

Bernhard Giuseppe Lang

**The Effect of Servant Leadership
on Followers' Career Ambition
in Multilingual Public Service
Organizations**

**Faculty of Management,
Economics and Social Sciences**

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The Effect of Servant Leadership on Followers' Career Ambition in Multilingual Public Service Organizations

DOCTORAL THESIS

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The Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) neither approves nor disapproves the opinions expressed in a doctoral thesis: They are to be considered those of the author. (Decision of the Faculty Council of 23 January 1990).

Je dédie cette thèse de doctorat à mon fils, Dion.

Preface

This dissertation arises from a personal tension: the experience of navigating systems that often sought to confine me within rigid categories and outdated practices, in which superficial norms and established ways of doing things curtailed the space to express my full potential. This tension is not only personal but reflects a broader societal reality, in which leadership has too often been reduced to mechanisms of control, compliance, and the instrumental treatment of people as functions rather than as human beings. Against this backdrop, the present work is both an academic investigation and a personal response. It is grounded in the conviction that leadership can be otherwise: not a tool of domination, but an enabling force for both individual and collective growth, shared purpose, and freedom. At the heart of this vision lies the belief that leadership is not confined to those holding formal authority. Leadership emerges wherever individuals, whether through formal or informal roles, shape collective direction and outcomes. With this influence comes responsibility: the responsibility to recognize one's impact on others and to exercise it in ways that build trust, foster a sense of belonging, and enable empowerment. It is this broader and more inclusive understanding of leadership that guides the inquiry of this dissertation.

More importantly, this work is also an invitation to future generations: to reject rigid and preconceived models, to cultivate a critical and original vision, and to embrace a form of critical engagement that is not destructive but aware, a refusal to conform to systems that suppress rather than uplift. In contemporary organizations, saturated with commands, deadlines, and performance indicators, leadership too often degenerates into a mechanism of robotic control rather than serving as a source of meaning and inspiration. When individuals are managed without being truly seen or evaluated without being genuinely valued, they may drift into silent resignation or quiet rebellion. However, rebellion, when rooted in awareness and critical engagement, can also become a positive force: a refusal to submit to empty routines and a call to imagine alternative ways of being. This spirit of rebellion has been powerfully articulated in Italian hip hop culture, particularly in the work of Fabio Bartolo Rizzo, known as Mar-racash. Raised in the periphery of Milan as the son of a southern Italian family, Mar-racash grew up with the stigma of being perceived as a *straniero* in his own country. From this experience of marginality, he forged a voice of rebellion that combines the courage to speak out, the willingness to take risks, and a deep capacity for

introspection. In *Vendetta* (Marracash, 2015, Status), he declares: *“La mia vendetta è che i tuoi figli ascoltano i miei testi e sognano di diventare quello che detesti. La mia missione è di educarli a essere ribelli.”* Here, Marracash expresses more than a personal protest: he voices his hope that younger generations, by listening to his music, will awaken to their own strength and rebel against rigid structures imposed from above. His words become a call to reclaim voice, power, and freedom, an invitation to resist conformity and to imagine alternative futures. In *Catatonica* (Marracash, 2016, Status: Inediti, Rarità & Live), he directs his critique at Italian society and its tendency toward passive acceptance: *“Tu protesti con un hashtag, sei parte del problema... Stronza, fa qualcosa, non restare catatonica.”* The verse denounces superficial forms of protest and the absence of critical thought, originality, and courage to challenge the status quo. It is a call to awaken, to reject complacency, and to engage actively with the social realities that shape everyday life. Finally, Marracash reminds us: *“Solo chi si mette in gioco si esprime. Da me si dice: solo chi mangia fa molliche.”* The message is clear: only those who dare to step in, risk mistakes, and engage fully can truly leave a trace. Leadership, too, requires this courage, to act, to take responsibility, and to create space for others to do the same. Beyond his lyrics, Marracash has openly assumed the role of cultural leadership, presenting himself as the “king” of Italian rap. In doing so, he acknowledges not only his influence over a musical genre but also the responsibility that comes with it: responsibility for shaping artistic culture, for giving voice to marginal experiences, and for contributing to society at large.

This dual posture, which combines rebellion against restrictive systems with a sense of responsibility toward a community, captures the paradox at the heart of leadership itself. Taken together, these cultural expressions and personal reflections echo the central concern of this dissertation: leadership must move beyond rigid hierarchies and superficial conformity to become an enabling force, one that creates space for risk for mistakes, authentic human development, and finally inclusivity. Rooted in principles such as empowerment, stewardship, humility, authenticity, and standing back, servant leadership embodies this vision. It shifts the logic of leadership from control to care, from dominance to service, from compliance to growth. To lead, in this sense, is not to exercise power over others but to serve them, to enable individuals to become more fully themselves: competent, responsible, and free.

