared that “leaders shape and reinforce an ethical or unethical climate by what they pay attention to” (p. 422), this includes who and how they hire and fire and perhaps by extension, who they assign. However, attributes of servant leadership, specifically the ideas of unselfish serving, putting other’s needs first (Greenleaf, 1970; Van Dierendonck, 2010), viewing themselves as altruists (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), and valuing integrity (Bacha & Walker, 2013) may allay the negative outcomes associated with nepotism.

In chapter 3 I present the research design, methodology, and justification for the study including the criteria for selecting and process for protecting study participants. Further I document how study data were collected and stored. Finally, I present how the data were analyzed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this study, I employed a phenomenological approach, which was chosen to facilitate obtaining multiple, individual perceptions of nepotism in a Protestant church. My goal included identifying themes and patterns. Given the necessity for nonprofit organizations (including churches) to adhere to all government regulations to maintain tax exempt status, it was important to understand whether the presence of servant leadership could contribute to the perception of an ethical environment even when nepotism is present.

In this phenomenological study, I sought to interpret and describe the lived experience of participants and to understand their perceptions focusing on the words and language they used. The study was clearly bounded within the population of one Protestant church and was further bounded by a period of 6 weeks of interviews. In this chapter, I will detail the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and methodology. The chapter will include the issues of trustworthiness before concluding with a summary and transition to Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

I developed the following research question to facilitate an understanding of congregation members' personal experience with nepotism in the context of their church and to gain insights on its impact:

To what degree do parishioners in a Protestant church where leader nepotism is present, perceive the impact on the congregation as positive, negative, or neutral related to five elements of servant leadership?

The central phenomenon under study was the experience of nepotism, defined as showing favoritism in the hiring of relatives and friends, in the environment of a Protestant church. The theoretical framework for this research was the influence of servant leadership. Specifically, I explored the impacts related to five elements of servant leadership: (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) stewardship, and (e) building community.

I selected the phenomenological design because of its appropriateness in examining individual experiences of nepotism. According to Sokolowski (2007), phenomenology includes the idea that "every experience that we have, is intentional: it is essentially 'consciousness of' or an 'experience of' something or other" (p. 8). Vagle (2014) described this intentionality or "of-ness' of a phenomenon" as being essential to an understanding of Husserl's approach (p. 36). Husserl is generally credited with founding phenomenology; however, beyond studying the "of-ness" of a phenomenon lays the study of individual "subjective lived experiences of those who have experienced the phenomenon" (Vagle, p. 36).

While there are challenges associated with a phenomenological approach, such as the necessity that all study participants have experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), these were addressed in this study by my use of a site where nepotism was known to exist. There was also the possible difficulty with bracketing personal experiences, with the goal to be “transparent to ourselves” and “becoming aware, without imposing our prejudgment” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). While this may not be perfectly achieved, Creswell (2007) shared witnessing the success when researchers bracket their opinions and describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study before beginning a project. Although bracketing can be very challenging it is nevertheless essential to gaining an understanding of the experiences under study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Creswell (2007) detailed five approaches to qualitative inquiry: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. According to Creswell, all qualitative approaches share several characteristics including being field focused, using multiple data sources, and focusing on participants’ perspectives, and their subjective views (p. 38). I wanted to study the lived experiences of several people of a particular phenomenon rather than the life of a single individual as in a narrative study (p. 57). Also, because my goal was not to produce a theory, I did not choose a grounded theory approach (p. 63). The focus of an ethnographical design is on several attributes of a culture-sharing group and requires researcher immersion in participant’s daily lives (p. 68). Although similar to a case study, in that the current study was bounded by one (church) site, I did not choose a case study because the goal of studying a single phenomenon did not require that over time commitment and multiple sources of resources approach (p.73).

Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2007), the qualitative researcher is the "key instrument" whose responsibilities include personally collecting data "through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants" (p. 38). Yin (2011) agreed that the researcher is the research instrument and along with assessing and recording data, the researcher must be aware of the possibility of prejudices. My challenge was to not have my understanding of the data be influenced by issues in my personal background.

My personal experience includes having held administrator-level positions in more than one Protestant church. My responsibilities have included running the counseling department in a mega church and holding the position of business administrator in a smaller church. In the latter position, my duties included informing policy; however, all decisions regarding establishing policy were the purview of the board. To my knowledge, no issues or policies regarding nepotism were ever addressed in either church, although examples existed in both. My experience also includes being a Protestant from a multigenerational family that has included pastors, elders, and deacons as well as various other paid and volunteer positions, and I am very familiar with family members working together in a church environment. Although I have never been employed by a family member, I have on more than one occasion been employed as a manager or administrator by people I consider friends, including pastors. While I am not aware of being personally negatively impacted by nepotism, I am aware of its reputation. Nevertheless, I do not believe that my opinion influenced how the data were acquired or reported in this study. I was not known at the church site used for the study and had never met the pastor prior to contacting him in the process of searching for a site. My role was solely as an interviewer and observer; no power relationships existed.

Methodology

For this research, I targeted a purposeful sample of 12-15 individuals who self-identified as Protestant and were aware of the presence of nepotism in their church. However, the final participant count for this study was nine individuals.

I queried volunteers and selected participants who met the following criteria:

1. They were self-identified as Protestant.
2. They were members of a Protestant church located in a metropolitan area in the western United States.
3. They had been a member of their current church for a minimum of 2 years.
4. They were not a current employee of the church.
5. They were not related to senior leadership.
6. They were aware that family members or close friends of leadership were or had been employed by their church.

I distributed informational flyers containing study information and my contact information to the church that agreed to allow access to their members. Members were then contacted by phone or e-mail to schedule meeting times. Although the minimum target was 12 participants, I was able to find and engage nine individuals who met the criteria and were willing to participate in this study; a success rate of 75% participation. Additional participants were not sought because code saturation was reached at seven interviews, determined by coding the interviews in the order they were conducted.

Instrumentation

Data for a phenomenological study are dependent upon in-depth interviews. I conducted comprehensive, semi structured interviews using the same, researcher-developed interview questions and protocol. Observations were journaled following each interview. Interviews were recorded using two digital audio recorders and the accompanying software of Dragon speech recognition software and Sound Organizer to upload interviews onto my computer.

I developed the four interview questions with the goal of obtaining each participant's personal and honest perceptions of their experience with nepotism, described as the hiring or appointment of relatives or friends of church leadership. I additionally sought to determine whether the presence of servant leadership behaviors was recognized and mitigating. I believe that the four interview questions allowed for each participant's personal perspective, yielding quality, consistent results, and data sufficient to answer the research question.

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

My search for a church site for this study spanned more than 4 months. During this period, I contacted 14 churches. Letters and/or e-mails as well as phone calls were directed to the senior pastors of churches where nepotism was known to exist and servant leadership suspected**.** When a site was finally identified, I e-mailed an invitation/information flyer to the church. These flyers were either handed out individually or included in a Sunday bulletin. Approximately 10 days after the e-mailed flyer was first made available to the study site, two potential participants contacted me via e-mail. The low number of respondents motivated my visit to the church the following Sunday. The pastor described the study, mentioning details I included in my letter to him, and directed members to the flyer that was included in the bulletin. He also had me stand during the announcement period of service by way of introduction. Response by church members increased to 14 over the next 4 weeks, due in part, some members admitted, to being able to “put a face to the name” since I was unknown to the congregation. I visited the church several times; once to get the letter of cooperation signed by the pastor, twice for Sunday service, and twice during nonservice times to drop off additional flyers.

I targeted a purposeful sample of 12-15 individuals who self-identified as Protestant and were aware of the presence of nepotism in their church for this study. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) advised phenomenological research depends on a sample size of between five and 25 participants. Of the 14 potential participants who responded, two did not meet the selection criteria because they were members of the church for less than 2 years or were employed by the church. Three potential participants did not respond to my attempts to either schedule or reschedule meetings. Because saturation was reached at Interview Number 7, no further recruitment was deemed necessary. However, I was prepared to continue recruiting if needed. If more than 15 people had volunteered to participate, my plan was to include as much gender, race, and age diversity as the pool would allow.