The empirical foundation of this dissertation was developed over the course of the doctoral journey and disseminated through peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations. Two major data collection projects form the empirical basis of this work, both situated in the broader field of public service organizations but focusing on different institutional contexts: the *Military Leadership Project* and the *Police Leadership Project*. In this context, *projects* refer to independent empirical studies situated in different mission-oriented organizations. Although not conceived as stand-alone research programs, these projects provided the primary data foundation for this dissertation.

The first project, the *Military Leadership Project*, conducted during the early phase of the doctoral journey, investigated two central aspects: the mechanisms through which servant leadership shapes followers' leadership role occupancy, and the role of linguistic dynamics in leadership processes. The Swiss Armed Forces provided a unique mission-oriented setting for this inquiry, allowing the study of leadership in a highly structured and diverse environment. The project employed a state-of-the-art multi-level quasi-experimental design, enabling the examination of leadership processes over time and across multiple levels of analysis. It has generated substantial academic output, including one peer-reviewed article already published, two further articles currently under review (both included in this dissertation), and five conference contributions delivered at international meetings in the fields of non-profit management, human resource management, and military studies.

The second project, the *Police Leadership Project*, developed in the subsequent phase of the dissertation, focused on servant leadership within the police as a mission-oriented and male-dominated organizational context. Here, the emphasis was placed on women's leadership aspiration and the enabling role of servant leadership in this regard. This project resulted in one article (also included in this dissertation), three conference presentations, and two practitioner-oriented contributions presented at conferences in the domains of human resource management, non-profit management, and leadership studies.

Together, these two projects form the empirical backbone of this dissertation. While situated in different organizational fields, they converge on a common research question:

How does servant leadership foster leadership aspiration and actual leadership role occupancy among followers through psychological mechanisms—particularly among linguistic and gender minorities in multilingual, male-dominated public service organizations?

In both projects, I carried the primary responsibility for the entire research process. From the initial conception and theoretical framing, through the design of questionnaires and research instruments, the organization and execution of data collection, and finally to the analysis and dissemination of findings. At each stage of the research process, I exercised both direction and hands-on involvement in execution. Although the projects were supported and enriched by the valuable contributions of esteemed co-authors, collaborating researchers and practitioners, whose contributions are explicitly acknowledged in the author lists and acknowledgments, the projects were conceived, steered, and brought to fruition under my leadership. The empirical foundations of this dissertation were disseminated through conference presentations, scientific publications, and practitioner-oriented talks. These contributions positioned the findings of the Military and Police Leadership Projects within academic debates on leadership and supported their transfer into practice.

Military Leadership Project

Scientific Paper Contributions

- Lang, B., Sansossio, R., Annen, H., & Gmür, M. (2022). *Zur Wahrnehmung von Führung in der Schweizer Armee: Die Bedeutung von transformationaler und dienender Führung* [Perception of leadership in the Swiss Army: The role of transformational and servant leadership]. Stratos.
- Lang, B., & Gmür, M. (2025). *The Impact of Servant Leadership on Leadership Role Occupancy in Public Service Organizations: A Multi-Level Quasi-Experimental Study*. German Journal of Human Resource Management. (Revise and resubmit; third round).
- Lang, B., & Gmür, M. (2025). *Leading Across Languages: How Linguistic Diversity Moderates Leadership Impact in a Public Service Organization*. Swiss Journal of Business. (Revise and resubmit; second round).

Scientific Conference Contributions

- Lang, B., & Sansossio, R. (2021, April). *Führung in der Schweizer Armee* [Leadership in the Swiss Army]. Presented at the 14th International NPO-Colloquium, Linz, Austria.
- Lang, B. (2022, April). *The intention to take a leadership position in the Swiss Army: The role of servant leadership*. Presented at the PhD Seminar, Murten, Switzerland.
- Lang, B. (2023, June). *How servant leadership affects subordinates' long-term engagement in mission-oriented organizations: The case of the Swiss Army*. Presented at the International Applied Military Psychology Symposium (IAMPS), Zurich, Switzerland.
- Lang, B. & Gmür, M. (2023, September). *Examining how servant leadership affects subordinates' long-term engagement in mission-oriented organizations: The case of the Swiss Army*. Presented at the Herbstworkshop der Kommission Personal, Berlin, Germany.
- Lang, B. (2025, September). *Bridging cultural diversity through servant leadership: Exploring leadership perceptions and aspirations in culturally congruent and incongruent dyads*. Presented at the Herbstworkshop der Kommission Personal, Hannover, Germany.

Police Leadership Project

Scientific Paper Contributions

Lang, B., & Bonnot, O. (2025). *Empowering Leadership Aspiration: The Role of Servant Leadership and Psychological Safety in Developing Women's Ambition to Lead*.

Scientific Conference Contributions

Lang, B., & Bonnot, O. (2023, September). *Der Einfluss von Servant Leadership auf die Karrieremotivation von weiblichen Nachwuchskräften in Schweizer Polizeikörpers* [The influence of servant leadership on career motivation of female junior staff in Swiss police corps]. Presented at the Herbstworkshop der Kommission Personal, Berlin, Germany.

Lang, B., & Bonnot, O. (2024, April). *Der Einfluss dienenden Führungsverhaltens auf die Leadership-Aspiration weiblicher Nachwuchskräfte in männerdominierten Organisationen* [The influence of servant leadership on leadership aspiration of female junior staff in male-dominated organizations]. Presented at the 15th International NPO-Colloquium, Frankfurt, Germany.

Lang, B. (2024, September). *The relationship between servant leadership and the leadership aspirations of female junior staff in male-dominated organizations*. Presented at the 7th International Positive Leadership Symposium (IPLS), Thessaloniki, Greece.

Practitioner Conferences Contributions

Lang, B., & Bonnot, O. (2024, August). *Karriereambition von Männern und Frauen und der Einfluss von Servant Leadership* [Career ambition of men and women and the influence of servant leadership]. Presented at the KKPKS HR-Konferenz der Schweizer Kantonspolizei, Bern, Switzerland.

Lang, B., & Bonnot, O. (2025, August). *Servant Leadership – ein mögliches Führungsleitbild für inklusive Führung* [Servant leadership – a possible guiding framework for inclusive leadership]. Presented at the KKPKS HR-Konferenz der Schweizer Kantonspolizei, Bern, Switzerland.

Lang, B., & Bonnot, O. (2025, September). *Servant Leadership – ein mögliches Führungsleitbild für inklusive Führung* [Servant leadership – a possible guiding framework for inclusive leadership]. Presented at the Operational Psychology Switzerland [OPS]-Workshop, Zug, Switzerland.

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Foundations of Leadership

Leadership Pipelines

Organizations across sectors depend on capable leaders to ensure effectiveness, adaptability, and long-term sustainability. Leadership is broadly recognized as a key factor influencing individual motivation and performance, team functioning and effectiveness, and the development of organizational culture and outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2025; Yukl, 2013). Leadership research has traditionally concentrated on the traits, behaviors, and styles of effective leaders (Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2025), comparatively less attention has been paid to how leadership style, the relational and behavioral approach taken by leaders, shapes followers' own motivation to lead or their actual occupancy of leadership roles (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Day et al., 2014; Lord & Hall, 2005). In recent years, growing concerns about declining interest in leadership positions, particularly among younger generations, have drawn attention to the processes by which individuals develop the ambition to lead and ultimately assume leadership roles (Bottomley & Willie Burgess, 2018; Chudzikowski, 2012; Torres, 2014). Central to this discussion are two core elements: leadership aspiration and leadership role occupancy. Leadership aspirations reflect an individual's attitudinal orientation toward leadership, specifically, the desire, willingness, and motivational readiness to assume leadership responsibilities. It encompasses the psychological drive to envision oneself as a leader, pursue developmental opportunities, and prepare for future leadership roles (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018, 2020; Singer, 1991). In contrast, leadership role occupancy represents the behavioral manifestation of leadership ambition, namely, the actual assumption of a formal leadership position. This construct captures not only personal motivation but also the influence of organizational structures, selection mechanisms, and broader social and cultural dynamics that shape access to and attainment of leadership (e.g., Avolio et al., 2009; Hernandez Bark et al., 2016). Rather than treating aspiration and occupancy as stages along a linear trajectory, this dissertation explores how followers' willingness to assume leadership positions relates to leadership, particularly how the leadership styles they encounter develop their desire to lead and their eventual attainment of leadership roles. The