Any volunteers who did not meet the criteria were not included in the study; conversely, all volunteers who met the criteria were included in the study. My search for participants who met the desired criteria for this phenomenological study was limited to the confirmed site, which I gave the alias of ABC Church for this study. The site offered multiple Sunday services and the flyers were made available at all services.

I collected data from interviews scheduled at a location and time of the participant’s choosing. Interviews took place over a 6-week period. Two interviews were conducted on 1 day, but the majority and balance of the interviews were spread out through the data collection period. I recorded the interviews using two digital recorders. The possibility of the need for additional interview time was discussed with participants at the time of the initial meeting, and time was set aside following the interview for a review of the process and to thank the volunteers for their participation.

Data Analysis Plan

A preliminary coding framework reflects data that would be informed by the research question and the interview questions (Creswell, 2007). Some possible codes were suggested by the wording of the interview questions and the possibility of the influence of servant leadership behaviors on the experience of nepotism. Listening, empathy, healing, stewardship, and building community were the five elements of servant leadership that I was listening for in participant responses, although not to the exclusion of any other codes or themes that emerged from an analysis of the data obtained from participant interviews, observations, and journal entries.

The initial codes that were decoded from interview data, were analyzed to determine patterns that could be assigned to categories and themes. Transcribed interviews and other notes, including from my observations, were examined to uncover important revelations, thoughts, quotes, and common threads of information with the goal of discerning specific emerging themes. Important statements and information were grouped together to uncover their meaning as it relates to nepotism and ethical leadership. Two digital audio recorders were used to record the interviews and pc-based voice recorder software was used to upload recorded interviews onto the computer. These recordings were sent as an attachment to a transcriber. Recordings were labeled with a participant alias and did not include any other personally identifying information. Returned transcripts were reviewed several times including while listening to the recordings of the interviews for member checks and accuracy. Using NVivo 12, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, uploaded transcripts were organized and sorted into correlating nodes/codes. All coded and themed data were used to develop an understanding of what nepotism means in the context of the participant's experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

According to Patton (2002) "in qualitative inquiry the researcher is the instrument" as opposed to quantitative research that relies heavily on the construction and administration of measuring instruments such as survey questions to establish validity (p. 14). The qualitative researcher in the quest for complexity and thoroughness in investigation depends on skill, competence, and rigor for credibility but must also be mindful of the possible distractions of personal life events (Patton, 2002p. 14). Patton further shared Guba and Lincoln's (1981) view of this challenge:

> Fatigue, shifts in knowledge, and cooperation, as well as variations resulting from differences in training, skill, and experience among different "instruments," easily

> occur. But this loss in rigor is more than offset by the flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument. (p. 113)

I believe that by disclosing any experience with the phenomenon and bracketing any personal preconceived notions and feelings, the participant's responses to the interview questions revealed their own perspective. Interview protocol included a description of the time and place of the interviews. Validity and credibility were reinforced by using each participant's own words (Patton, 2002) and the opportunity for member checks. Transferability was addressed by the variation in participant selection. Participants included male and female volunteers with ages ranging between 25 to over 75 years of age. Participants included both married and unmarried volunteers and the length of membership/attendance at the church varied.

I conducted all interviews; retrieved, and stored all data. The interviews were digitally recorded, e-mailed as an attachment to a transcriber and then I reviewed the returned transcripts several times while listening to the audio recordings to assure accuracy. Interviews were coded in the order they were conducted to determine saturation. The same interview protocol and interview questions were used consistently. The use of digital recorder(s) assisted with member checks. I believe the open-ended questions revealed data that is detailed and varied, consistent with one of Maxwell's seven strategies for combating threats to validity in qualitative research as shared by Yin (2011, p. 79). Triangulation was addressed by the opportunity of more than one meeting with a participant and comparing perspectives from different point of views.

I acknowledge that my presence may have resulted in some influence on those being observed. The goal was to seek to minimize reflexivity by becoming aware of any physical traces, archives, pictures, or by-laws in place prior to the current research and as a result not influenced by my presence (Yin, 2011). Patton (2002) further described the challenge of reflexivity as one of self-awareness; of the "ongoing examination of *what I know* and *how I know it*" (p. 64).

Creswell (2007) confirmed that qualitative researchers face many ethical issues during data collection, analysis, and the final dispersing of reports. The issues can include confidentiality, informed consent, and questions surrounding deception, among others. Creswell further cautioned about being sensitive to the possibility that the research will disturb the site of the fieldwork, exploit a vulnerable population, or in some way leave participants marginalized or feeling abandoned. My response was to employ rigorous collection procedures, data analysis, and report writing along with including validation procedures such as member checking and triangulation of data (p. 46). Additionally, any interaction while at the site that would indicate that any church member was a definite inclusion in the study was guarded against. No interviews were conducted at the site.

Evaluation by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was a requirement for approval of this study. Walden University's approval number for this study is 05-18-18-0101932 and it expires on May 17th, 2019.

At the very least a consent form from participants was required for IRB approval. I understood that if the decision was made to only have the community partner (church) include the request for participants as a bulletin announcement or e-mail and if interviews would all be conducted off-site; a letter of cooperation may not be required. For those desiring anonymity, this may be preferred. However, I found having a signed letter of cooperation assisted in making sure the pastor had a thorough understanding of the study and would then not be averse to my contacting church members. Nevertheless, no interviews were conducted on site and every effort was expended to protect anonymity.

No potential risks, other than those that would be described as minor discomforts regularly occurring in daily life have been identified related to this research. Measures were used to provide protection from loss of privacy, including but not limited to the use of aliases, and participants having their choice of interview location to further protect privacy, as well as unnecessary distress, psychological harm, economic loss, damage to professional reputation, and physical harm. Employees of the field site were not included as participants. There were no vulnerable populations that were specifically targeted.

Completed interviews had personal information removed and replaced with code numbers/aliases and remain confidential. Notebooks with the personal identifiers replaced with a code number were stored in my personal files. One copy of code information is stored on a different computer and/or in a separate, password protected Cloud account. Computer(s) are password protected and backed up to an external hard drive that will be kept in a file. Files have locks. All data will be retained for a minimum of 5 years.

Summary

In chapter 3 I presented the methodology used in this qualitative study to recruit participants, obtain data from in-depth interviews, and other sources, including my journal. I further described the approach to careful data analysis including a multi-layered coding approach that was used to identify themes and develop codes as direct responses to the interview questions. The phenomenological design was selected because of its appropriateness in examining individual experiences of nepotism and potential for revealing rich detail especially as it pertains to nepotism in an environment of ethical leadership. Issues of reliability and validity were addressed as well as ethical concerns pertaining to the treatment of human participants and how research data were treated.

In Chapter 4 I address the results of the study. Included in the results is a description of demographics, data collection, and analysis. The chapter concludes with a summary that also contains details of the interviewing process.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experience of individual parishioners related to nepotism in a Protestant church. I developed the following research question to guide this study:

> To what degree do parishioners in a Protestant church, where leader nepotism is present, perceive the impact on the congregation as positive, negative, or neutral related to five elements of servant leadership?

In this chapter, I will present the setting, demographics, data collection, and analysis of the study. I will also present evidence of trustworthiness and the results. The chapter will conclude with a summary and transition to Chapter 5.

Setting

To my knowledge there were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experience at the time of the study that may have influenced my interpretation of the study results. Church leadership had no influence on who was accepted for the study. Church member involvement included volunteering for participation in the study and did not extend beyond interviews and member checks.

Demographics

The site for this study was a church located in the western region of the United States. The congregation was predominately African American, and all participants in the study were African American. Seven of the nine participants were female. This is consistent with the national norm of gender composition in Protestant congregations in that women outnumber men in church attendance, according to the Pew Research Center's data on Religion in America (The Pew Research Center, 2018). Although the national norms for what is labeled as the Historically Black Protestant tradition show closer to a 60/40 percentage difference of women to men rather than the more than 77% majority of women in this study (The Pew Research Center). Additionally, seven of the nine participants were retired. The two participants that were still in the work force were female. The age range of participants was almost exactly consistent with employment status with six of the nine participants being over the age of 65. The one retired participant who had not reached the standard retirement age offered during her interview that she had made the decision to retire early so that she could travel.