distinction between leadership aspiration and leadership role occupancy is not merely conceptual; it has practical implications at both the individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, aspiration reflects a motivational drive that promotes personal development, continuous learning, and proactive career planning. It signals a readiness to grow into leadership. At the organizational level, actual leadership role occupancy ensures continuity in leadership pipelines, facilitates succession planning, and enables the advancement of diversity within leadership ranks. In other words, while aspiration drives leadership potential, occupancy reflects its realization. However, aspiration alone is not sufficient to guarantee that individuals will enter leadership positions. Many aspire to lead without ever being selected or encouraged, while others assume roles because of external opportunities or organizational demands, despite having limited initial ambition. This tension raises important questions about how leadership pipelines are formed, sustained, and potentially disrupted. Several factors influence the transition from ambition to occupancy. At the individual level, values, intrinsic motivation, and career orientation shape individuals' readiness (Badura et al., 2019). At the organizational level, development programs, mentoring, and transparent selection procedures can open or close pathways to leadership (Day, 2001; Day et al., 2014). At the societal level, cultural norms, generational expectations, and considerations such as work–life balance play decisive roles in shaping whether individuals ultimately take on leadership responsibilities (Bottomley & Willie Burgess, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Understanding these dynamics is important, as weak alignment between ambition and occupancy can create gaps in leadership pipelines, limiting both organizational performance and the development of inclusive leadership structures. This focus on ambition and occupancy highlights a pressing practical challenge: ensuring that organizations continue to attract, develop, and retain future leaders. Addressing this challenge requires not only examining who aspires to lead and who ultimately occupies leadership roles, but also rethinking the nature of leadership itself. To examine these dynamics, this dissertation focuses on leadership style as a central explanatory factor influencing both aspiration and role occupancy. By analyzing how leaders' behaviors, attitudes, and relational approaches shape followers' leadership trajectories, the research addresses a relevant yet understudied dimension of the leadership development process.

Leadership as a Dynamic Process

Leadership style is a central mechanism through which leadership influence is enacted. Understanding leadership as a dynamic, socially embedded process helps illuminate how different leadership styles may foster or inhibit followers' motivation to lead and their eventual entry into leadership roles. In organizational contexts, leadership is a multidimensional, socially embedded, and dynamic process that significantly shapes individual behavior, team functioning, and organizational outcomes. It is commonly defined as a purposeful and structured form of social influence, in which one or more individuals mobilize others toward the achievement of a shared goal (von Rosenstiel, L. & Nerdinger, F. W., 2011). Contemporary leadership theory has moved beyond leader-centric models, emphasizing that leadership is not only about who leads, but also about where leadership resides and how it unfolds. Hernandez et al. (2011) propose that leadership can be understood through two fundamental dimensions: its loci, the sources from which leadership originates, and its mechanisms, the processes through which leadership influence is transmitted. From a locus perspective, leadership can emerge from multiple sources: the leader as an individual with specific skills, responsibilities, and personality; the follower, who actively co-constructs leadership through expectations and responses; the dyadic relationship between leader and follower, where interaction patterns shape mutual influence; the collective, where leadership is shared or distributed within a team; and the broader context, which provides the cultural, structural, and situational conditions that support leadership practices (Hernandez et al., 2011). Complementing this, the mechanisms of leadership describe how influence occurs. Leadership may operate through traits, such as personality or integrity, which foster credibility and trust; through behaviors, such as task-oriented actions that guide performance or people-oriented approaches that emphasize care and development; through cognition, which enables sensemaking, framing, and interpretation of roles and goals; and through affect, whereby emotions such as enthusiasm, trust, and empathy spread across individuals and groups, reinforcing commitment and cohesion (Hernandez et al., 2011). These mechanisms, particularly behaviors, cognition, and affect, are reflected in specific leadership styles, such as transformational, servant, or transactional leadership. By shaping how followers perceive themselves, their leaders, and their career potential, these styles can significantly influence leadership aspiration and development trajectories. By integrating these loci

and mechanisms, leadership emerges as a multi-layered phenomenon: it arises from the interplay of individuals, relationships, groups, and environments, and is transmitted through traits, behaviors, cognitive frames, and emotional exchanges. This perspective highlights the richness and embeddedness of leadership within organizations, underscoring the importance of studying leadership as a dynamic and interactive process shaped by multiple sources and channels of influence. Leadership effectiveness reflects both the loci from which leadership emerges and the mechanisms through which influence is enacted. These mechanisms, traits, behaviors, cognition, and affect form the pathways by which leaders, followers, collectives, and contexts generate outcomes. Importantly, leadership contributes positively across levels. At the individual level, it promotes growth, motivation, and well-being, thereby enhancing job satisfaction, engagement, and performance. At the team level, it fosters cohesion, collaboration, and adaptability, enabling teams to respond effectively to challenges and to develop creativity, resilience, and collective efficacy. At the organizational level, leadership shapes culture, performance, and long-term sustainability, strengthening adaptability, innovation, and legitimacy. Taken together, these perspectives emphasize that leadership effectiveness grows from the dynamic interplay of processes that empower individuals, enable cohesive teams, and sustain value-driven organizations.