I did not specifically query study participants about their occupation; however, during the course of the interviews it was revealed that participants included a retired RN, a retired engineer, and a retired Department of Water and Power employee. A Ph.D. student was also among the participant volunteers. Participants shared they had been members under at least two pastors; however, Participant 8, the oldest participant, reported being a member under five different pastors. A demographical summary of study participants is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age Range	Race	Gender	Marital Status	Length of Membership in Years	Family Also Members?	Employment Status
P1	65-74	AA	Female	Single	12 years	No	Retired
P2	35-44	AA	Female	Married	20 years	Yes	Employed
P3	25-34	AA	Female	Single	20 years	Yes	Employed
P4	65-74	AA	Female	Married	36 years	Yes	Retired
P5	65-74	AA	Female	Married	32 years	Yes	Retired
P6	65-74	AA	Female	Married	60 years	Yes	Retired
P7	65-74	AA	Male	Married	35 years	Yes	Retired
P8	>75	AA	Male	Married	58 years	Yes	Retired
P9	55-64	AA	Female	Married	42 years	Yes	Retired

Data Collection

I began this phenomenological study with site selection and confirmation, followed by participant recruitment, selection, briefing, and having consent forms signed. This was followed by scheduled interviews. I provided the nine participants with a copy of the consent form before the interview commenced. Every effort was made to assure the interview process was accommodating of participants' schedules and choice of locale. My goal was to establish an atmosphere where participants felt comfortable sharing their honest, detailed responses to questions that were designed to facilitate a thorough examination of the phenomenon.

I conducted four of the interviews in the participant's residence. The other five interviews took place at a coffee shop or restaurant of the participant's choosing. The interview locations covered four cities within the geographical area of the western United States. The interviews were accomplished over a 6-week period and recorded using two voice recorders. I used two digital recorders to make sure that I captured the interviews in case one malfunctioned. I estimated that each interview could last up to 1 hour long; however, the average length of each interview was 22 minutes. The longest interview was 43 minutes long and the shortest interview was 9.5 minutes. Although I was prepared to offer a break or to reschedule because of fatigue or the possibility of infringing too much on any participant's time, there was no instance where the amount of time spent on the interview elicited the need to do so. The interview began after the consent form was reviewed and signed, and participants were thanked for agreeing to participate in the study. After the interview began my goal was to ask the interview questions and limit interruptions or interjections to those instances where clarification was needed or to keep the dialogue moving.

Data collection for this study produced 3.28 hours of digitally recorded interviews, resulting in 140 pages (28,870 words) of interview transcription. Written documents, including field notes, provided additional data. I reviewed, deduced, and analyzed the participant responses to determine themes, codes, and categories.

After each interview was completed, I tested the digital recorders to be certain the recording was successful. The recording was then uploaded to my computer using the software that accompanied the digital recorders, Dragon speech recognition software and

Sound Organizer, and then a digital copy was forwarded to the transcriber as an attachment to an e-mail. No personally identifying labeling was used other than the participant alias. When the transcriptions were completed and returned, I listened to each recording at least two times as I simultaneously read and reviewed each transcript, making note of any words or phrases that may have been noted as inaudible or misunderstood by the transcriber. I then made a separate edited copy of each transcription, noting any corrections while retaining the originals for the record. I read each transcribed interview at least twice while making handwritten notes on the printed transcriptions as issues were identified and themes revealed. The transcripts were reviewed in the order that the interviews were conducted. This process helped me to organize each interview and clarify data, eventually resulting in a code book. It also helped to identify code saturation.

Data Analysis

The words and phrases that emerged from my close and thorough review of the data allowed for the development of the categories and themes used to examine the phenomenon under study. The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a transcriber; however, I also used the latest version of NVivo qualitative data analysis software that was available, NVivo 12, to aid in coding and analyzing data. Codes were logged by interview, with each subsequent interview being reviewed to determine if a code had been disclosed in a prior interview. In some instances, I used a quote from an interview to add clarity to the issue. For instance, for the initial code that was classified broadly as known skills/talents/qualification Participant 3 offered: “If the people are qualified why remove them?”

I reviewed codes and issues with the goal of refining, collapsing, or consolidating like themes. The result was a revealing overview and rich portrayal of each individual’s lived experience of nepotism in a Protestant church and their perception of the influence of servant leadership. I logged the initial categories under the following codes (see Appendix B): bias, building community, conflict, dishonesty, empathy, familiarity, family, favoritism, healing, jealousy, lack of accountability, lack of trust, listening, noncommittal members, power and influence, pride, qualifications, stewardship, time, and trust. These included the five codes that were preset for their anticipated relationship with the four interview questions.

The definition of nepotism that I used for this study was the showing of unmerited favoritism to relatives and friends in a work environment (Jones & Stout, 2015). The work environment in this study was a Protestant church. With this in mind, I first extracted from the transcribed interviews any words or phrases that revealed how a parishioner might perceive, respond to; or, otherwise experience the phenomenon of nepotism with the opportunity for responses to reveal perceptions that were positive, negative, or non-impactive. My goal was to make the codes reflective of the data. Additionally, I listened for and made note of any responses indicating that the presence of servant leadership was a mitigating factor in the context of a nepotistic environment. Five specific characteristics, attributed to servant leadership, provided the precodes of listening, empathy, healing, stewardship, and building community. These characteristics were most suitable for a church environment because they most closely align with the responsibilities outlined in the Holy Bible for pastors and deacons (Acts 15:1-2, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5-9).

The research question along with the four interview questions provided me with a guide for establishing the preliminary coding framework that was analyzed to determine patterns that could be assigned to categories and themes. Because of this process, I was able to extract the accurate meaning of each participant's response. I could then fully explain the effect, if any, of servant leadership on each participant's experience of nepotism in a Protestant church environment.

The preliminary coding resulted in a list of 21 codes that I quickly condensed to 19 codes (see Appendix B). Every code discovered through a review of the study data were evaluated; however, I determined some to be redundant and either combined them with a like theme or set them aside. With the exception of the precodes, I concluded that those codes that occurred at least three times were significant. Table 2 shows what significant codes were developed from a review of the interview data and the relationship between the codes and any interview questions. This preliminary coding was eventually refined to 12 significant codes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Significant Codes: Relationship to Interview Questions

Code	Correspondences to interview question	Description
Code 1	1,4	Listening
Code 2	4	Empathy
Code 3	1,2,3,4	Healing
Code 4	2,4	Stewardship
Code 5	1,2,3,4	Building Community
Code 6	1,2,3,4	Time
Code 7	1,2,4	Family
Code 9	1,2	Familiarity
Code 11	2,4	Conflict
Code 12	2,3	Favoritism
Code 13	1,2,3	Qualifications
Code 16	2,3	Noncommittal members

The four interview questions (see Appendix A) contributed to the consistency in my approach to data collection while also serving as a stimulant for discussion. To achieve the honest responses that are required of a phenomenological study, it was important that I designed the questions to capture the experience of nepotism and that the participants felt comfortable sharing those experiences. To this end, every effort was made to disclose to the participants what they could expect from agreeing to participate in the study. I offered them the opportunity to ask questions more than once and explained my estimate of the time requirement, including the possible need for further contact after the interview was completed. It was important to me that I thoroughly addressed any concerns that participants had.

The idea of sharing personal, lived experiences with a stranger could prove daunting, even after volunteering, and it was not one that I took for granted. It was important that participants felt comfortable with their choice and with the process, and so each participant was able to choose the time and location for their interview. Five participants chose Starbucks or another fast food restaurant option, and the balance took place in the participant’s home. The large number of retired participants meant that many interviews happened during what would have traditionally been working hours. For those who chose a fast food restaurant or coffee shop, the choice was usually to opt for an outside or patio table either because the music was too loud or it was suspected the tables were too close inside to provide a confidential exchange. Whenever possible, I scheduled these interviews to begin either before or after the height of the lunch period. For interviews held at the participant’s residence, the same standard applied, which was at the participant’s convenience. There was only one interview that was scheduled in the evening after the participant got home from work, and I was a little concerned that it would be a long day for the participant. However, they did not express or demonstrate any sign of fatigue. As much as I sought to make my participants comfortable, being aware that they were in fact doing me a favor by agreeing to participate, I often found them gracious and hospitable.

All interviews were digitally recorded using two digital recorders, however after all of the interviews were complete it became apparent that the 2nd recorder was redundant, and it was never needed. Each participant, Participants 1-9, was assigned an alias, for example, Participant 1 or P1. After addressing any questions about the study and interview process and having the consent form signed, I gave participants an idea of the time commitment. I thanked them again for agreeing to participate and began the interview with the 1st interview question (see Appendix A). During the interview participants were asked about the length of time they had been members of the church, what other members of their family currently attended or had attended the church in the past, and what ministry or other church activities they currently participated in or had participated in in the past. Information regarding gender, specific age (range), marital status, number of children, level of education, and employment status surfaced less often as the response to a direct question and more as the by-product of what may have been a comfortable, trusting environment and the participant's willingness to share.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Patton (2002), "in qualitative inquiry the researcher is the instrument" as opposed to quantitative research that relies heavily on the construction and administration of measuring instruments such as survey questions to establish validity (p. 14). The qualitative researcher depends on skill, competence, and rigor for credibility but must also be mindful of the possible distractions of personal life events (Patton, 2002, p.

14). Participant pool varied by age, gender, marital status, employment status, and length of membership/attendance at the church. Validity and credibility were reinforced by using the participant's own words in interviews that were typed verbatim from digitally recorded data and transcriptions that I personally reviewed as I simultaneously listened to the digital recording while making note of any words or phrases that may have been noted as inaudible or misunderstood by the transcriber. I then made a separate edited copy of each transcription noting any corrections while retaining the originals for the record. Verification also involved member checks and triangulation was addressed by the opportunity of more than one meeting. Notes were made following the interviews that could be cross-checked to help eliminate misconceptions or an inaccurate understanding of the interview data.

I spent time with each participant before their interview with the goal of establishing a comfortable, trusting atmosphere. Recognizing that I was previously unknown to them and that the interview questions were developed to encourage honest responses on what could be considered a sensitive subject, led me to hold their comfort in high regard. It was completely up to the participants to choose the date, time, and location for their interviews. The alias coding, which was assigned to preserve confidentiality, was applied consistently through the interview process, digital recording, transcribing, coding, using NVivo 12, and within notebooks. Ages were also noted in ranges to further alleviate any concerns relative to confidentiality.

All data were consistently coded with an alias with data stored on both a password-protected computer and a password-protected cloud account. Signed consent forms were sealed in separate envelopes, labeled with the participant alias and placed under lock and key. The interview protocol included a description of the time and place of the interview and the interview questions were used consistently. Open-ended questions were chosen to reveal data that was detailed, varied, and uniquely attributed to the participant.

Results

There was one research question for this study created to facilitate an understanding of congregation members' personal experience with nepotism in the context of their church and to gain insights on its impact. There were four interview questions. Participant responses to the four interview questions (see Appendix A) resulted in various themes.

Interview Question 1

In what ways, do you feel your congregation is positively impacted when church leaders hire (or appoint) family members or friends to work in the church?

One participant's initial response was simply: “Oh, that's a no-no” and another asked “How would it be positive? How could I get positivity out of that?” However, all nine of the interviewees agreed that the theme of time, especially as it pertains to length of membership, was positive. One of the nine participants more specifically noted that growing up in the church and knowing the history of the church when also considering positions “held for years' was positive. Similarly, the theme of familiarity, as in members being familiar and therefore comfortable with each other, was considered by six of the nine participants as positive.

The theme of qualifications, as being qualified or specifically talented to hold a position was offered by four of the nine interviewees as being responsible for a positive impact. One participant suggested that if a person has a specific skillset and experience "I don't think you can turn them away. If that's, like, their wheelhouse, and they're good at it."

Four of the nine interviewees noted the theme trust, as between family members, was a positive response to hiring family and friends with the ideas of respect and cooperation as by-products. Only one of the nine interviewees noted that it could be positive if the pastor listens, is trusted and is then able to provide conflict resolution "if all parties are comfortable talking to pastor." These were the most aligned with the idea of looking for any possible influence of servant leadership. Although not offered by any of the participants, I observed when I visited the church, that the pastor took time before service to stop and greet members. On one occasion I witnessed him kneel on one knee in the aisle next to an elderly member and engage in conversation. After service he lingered in the sanctuary to speak with members and apparently had an "open door policy." all examples of the servant leader characteristic coded as listening.

Interview Question 2

In what ways, do you feel your congregation is negatively impacted when church leaders hire (or appoint) family members or friends to work in the church?

Six of the nine study participants cite the theme of conflict (also described as turmoil) as evidence of nepotism's negative impact, with one offering specifically that "the hiring of the family members is what created the conflict." Four of the six also offered the idea of a “split” or people leaving the church as being directly attributable to conflict. One of this six remembered the conflict as more specifically occurring after staffing changes in the finance department.

Six of the nine interviewees (not the exact six as above) held the theme favoritism as an example of negative impact. Two participants additionally specified the forming of cliques as evidence of a negative outcome. The ideas of power, unfair influence and control were framed as negative by four of the nine participants. While all nine of nine interviewees thought that length of membership (time) produced a positive impact, three of those interviewees suggested that knowing the history of the church (time) was negative. Additionally, one interviewee offered under the time theme, that positions held for years was negative.

Two of the nine study participants noted responses originally coded under dishonesty, (as in falsifying documents and thief) as being negatively associated with nepotism. One participant noted the possibly related lack of accountability as negative. Jealousy was only offered as negative by two of the nine study participants.

Associated with the idea of building community, one of the precodes I assumed would be labeled as positive, had instead some negative connotations as considered by four of the nine study participants. Two of the four hinted at a lack of trust when they both questioned something the pastor had said publicly. The other two of the four offered the idea of parishioners not feeling included, which also goes against the idea of building community.

Interview Question 3

In what ways, do you feel your congregation is not significantly impacted when church leaders hire (or appoint) family members or friends to work in the church?

Three of the nine interviewees offered that the hiring of friends and family would not be impactful for silent or noncommittal members. One participant explained, “We refer to them as ‘bench’ members. They come for service…they won’t get involved. They won’t ask questions. So, it won’t impact them.” Another participant added “Some people remain silent. Neither yea or nay.”

Two of the nine participants said that the church is not significantly impacted when the pastor is trusted, goals are being taught and reached, people are being integrated into the church and things are running smoothly. “If it’s not broke, why fix it?” This was coded under healing.

Of the nine participants interviewed only one specifically offered that nepotism is not impactful when the pastor is fair, which was coded under the servant leadership precode: building community. While two participants responded that nepotism is not impactful when the subjects were qualified. As one interviewee suggested: “If the people are qualified why remove them?”

Three participants out of nine could not think of any situation where the hiring of family and friends would not be impactful at all. One of those three participants admitted: “I’ve never seen it where it didn’t just really matter.” This seemed independent of any influence of servant leadership.

Interview Question 4

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the impact (on the congregation) when church leaders hire or appoint family members or friends to work in the church?

Only one of the nine interviewees noted in response to this question something that could be coded under empathy: “It really is a tough decision, when it comes to the pastor.” Three of the nine participants made responses that support the theme of healing referencing trust of the pastor and efforts at reconciliation. “I believe he’s trying,” one participant offered.