Historical Transformations

The understanding and practice of leadership have undergone a significant transformation since the mid-20th century. In earlier historical contexts, particularly during the Industrial Revolution and the early decades of the 20th century, leadership models were predominantly shaped by hierarchical, authoritarian paradigms that emphasized discipline, obedience, and top-down control. These approaches can be described as command-and-control models, reminiscent of Prussian or Napoleonic traditions, where rigid, militaristic systems demanded unquestioned compliance, whether on the battlefield or in the factory. In the industrial domain, Fordism exemplified this rationalist orientation: Henry Ford's assembly line methods, while revolutionary in terms of productivity, also epitomized leadership that prioritized efficiency, predictability, and control at the expense of individual autonomy and creativity (Braverman, 1998). Workers were often viewed primarily as cogs in a machine, a perspective consistent with classical management theories, such as those of Taylor and Weber, which

emphasized bureaucratic control and scientific management. However, in the decades following World War II, particularly from the 1970s onward, leadership theories evolved in response to changing social, economic, and organizational conditions. The rise of the knowledge economy, increasing cultural diversity, and shifts in employee expectations all contributed to a growing interest in human-centered leadership approaches. Models such as transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970; van Dierendonck, 2011) have emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence, purpose, and empowerment. In this contemporary view, leadership is no longer merely a mechanism for control and coordination but a dynamic, relational process grounded in mutual respect, engagement, and the development of others (Yukl, 2013). This evolution reflects a broader shift in leadership style, from directive and hierarchical toward supportive, inclusive, and empowering, which has direct implications for how individuals experience leadership and whether they are inspired to pursue leadership roles themselves. In this contemporary view, leaders are increasingly expected to foster inclusive environments, support individual autonomy, and align organizational goals with personal meaning. As leadership styles have become more participatory and empowering, it is important to examine whether and how these changes influence followers' leadership aspirations and their progression into leadership roles. Understanding this historical transformation helps contextualize the current research focus on leadership style as a key driver of follower development and leadership emergence.

Servant Leadership

Construct

Over recent decades, leadership research has produced a wide range of paradigms, including transactional, transformational, authentic, and ethical approaches (Hoch et al., 2016). Among these, servant leadership has gained prominence as a future-oriented construct that redefines the relationship between leaders and followers by emphasizing service, empowerment, and ethical responsibility (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). Its relevance has grown as organizational environments have become increasingly complex, with diversity, sustainability, and inclusion now central challenges. In such contexts, leadership effectiveness requires more than efficiency and control; it

depends on approaches that actively foster follower development, shared responsibility, and collective well-being (Hoch et al., 2016; Kiker et al., 2019). The origins of servant leadership can be traced to Robert K. Greenleaf, whose seminal essay “*The Servant as Leader*” introduced the concept. Greenleaf (1970) articulated the foundational inversion of leadership logic: *The servant-leader is servant first*. Leadership, in this view, begins with a desire to serve and only then becomes a conscious choice to lead.

“The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?”(Greenleaf, 1970, p. 6).

Rooted in this ethical and developmental vision, servant leadership challenges dominant hierarchical models by prioritizing service over authority and emphasizing leadership’s responsibility to society and to organizations. Because Greenleaf’s writings were primarily philosophical rather than empirical, subsequent scholars sought to develop frameworks for conceptualizing and measuring servant leadership. Early contributions focused on identifying core characteristics and dimensions. (Spears, 1998, 2010) distilled Greenleaf’s ideas into ten characteristics of servant leaders, while (Laub, 1999) introduced a six-dimensional model of the “servant organization.” These conceptual efforts provided the foundation for more systematic measurement approaches. Building on these early models, Liden et al. (2008) developed and validated a multidimensional servant leadership scale, which was later refined into a shorter form to facilitate empirical research while maintaining strong psychometric properties (Liden et al., 2015). In parallel, van Dierendonck (2011) synthesized prior approaches into a six-characteristics model and subsequently validated both long and short forms of a servant leadership scale (van Dierendonck et al., 2017; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The short scale, which has been widely adopted in empirical studies, captures five theoretically grounded dimensions: empowerment, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship (see Table 1) and provides the conceptual basis for the empirical analyses in this dissertation.