Four of nine interviewees noted the stewardship theme. They described the process of problem resolution that first involves a leadership council before moving to the pastor and the fact that church meetings where the parishioners vote can now address issues including hiring decisions. Two of the four specifically mentioned personnel changes that were made in the finance department.

Three of nine interviewees offered responses that were coded under building community. Two of the three suggested a tendency toward failure to build community as when lack of trust and lack of communication was referenced. However, the third interviewee thought the pastor was fair and named several community outreach activities that had either initiated or flourished under his leadership.

Under code family one interviewee out of nine responded “we are basically a family-oriented church” when asked if there was anything else they would like to tell me about the impact of nepotism. The interviewee then offered examples of several talented family members who worked together in one ministry. That participant also shared how members were sometimes considered as surrogate parents to the children of the congregation.

Only one of the nine study participants noted a response that was coded under conflict for this question. The response was directed to the specific instance of members leaving the church following pastor-directed staffing changes in the finance department that involved family members. “Why would I let him run me off?” “This is *my* church. This is *my* community. Why should *I* go?”

Summary

One thing that was immediately evident from the study interviews is that all participants had experience with and could recognize the characteristics of nepotism. Even though I did not use the word nepotism specifically, not wanting to negatively charge or influence responses, I was careful to clearly and honestly describe the phenomenon through the interview questions. However, on more than one occasion the interviewee used the word in their response. Even when the entire interview progressed without mentioning the word there was never an instance where a participant asked for clarification, hesitated in responding as if confused about meaning or context, or in any way gave any indication that they did not understand the subject matter. Further, they were all responsive, indicating a personal experience with the phenomenon. The only times interviewees did not respond to a question was when two of the nine participants initially responded that they couldn’t think of anything positive about hiring family or friends.

The participants of this study were not only aware of the phenomenon and could offer examples of it in their church, but they were also very aware of consequences that had occurred because of nepotism. Possibly the most damaging, and definitely the most frequently mentioned, was a situation resulting in a “split” in the congregation. A split is when a substantial number of parishioners leave in direct response to some action or occurrence in the church that they don’t agree with. At ABC Church a major split occurred when the fact that family members who were working together in the finance department was addressed. Surprisingly, although family members working together in the finance department may not have been deemed ideal, it was when one of them was dismissed in what was posed as a proactive hedge against possible infractions that the split occurred. The new rule was put in place by the then new (current) pastor recounting a law that, according to two different participants, “no one can ever find.” Some members found the process unacceptable. The report by one participant was that first locks were changed before any discussion was had about the changes. “There was no, ‘We’re going to remove you from your positions.” It wasn’t the “what” but rather the “how” of it that caused people to leave the church, sometimes taking family and friends. One interviewee offered: “…they all stick together, whether they’re right or wrong.”

For those who stayed it was not representative of an agreement with the process but rather more akin to what one interviewee offered as “Why would I let him run me off?” It also did not necessarily stand as confirmation that family members of leadership should be hired or more directly that they should work in the same department. By report, some of the people who left eventually returned, although I could not definitively know their reasons since they were not among those who volunteered for the study.

It is clear that participants experience nepotism that it is, as may have been suspected, not necessarily a positive experience. However, there are definitely positive attributes that can exist despite the presence of nepotism. All interviewees recognized that the length of time that a parishioner was a member could be positively mitigating.

In Chapter 4 I documented the results of nine individual interviews. These findings will provide the basis for the examination of the data in Chapter 5. Chapter 4 included the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results. Twelve codes were determined to be significant for this phenomenological study. The quotes included in Chapter 4 are taken directly from participants and considered honest and significant.

Chapter 5 will include a synthesis and analysis of the study interviews and the related literature. Conclusions will be presented as they relate to the research question. I will also present study limitations and recommendations for further study relative to the experience of nepotism in a Protestant church and any influence of servant leadership.

Chapter 5

Introduction

I conducted this phenomenological study to investigate how parishioners experience nepotism in a Protestant church environment where nepotism is known to exist. I also explored the possible influence of behaviors consistent with servant leadership on each participant's experience of nepotism, making note of similarities and differences. The results of participant interviews were transcribed, coded, clarified, and the data used to form recommendations that may inform policy decisions regarding nepotism made in Protestant churches as well as other church denominations and faith-based nonprofits. The findings may potentially reinforce the necessity for additional public policy measures and highlight the potential benefit of ethical leadership in this environment. The results may additionally inform hiring practices and governance issues such as refining church by-laws.

The research question that steered this research study was:

> To what degree do parishioners in a Protestant church, where leader nepotism is present, perceive the impact on the congregation as positive, negative, or neutral related to five elements of servant leadership?

The five elements of servant leadership that I considered for this study were (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) stewardship, and (e) building community, as gleaned from the Spears' (2010) list of 10 (Hoch et al., 2018). These characteristics were most appropriate for a church environment. They most closely align with the responsibilities outlined in the Holy Bible (Acts 15:1-2, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5-9) for pastors, elders, and deacons.

As I proposed in Chapter 1, a phenomenological design was required to investigate the lived experience of parishioners in a Protestant church where nepotism exists. Although there is a lack of literature and research available investigating the phenomenon in this context, locating churches where nepotism exists was not difficult. Furthermore, in this study, I examined participant interview responses to determine whether the experience of nepotism was influenced by the presence of some of the characteristics of servant leadership.

Although the word nepotism was not used in the interview questions specifically, it was immediately evident from the interviews that all participants were familiar with, could recognize the characteristics of, and were aware of a personal experience with the phenomenon. The results of the study revealed that participants' opinions about nepotism in their church, though not identical, were often similar. The youngest participant, between the age of 25 and 34, as well as the oldest participant, who was over 75 years old, were both forthcoming, although with different perspectives. Responses to the interview questions revealed a difference in viewpoint and perhaps degree of understanding, as in the difference that might exist between an observer versus participant. However, the feelings and attitudes about the experience of nepotism in this environment were shared. I coded the different viewpoints by themes that manifested as the interviews progressed.

In Chapter 5, I will reiterate the purpose and nature of this phenomenological study. The responses to the interview questions will be reviewed and considered in concert with the related literature to draw conclusions concerning the research question. Recommendations for action and further study will also be included. The chapter will conclude with suggested implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

My review of the literature and the participants' interview responses revealed 12 significant themes. These themes were related to each participant and their experience of nepotism, including ones specific to the possible influence of servant leadership. The 12 themes identified in the study were: listening, empathy, healing, stewardship, building community, time, family, familiarity, conflict, favoritism, qualifications, and noncommittal members. In the following subsections, I will provide a description of these themes and how the study findings compare with what was found in the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2.

Listening

Study participants overwhelmingly did not recognize listening, interpreted as a characteristic of servant leadership, when considering any impacts of nepotism in their church. In fact, only one participant identified listening in response to interview questions. This was despite my witnessing the pastor take time to speak with members before and after church service on more than one occasion. Although listening was offered as being positive, it was as one of the components in the process of conflict resolution and qualified by "if all parties are comfortable talking to the pastor." This is in contrast with the literature on servant leadership including Coetzer et al.'s (2017) study that specifically counted listening as 1 of 8 servant leader characteristics.

Empathy

A leader demonstrating concern for the people they lead (Dion, 2012, p. 8), while considered integral to servant leadership as evidence of empathy, was only addressed by one of the nine participants. When considering the hiring or appointing of family or friends this participant did not offer evidence of empathetic behavior but rather seemed to understand that the situation could be a challenging one for the pastor. However, Shirin (2014) advised "Ministers need to make sure they do not nourish themselves at the expense of their flock" (p. 22).

Healing

According to the literature, behaviors that can be labeled as promoting or encouraging healing are foundational to servant leadership and its focus on the follower. Although Greenleaf's (1970) inspiration did not originate in religion, according to Shirin (2014), "the idea of unconditional concern for the other seems to resonate with Christian spirituality" (p. 14). In this phenomenological study, the participants' responses regarding conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the specifics of people being integrated into the church were included under the theme of healing, and 6 of the 9 participants felt like some aspects of healing existed in their nepotistic environment. One participant went so far as to say "I believe he's trying" when describing what they felt were the pastor's efforts in this area.