Table 1: *Dimension of Servant Leadership (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)*

Empowerment	This dimension refers to the leader's role in enabling followers to realize their potential by encouraging initiative, supporting decision-making, and fostering self-development. Empowerment demonstrates trust in followers' capabilities and creates conditions of autonomy and accountability, which in turn strengthen confidence and proactivity.
Stewardship	This dimension captures the leader's responsibility for the well-being of the organization, its members, and the wider community. Stewardship frames leadership as a custodial duty in which resources are safeguarded and decisions are made with an emphasis on sustainability, ethics, and long-term impact.
Humility	This dimension reflects the leader's ability to recognize personal limitations, appreciate others' contributions, and avoid self-centered behavior. Humility requires leaders to prioritize collective achievement over personal recognition and to remain open to learning and constructive feedback.
Authenticity	This dimension emphasizes the importance of leaders acting in alignment with their values and beliefs, behaving consistently, and communicating transparently. Authenticity builds trust between leaders and followers, as integrity and coherence between words and actions signal reliability and credibility.
Standing Back	This dimension refers to the leader's willingness to step aside when appropriate, give credit to followers, and let others take the spotlight. Standing back underscores the priority of followers' growth and success, demonstrating that leadership is not about personal recognition but about enabling others to thrive.

Building on these conceptualization and measurement efforts, Eva et al. (2019) proposed a widely accepted definition that integrates both theoretical and empirical insights:

“Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community.” (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114).

This definition highlights three key aspects: an altruistic orientation rooted in concern for others; personalized relationships that address individual follower needs; and a community focus that extends leadership responsibilities beyond organizational performance to encompass societal well-being. Taken together, servant leadership is best understood as a people-centered and ethically grounded approach in which leaders embody humility, stewardship, and authenticity while fostering growth, empowerment, and collective purpose. By offering both a normative vision and empirically validated frameworks, servant leadership positions itself as a compelling response to contemporary organizational challenges and as a redefinition of what constitutes legitimate and effective leadership.

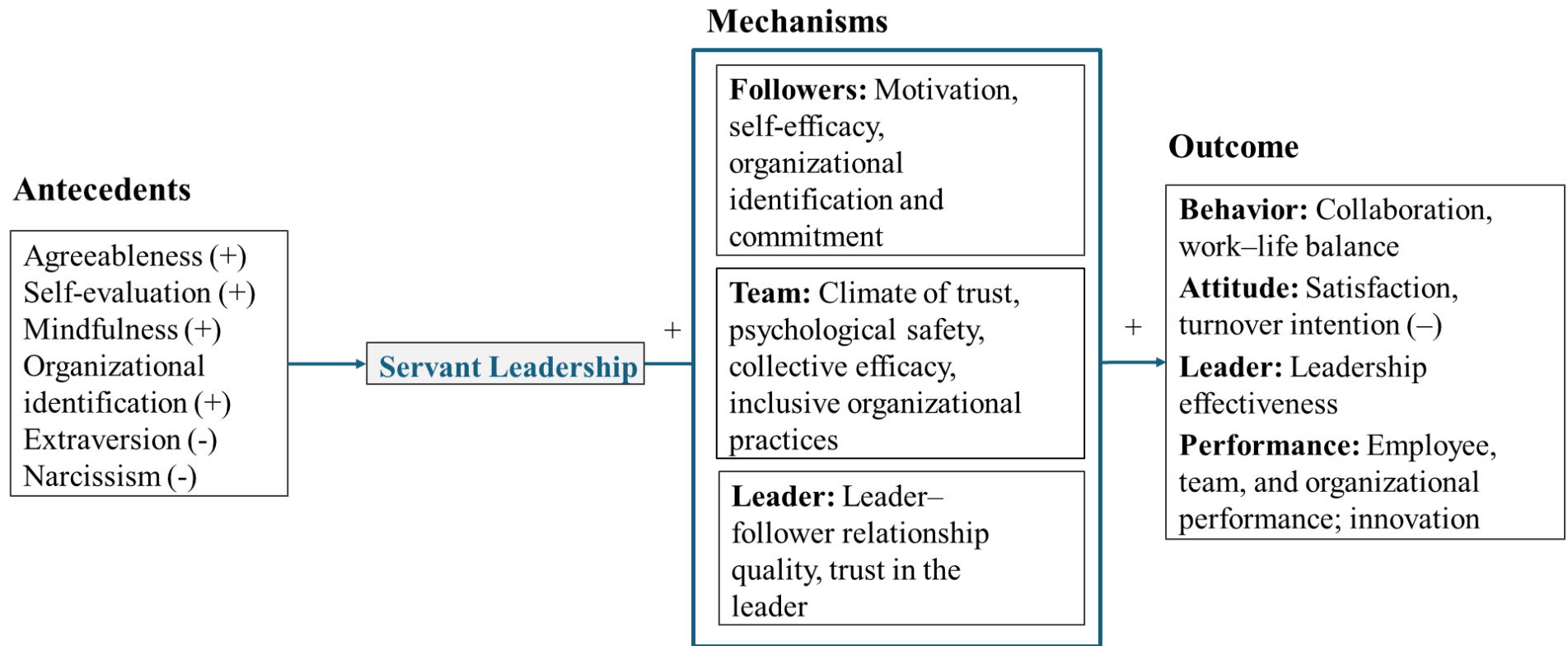
Taken together, servant leadership offers a distinctive dual focus: task-oriented responsibility through empowerment and stewardship, and people-oriented care through humility, authenticity, and standing back (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). This dual orientation combines a commitment to organizational performance with a parallel focus on followers' growth and well-being, in contrast to traditional leader-centric approaches that emphasize authority, control, or personal vision. Effectiveness is grounded not in formal position or personal power, but in service, humility, and ethical responsibility. Leadership is thus reframed as a relational, value-driven process in which the flourishing of followers and communities constitutes the ultimate criterion of success. By uniting responsibility with care, servant leadership positions itself as a compelling model for addressing contemporary organizational challenges, including inclusion, sustainability, and the creation of meaningful work.