Stewardship

The idea of stewardship speaks to the handling of resources, including relationships. Fiscal responsibilities are often within the purview of the board in a nonprofit environment, including a church. According to Kennelly (2012), the board's responsibilities may also extend to meeting the regulations concerning local, state, and federal laws. Additionally, the board, with or without input from the pastor depending on church structure, may also be responsible for establishing policy that governs hiring (Kennelly 2012). The challenge, according to Arasli and Turner (2008) and Finelli (2011), is to establish policies that are both fair and flexible, especially those that limit hiring of persons not defensibly qualified for any open position, regardless of familial ties. Of the nine parishioners who participated in this study, five witnessed actions that might indicate the influence of the servant leadership characteristic of stewardship. Although no one referenced a formal church board, one participant shared the existence of a church Leadership Council that served as a first step toward resolving conflict and was a conduit to the pastor for situations that could not be resolved at that level. Two participants shared that church meetings now allowed for membership voting on major decisions, including hiring for some positions. Three participants thought that intent behind making personnel changes in a finance department that had included family members and close friends was appropriate.

Building Community

The idea of the servant leader as someone whose goal is to build community is one of the most supported throughout the literature on servant leadership. Integral to this behavior is the importance of establishing the trust relationships that others perceive as ethical and are willing to reciprocate (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). The value of establishing trust relationships and building community extends beyond the organization and the leader's influence on followers to include the organization's reputation and standing in the community (Barth, 2010). Seven of the 9 study participants offered responses that indicated a shared view of the importance of building community. However, five of those responses emphasized it was the absence of trust that was most evident. Participants mentioned less than optimal communication between the members and the pastor, and more than one expressed doubt around a statement that the pastor made that could not be substantiated. Two of the participants referenced instances of members not feeling included. Nevertheless, there were expressions indicating that the pastor was fair, had integrity, was flexible with change, and supportive of community activities that serve a public need.

Time

Participant responses indicated that time was an important theme of the study. Of the nine study participants, 100% felt that the length of time that someone had been a member could be reflective of something positive in the midst of a nepotistic environment. Conversely, growing up in the church was only experienced as positive for 1 of the 9 participants, while 3 of the 9 felt that knowing the history of the church was negative. The latter may be indicative of the feeling that knowledge of nepotism may produce a negative influence going forward. Members holding positions for years were experienced equally as both positive and negative. However, because of a lack of research outside of an employment context, the idea of time was not represented in the literature as it might be experienced in in a voluntary organization, such as with parishioners in a church. Therefore, this study extends knowledge in the discipline. Research on the theme of time relative to nepotism instead addressed issues surrounding the generational transfer of intellectual capital and the perpetuation of the family business. For instance, Schmidts and Shepherd (2013) shared evidence that the percentage of family firms that survive to three generations is only 10%.

Family/Family Influence

The family theme is at the center of the literature on nepotism because the definition of nepotism is showing favoritism to family members and friends. The idea of family is the natural lens through which other issues are viewed: family and business outcomes across sectors, the legality of nepotism, the plusses and minuses of family involvement, and the effects on non-family members. When the available literature addressed the theme of family in the church specifically, there were questions surrounding succession and power transfer, including who the power is transferred to (Hartley, 2012; Koteskey, 2011). But when the review of literature was expanded to target or emphasize Protestantism, I learned that the Holy Bible, the “model of the Godly life” (Appelbaum, 2013, p. 318), consistently focuses on the concept of family and the importance of familial relationships. It is a fundamental component of the life of a Christian following the Protestant tradition.

In this study, the participant responses coded under the family theme were specific to the ideas of trust, respect, cooperation, and power/influence between family members. Six of the 9 participants referenced family in this context, and the only two negative responses were tied to the ideas of power and influence. Although kin selection might explain the instances of family working together in this study (Kragh, 2012), there was no information offered regarding anyone else being considered (or being interested) in the position(s) which could support confirming or disconfirming the findings.

Familiarity

The theme of familiarity was not present in the literature I reviewed for this study. However, 6 of the 9 participants expressed the idea of familiarity (between parishioners) as being recognizable and positive while 1 of those 6 also observed possible negative outcomes. The total of two negative outcomes was the result of relationships deemed too personal or when the familiarity permitted lax confidentiality.

Conflict

The idea of conflict in the literature surfaced primarily in the context of what could happen in a family firm in the presence of multiple generations of family members and their different perspectives (Chrisman et al., 2012). In the study, participant experience was framed only slightly differently. Although not a family firm per se, the church did offer opportunities for multigenerational clashes between family members involved in the same ministry activities or working in the same department. In fact, 3 of the 9 participants described public conflicts between family members in the music department. However, 5 of the 9 participants focused on the split that happened after the family member staffing issues in the finance department were addressed by the pastor. The conflict in this instance was not between family members in a department but rather the response of the church "family" to the process of making, what may have been optimal, staffing changes. The issue was the *how*, not the *why*.

Favoritism

The issue of favoritism in the literature is primarily tied to negative employee perceptions of unfair treatment (Riggio & Saggi, 2015) and unqualified hires (Bellow, 2003). Bacha and Walker (2013) suggested that leaders who obviously favor one employee over another are perceived as less fair. Of the 9 individuals who participated in this study, 6 cited favoritism as a negative outcome associated with nepotism. Two of the 6 also felt that cliques were an unwanted byproduct. One participant explained: "If they're in charge of something…, they will only want to work with their family members and close friends. So, it creates cliques, which creates division within the congregation." Favoritism is viewed as unfair, even in a non-employment situation.

Qualifications

The issue of a qualified versus unqualified hire or assignee is strongly associated with the subject of nepotism in the literature. Riggio and Saggi (2015) warned that effort should be directed to "ensure that the most qualified individuals are hired and promoted" (p. 20) and Bellow (2003) suggested that issues surfaced with nepotism when the "beneficiary is manifestly unqualified" (p. 11). While there are arguments citing the benefits of human capital transfer (Jones & Stout, 2015), there is the admission that a fair and equitable process of matching responsibilities to qualifications is crucial. The goal should be to match the most qualified candidate to the position, without respect to personal or familial relationship. Interestingly, the idea of qualifications, which included the ideas of skills and talents, did not surface for three of the participants. However, for the balance of the participants the presence of qualified persons was mitigating in that nepotism was not experienced as negative when the hired family member or friend was deemed qualified.

Noncommittal members

The idea of noncommittal members (or followers) was observed in the literature when DOJ employees were described as not complaining about nepotism until pressed by the introduction of an investigation (OIG, 2012). It is not clear whether employees experience being noncommittal differently from those in a non-employment, volunteer situation. However, the motivation to remain silent in an environment where people in positions of power are hiring or appointing their relatives and friends is likely similar across sectors and employment versus volunteer situations**.** When Hartley (2012) surveyed pastors, who were on the receiving end of father-to-son succession, he learned that participating in nepotism was considered a challenge. Although it was believed that the question of succession was always “at the backs of the congregations’ mind” (p. 56), any resistance by congregation members was resolved “by (members) being prayerful and…supporting the ministry’s activities” (p. 83). It is not clear whether or not the support was vocal. While only 3 of the 9 study participants referenced this theme of noncommittal members, their commonly known existence is evidenced by the name for them. They are “bench” members; members who sit in the pews (on the bench) without offering an opinion one way or another.

Protestantism

The tenets of Protestantism were assumed accepted, if not wholly embraced by the study participants because the name of the church includes an indication of a denomination that is considered part of the Protestant tradition. Most affirming were the references to the Holy Bible scriptures on the website and during church services, including but not limited to the sermon. This is consistent with Appelbaum's (2013) assertion that the Holy Bible is considered the "model of the Godly life" (p. 318) for Protestant believers. Additionally, the study confirmed the importance of the family in the Protestant tradition as 8 of the 9 participants had family members that currently attended the church, and this frequently represented a multi-generational presence. The pastor of the site church considered himself called by God to lead that congregation consistent with scripture (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28) and the participants deferred to his position even when they might not agree with specific actions.

Nepotism

Obvious comparisons to the presence or definition of nepotism in the private or public sector were not made since the interview questions specifically referenced a church setting. However, one participant's comment "…they all stick together, whether they're right or wrong" when speaking about nepotism was at the very least suggestive of Finelli's (2011) "blood's thicker than water" (p. 174). While Participant 3's position that "if the people are qualified why remove them?" confirmed Bellow's (2003) stance that nepotistic situations may only become untenable when the "beneficiary is manifestly unqualified" (p. 11). However, this study extended the knowledge regarding nepotism by providing empirical evidence of how nepotism is experienced in a specifically Protestant church environment.

Nonprofit Organizations and Policy

The current study did not confirm the peer-reviewed research that placed much of the responsibility for organization governance within the purview of a nonprofit's board (Letts, Ryan, & Grossman, 1999). The existence of a board was not mentioned during the interview process. There was also no mention of a governance board on the church website.

Organizational Values

According to Malloy and Agarwal (2010), nonprofits do not have the same accountability requirements as public sector organizations that are answerable to the public and federal and state laws. Private sector businesses are additionally held accountable to board members and shareholders. Although the state and IRS are instrumental in conferring nonprofit, tax exempt status, nonprofit accountability relationships are attributed to those between the organization and its mission, the board, members, paid and volunteer staff, the community and other stakeholders, (Filing, n.d.; Malloy & Agarwal, 2010). While the church website listed several beliefs that were important to the members of the church, there was no clear mission statement or way to gauge how the beliefs manifested on either an individual or corporate basis. Additionally, there was no mention of a board, the criteria of this study ruled out including paid staff, and community was represented by reported activities such as periodically handing out sandwiches and giving out backpacks in the fall. The current study did not confirm findings of peer-reviewed literature concerning accountability.

Hiring practices in the literature were addressed from ethical and legal viewpoints, including the ideas of what was appropriate regarding pay policy, promotion criteria (Argandona, 2009) and the consequences of not hiring the objectively assessed most qualified person (Alder & Gilbert, 2006; Johnson, 2009). These findings could not be confirmed in the study because we were not made aware of any past policies or procedures regarding hiring, other than to assume that there was nothing in place to prohibit the family members from working together in the finance department. While the existence of a Leadership Council was shared, there was no evidence that the council managed hiring policies. One participant mentioned that the annual business meeting had recently come to include announcements regarding key hiring but there were no further details offered that would reflect the establishment of policy.

Congregation member expectations around nepotism or hiring were only minimally available in the literature. Koteskey's (2011) instruction to mission leaders was that people's perceptions of the unethical could become the "reality' to which they react" (p, 257). This idea may have been confirmed by participants who were doubtful of the veracity of a statement made by the pastor to defend/explain actions taken to clear the finance department of nepotism. The literature also included the subject of succession, which is the pastoral transition process, specifically when the senior pastorate is passed from father to son, which is nepotism. However, although there had been at least five pastors of the church in the study, there was no mention of an instance of father to son succession.

Perceptions

As noted above, if people perceive something as unethical, it could influence their future thoughts and actions (Koteskey, 2011). According to the literature, this premise includes and extends beyond issues of nepotism. Leaders have the power to influence the existence of either an ethical or an unethical environment, (O'Connell & Bligh, 2009). The recommendations supported by the literature included installing and supporting an ethical leader, establishing an ethics code, and forming an external advisory board (Barth, 2010, O'Connell & Bligh, 2009). The findings of this study confirm that leaders have the power to create an ethical environment as evidenced, at least in part, by the pastor taking steps to correct a nepotistic situation. However, the findings did not confirm the value of establishing an ethics board or external advisory board as there was no evidence that either of those recommendations in the literature were executed at the site of the study. Also, although there was definite evidence of support for the pastor, it was not confirmed that it was solely due to him being considered ethical and not due to the respect attached to the position he held.

Findings

In this study I examined the experience of nepotism for parishioners in a Protestant church and whether it was influenced by the presence of servant leadership behaviors. In the literature I was only able to locate one church with known published rules concerning nepotism; however, locating churches where it occurs was not at all difficult. Furthermore, there was no doubt that all participants in this study understood that nepotism exists and were familiar with it happening in their church. Much of the research on nepotism was substantiated in the study. The majority of participants felt that showing favoritism was negative and that having qualified persons in positions was crucial. Conflict between family members was associated with nepotism in the literature and in the study. It may also be true that parishioners mirror the public sector employees noted in the literature in choosing not to speak out against nepotism, unless specifically questioned about it.

The influence of servant leadership was the theoretical framework for this study. Servant leadership is considered a form of positive, ethical leadership that emphasizes “ethical and moral behavior” (Hoch et al., 2018, p.501). Five characteristics of servant leadership were chosen as the best fit for a church environment because they most closely align with the responsibilities outlined in the Holy Bible (1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5-9, Acts 15:1-2). This study focused on: a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) stewardship, and (e) building community, as gleaned from the Spears (2010) list of 10 (Hoch et al., 2018).

Summary

This phenomenological study resulted in the following findings based on the data:

- All participants in the study understood what nepotism is and recognized having experienced it in the environment of their Protestant church.

- All participants in this study experienced and/or recognized the influence of at least one of the characteristics of servant leadership.
- For some participants the absence of a particular servant leader characteristic emphasized its importance. For instance, some participants responded that their nepotistic church environment was negatively impacted when there was a lack of trust or there were members who didn't feel included.
- It appears that a relationship exists between nepotism being tenable and parishioners noticing efforts at building community.
- It appears that leadership efforts toward healing, after nepotism-related conflict(s), are recognized by church membership. This includes conflict resolution and reconciliation.
- Even though the extent varied, all participants experienced at least one servant leadership characteristic. The participants with the longest length of membership noted the fewest responses related to servant leader characteristics.
- It may be that participants with the longest membership were more likely to have more knowledge regarding past nepotistic conflict and personal experience with those involved. This might render them warier and less sensitive to characteristics like listening and empathy, the characteristics with the least number of responses and so appearing to exhibit the least amount of influence.

- The length of membership was relevant in that the participant with the shortest tenure was the most responsive in terms of servant leadership characteristics.
- Although the ages of the participants varied, that appeared incidental relative to the influence of servant leadership characteristics.
- Whether or not a person was qualified for a position mattered.
- Age was consistent with employment status and was considered a factor because 7 of the 9 participants were retired.
- Race was not considered a factor as all participants were African American.
- Gender was not considered a factor as no discernible patterns or differences in responses emerged along gender lines.

Limitations of the Study

Only persons self-identified as a member of one identified Protestant church were included in this study. Because I was unknown to the congregation and they were similarly unknown to me, I was not aware of any persons of influence, except for the pastor. The pastor, perhaps because he was personally experienced with the rigor of obtaining an earned doctorate, offered to assign volunteers to me. I respectfully declined and emphasized the goal of confidentiality, including from him. Although it was important that I not be in a position to influence participants, either by personal relationship or reputation, it also meant the possibility of not understanding any dynamics present in the congregation. The need for confidentiality and for people to agree to participate without persuasion or coercion was emphasized with every participant prior to their interview.

The sample limited face-to-face interviews to a small number of participants, who were all African American and lived in urban areas in the geographical areas of the western United States. Therefore, results may not be representative of more rural areas or other cities or areas of the United States. It is possible that the family dynamic is expressed differently in a rural area and that nepotism is experienced differently. A larger, more racial diverse sample could provide an additional perspective. A limitation is how well the participants represent the greater population of parishioners in Protestant churches. Subsequent studies utilizing a quantitative approach may produce additional statistical data that could supplement the research produced by this study.

Locating churches where nepotism was known to exist was not difficult. However, the search for a site whose pastor would agree to my contacting parishioners extended beyond four months. Contact was made to 14 churches, some weekly for several weeks before receiving notice of a decline to participate.