Antecedents, Mechanisms, and Outcomes of Servant Leadership

Over the past two decades, servant leadership has evolved from a philosophical vision (Greenleaf, 1970) into a construct that is both conceptually mature and empirically examined. It has become increasingly relevant in response to evolving organizational demands, including the need for ethical leadership, inclusive cultures, and

sustainable practices. Increasingly, scholars have moved beyond defining what servant leadership is to exploring why it emerges, how it operates, and what effects it produces in organizations. This shift reflects a broader trend in leadership research toward understanding the psychological, relational, and contextual factors that influence leadership effectiveness. Addressing these questions requires an integrated perspective on its antecedents, mediating mechanisms, and outcomes. Two recent systematic reviews have been particularly influential in advancing this discussion. The first comprehensive conceptual review of servant leadership was published by van Dierendonck (2011), who synthesized the theoretical underpinnings and identified core characteristics of the construct. Building on this foundation, Eva et al. (2019) consolidated the growing empirical literature, providing a comprehensive synthesis of the antecedents, mechanisms, and multi-level outcomes of servant leadership. In parallel, Langhof and Güldenbergl (2019) structured the fragmented literature into coherent categories, offering greater clarity on the drivers, processes, and consequences of servant leadership across different levels of analysis. Building on these reviews, the following section develops a narrative that outlines the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of servant leadership, thereby situating the construct within the broader field of contemporary leadership research. This perspective not only enables a deeper theoretical understanding of how servant leadership functions but also informs practical strategies for leadership development and organizational design. This structure is also illustrated in Figure 1, which synthesizes insights from Eva et al. (2019) and Langhof & Güldenbergl (2019), and is conceptually grounded in the seminal review by van Dierendonck (2011).

Figure 1: A Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership. Adapted from van Dierendonck (2011); Eva et al. (2019); Langhof and Güldenbergl (2019)



Antecedents

The question of who becomes a servant leader has been a central concern in the literature. Servant leadership is understood to be shaped by a combination of personality traits and contextual factors (Eva et al., 2019; Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019). Research has identified several antecedents that increase or decrease the likelihood of leaders adopting a servant leadership style. Among the positive antecedents, certain traits are particularly notable. Agreeableness plays a pivotal role, as pro-social tendencies and empathy align closely with the orientation toward others characteristic of servant leadership (Hunter et al., 2013). Core self-evaluations, which reflect a stable and positive self-concept, enable leaders to devote attention to follower development rather than self-protection or maintaining their status (Flynn et al., 2016). Mindfulness further supports servant leadership by fostering authenticity and attentiveness to the needs of others (Verdorfer, 2016). Likewise, organizational identification increases the likelihood of servant leadership behaviors, as leaders who feel strongly attached to their organization assume greater responsibility for the well-being of its members (Peterson et al., 2012). By contrast, several traits have been identified as negative antecedents. High levels of extraversion, particularly when expressed through dominance and assertiveness, may undermine the humility and service orientation that are central to servant leadership (Hunter et al., 2013). Even more incompatible is narcissism, where self-centeredness and the persistent need for admiration directly contradict the servant leader's ethos of humility, stewardship, and prioritization of others (Peterson et al., 2012). Synthesizing these findings, Langhof and Guldenberg (2019) highlight emotional intelligence, core self-evaluations, and an altruistic mindset as key dispositional foundations for the development of servant leadership. Taken together, this body of research underscores that servant leadership emerges not from isolated traits but from a constellation of personal characteristics and contextual factors that jointly support a leader's orientation toward service and responsibility.