Recommendations

Existing research established evidence of nepotism with residual effects across sectors and this study confirmed that it is also experienced specifically within a Protestant church. A consideration was how well the participants represented the greater population of parishioners in Protestant churches. Because this study was limited to urban areas in the western area of the United States and a predominately African American congregation, it would be useful for researchers to reproduce this study perhaps with another demographic and in a different geographical area. It might also be informative if a different religious denomination was the focus. Providing the perspectives of different groups could add to the limited literature and reveal if a relationship exists between nepotism and people of different demographics and religious practices as compared to the current study.

According to the United States Census Bureau's targeted search on the percentage of the total population that is 65 years and over in the United States 2017 report, an estimated 15.6% is over 65 years old. In this study almost 67% of the participants were at or over 65 years of age which exceeds the standard reported by the Census. It could add to future research if participant recruitment could obtain a sample more representative of the general public. While the nine participants in this study fit Leedy and Ormrod's (2005) advice of a chosen sample of between 5 and 25 participants, a larger sample of 12–15 were originally targeted. Subsequent studies utilizing a larger sample or a quantitative approach may produce additional statistical data that could supplement the research produced by this phenomenological study. Additionally, as the literature posited the importance of policies (Finelli, 2011), appropriate governance oversight by a board (Hartley, 2012; Kennelly, 2012) and the possible positive influence of a code of ethics (Barth, 2010), choosing a site with a board and the opportunity to review policies and bylaws could be consideration with the opportunity for further research.

Implications

The review of literature revealed that a gap existed regarding a parishioner's lived experience of nepotism in their specifically Protestant church environment. There was not an absence of awareness of nepotism in this and like environments but few if any studies that were directed towards researching the experiences of parishioners. The phenomenological design was selected because of its appropriateness in examining individual experiences of nepotism and potential for revealing rich detail concerning the phenomenon. The lack of data concerning the relationship between the experience of nepotism and parishioners, specifically in the Protestant church, renders this study highly significant. The results of this study fill a gap in the research concerning how members of a church perceive and experience nepotism.

This study further addresses a gap in the literature in that it demonstrates that characteristics of servant leadership can mitigate what may be experienced as negative and perhaps emotionally harmful effects of nepotism. In fact, although the split in the congregation was in response to efforts to correct a nepotistic situation, two things are true: the actions would have been unnecessary had the nepotistic situation not been allowed initially; and the response of the congregation appears to be regarding *how* it was handled not *that* it was addressed. Some of the participants expressed doubt surrounding the veracity of statements made to explain the need for the action. Respecting followers by telling them the full truth, including substantiating statements may seem obvious. According to Richardson (2012), ethical leadership requires good communication, moral judgment, honesty, consistent modeling of fairness, and valuing the contribution of others.

Positive Social Change

Nepotism is not new. It has a thoroughly documented history beginning in the Middle Ages through the Protestant Reformation up to and including current regulations in the public sector and the accompanying, though often toothless, threats of punishment against it. Nepotism has its detractors and proponents. It is considered an example of the unfair and unethical (Calvard & Rajpaul-Baptiste, 2015) while also explained as being due to a history of family-produced pressure to show “altruism, generosity, and gratitude” (p. 32). Familial indebtedness aside, it is complicated.

Although the research confirms different positions on nepotism, no one is arguing for an unethical environment. In fact, an ethical framework and resulting ethical climate is desirable across sectors, in all business settings. However, in a Protestant church ethical leadership should be assumed, especially characteristics consistent with servant leadership. Many of these characteristics are already mandated by the Holy Bible and its instructions to leaders on how the flock, the people they are responsible for, should be treated. The point is not to suggest that church leadership has the intention to behave unethically. It may be more a need for conscious intent to consider the other, the follower. Maxwell (2003) suggested it is as simple as a leader “asking the question ‘How would I like to be treated in this situation?’” (p. 16).

Not speaking out about personal experiences regarding nepotism may be more an expression of resignation than acceptance. Furthermore, a parishioner’s awareness of not having a voice is antithetical to a servant leader’s presumed valuation of character traits like listening and building community. In the study, although some parishioners left the church, some who stayed harbored resentment. An individual who feels heard and understood, may listen; they may work harder for the organization. The servant leader values" ethical and moral behavior" (Hoch et al., 2018, p. 501) rather than personal power and self-serving control. These may spill over beyond parishioners into relationships in the community, with stakeholders, including multi-sector partnerships.

This study provides valuable information to the faith community and leaders. If what might otherwise be experienced as ethical leadership is instead either obscured or negatively altered by the presence of nepotism that may serve as an indication of the need for church policy addressing nepotistic practices. The challenge connected with giving a pastor instruction on how to interact with the congregants they were called to lead could be addressed by bylaws that support prescribed servant leader behaviors with scripture. This would also offer an approach to considering the impact of servant leadership in a nepotistic environment where the position of follower might not be limited to that of an employee but also apply to that of a volunteer organization member.

Recommendations for Practice

The following list represents recommendations distilled from an evaluation of the study findings.

- The board's responsibilities concerning the governance of nonprofit organizations, including churches, should include establishing ethical standards for pastors and leadership. These policies should be included in the job position descriptions and referenced in the organization bylaws.

- An open discussion specifically about nepotism should be scheduled with parishioners and the results used to frame policy. This might be at an expressly called forum or included on the agenda of regularly scheduled business meetings.
- Policies regarding nepotism should be published; included in personnel manuals, on the website.
- Effort should be intentionally expended to give parishioners an opportunity to voice concerns. This may be one-on-one as opposed to a group setting. Resentment and in some cases the unethical can breed in silence.
- At a bare minimum, family members should not work together in the same department but especially if there are other nonfamily members there.
- Job responsibilities should be matched to employee qualifications. Personal relationships should not outweigh qualifications.

A process that includes self-monitoring of the efficacy of these and like policies could result in positive personal and public relationships.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicate the presence of nepotism may pose a distinct challenge to the goal of obtaining and maintaining an ethical environment, even in a Protestant church. Negative influences of nepotism may exist despite a belief in God and the Holy Bible; despite respect for persons in positions of authority and spiritual leadership. Ramifications can occur when parishioners are new to the congregation or have long standing relationships with other parishioners that they consider like family.

Importantly, the absence of parishioner complaints may not indicate the absence of nepotism's negative impact. However, there is evidence that the presence of ethical leadership behaviors, specifically those attributed to servant leadership, can diminish the potential negative effects of nepotism in this bastion of Christian values. Furthermore, some of the characteristics of servant leadership are consistent with the tenets in the Holy Bible that prescribe how church leadership should conduct themselves in relationship with the follower. This consistency makes these servant leadership qualities easier to include in church policies, bylaws, and leadership training. Church leadership should be cognizant that parishioners are aware of nepotism and should consider making the effort to address its existence and impact. An internal environment in a Protestant church that is experienced as ethical may in turn garner an ethical reputation within the community and with other sector collaborations.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. In what ways, do you feel your congregation is positively impacted when church leaders hire (or appoint) family members or friends to work in the church?

(If needed, probe: Can you give me some examples?)

2. In what ways, do you feel your congregation is negatively impacted when church leaders hire (or appoint) family members or friends to work in the church?

(If needed, probe: Can you give me some examples?)

3. In what ways, do you feel your congregation is not significantly impacted when church leaders hire (or appoint) family members or friends to work in the church?

(If needed, probe: Can you give me some examples?)

4. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the impact (on the congregation) when church leaders hire or appoint family members or friends to work in the church?

Appendix B: Codes

Code Number	Description
Code 1	Bias
Code 2	Building Community
Code 3	Conflict
Code 4	Dishonesty
Code 5	Empathy
Code 6	Familiarity
Code 7	Family
Code 8	Favoritism
Code 9	Healing
Code 10	Jealousy
Code 11	Lack of Accountability
Code 12	Listening
Code 13	Non-committal members
Code 14	Power, influence

Code 15	Pride
Code 16	Qualifications
Code 17	Stewardship
Code 18	Time
Code 19	Trust