Mechanisms

Beyond its antecedents, servant leadership influences various psychological and relational mechanisms. In his seminal conceptual review, van Dierendonck (2011) identified these mechanisms as the pathways through which servant leadership translates its human-centered orientation into outcomes at the individual, team, and

organizational levels. These processes unfold simultaneously across personal, relational, and collective domains, thereby explaining how servant leadership's focus on serving others can generate both tangible performance outcomes and more intangible attitudinal benefits. According to van Dierendonck (2011), servant leadership operates principally through two interrelated elements. The first concerns the development of high-quality leader–follower relationships, which are grounded in mutual affect, respect, contribution, and loyalty. Servant leaders invest in followers' growth, value their input, and demonstrate genuine care for their well-being. This quality of relationship fosters identification with the leader, strengthens interpersonal trust, and motivates followers to reciprocate with greater commitment and prosocial behavior. By treating followers not as mere role occupants but as individuals with unique potential, servant leaders cultivate a relational dynamic in which loyalty and discretionary effort naturally emerge (van Dierendonck, 2011). The second element emphasized by van Dierendonck (2011) is the creation of a psychological climate characterized by trust and fairness. Servant leaders foster organizational environments where followers feel secure enough to voice concerns, contribute ideas, and take initiative without fear of negative repercussions. Such climates are characterized by transparency, justice, and consistency in leaders' behavior, which reinforce perceptions of procedural and interactional fairness. In turn, this sense of fairness strengthens collective trust and enhances psychological safety, thereby facilitating collaboration, innovation, and collective efficacy at the team and organizational levels. Expanding this line of inquiry, Eva et al. (2019) systematized the literature by identifying several clusters of mediating mechanisms through which servant leadership exerts its influence. At the employee and job level, servant leadership enhances followers' personal resources (Walumbwa et al., 2010). It strengthens their organizational identification (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014), thereby reinforcing both psychological resilience and role-based commitment. At the team level, servant leaders cultivate a climate of psychological safety (Schaubroeck et al., 2011), foster group identification (Chen et al., 2015), and encourage collaborative behaviors among members (Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2017), thereby enhancing collective functioning and cohesion. At the relational level, servant leadership improves the quality of leader–follower exchanges by building trust in the leader (Kashyap & Rangnekar, 2016), strengthening Leader-Member-Exchange (Amah, 2018), and promoting identification with the leader (Yoshida et al., 2014). Finally, at the organizational level, servant leadership shapes wider institutional

climates by embedding inclusive practices (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), cultivating a serving culture (Liden et al., 2014), and fostering a socio-moral climate (Pircher Verdorfer et al., 2015). Taken together, these mechanisms demonstrate that servant leadership does not operate in a linear or isolated manner. Instead, it simultaneously engages with individuals' psychological resources, the relational quality of leader–follower exchanges, team dynamics, and the broader organizational culture. Through these interconnected processes, servant leadership enhances followers' self-efficacy, deepens their sense of belonging, and channels their motivation toward prosocial behaviors and higher performance (Chen et al., 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2010). The explanatory power of this multi-level perspective lies in showing how servant leadership translates its values-driven, people-oriented orientation into observable and desirable outcomes across different layers of organizational life.

Outcomes

The outcomes of servant leadership have been extensively documented. Eva et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive systematic review of the empirical evidence, which is further corroborated by Langhof and Güldenbergh (2019). Collectively, this body of research demonstrates that servant leadership generates positive effects across multiple levels of analysis, typically classified into behavioral, attitudinal, and performance-related outcomes. At the behavioral level, servant leadership has been shown to promote prosocial and sustainable behaviors among followers and teams (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018; Walumbwa et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2015). At the attitudinal level, servant leadership enhances employees' affective connection to their work and organization, strengthening engagement and organizational commitment (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; Schneider & George, 2011). Importantly, it has been shown to reduce turnover intentions at both the individual and team levels, as employees are more likely to remain in organizations where they feel valued (Hunter et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2016). At the performance level, servant leadership yields substantial outcomes. At the individual level, higher motivation and self-efficacy are associated with improved service performance (Chen et al., 2015), often mediated by need satisfaction and task performance (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016). At the team level, servant leadership fosters climates of trust, collaboration, and collective efficacy, which in turn enhance team performance and cooperation (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Together, these findings provide robust evidence that servant leadership yields significant benefits for

individuals, teams, and organizations alike, and contributes to enhanced performance across multiple levels of analysis (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019). Emerging research also points to the potential influence of servant leadership on followers' leadership development trajectories. For instance, Lacroix and Verdorfer (2017) found that servant leadership is associated with reduced leadership avoidance, suggesting that empowering leadership may not only promote follower well-being and performance but also increase their openness to future leadership responsibilities.

Positioning Servant Leadership Within Leadership Theory

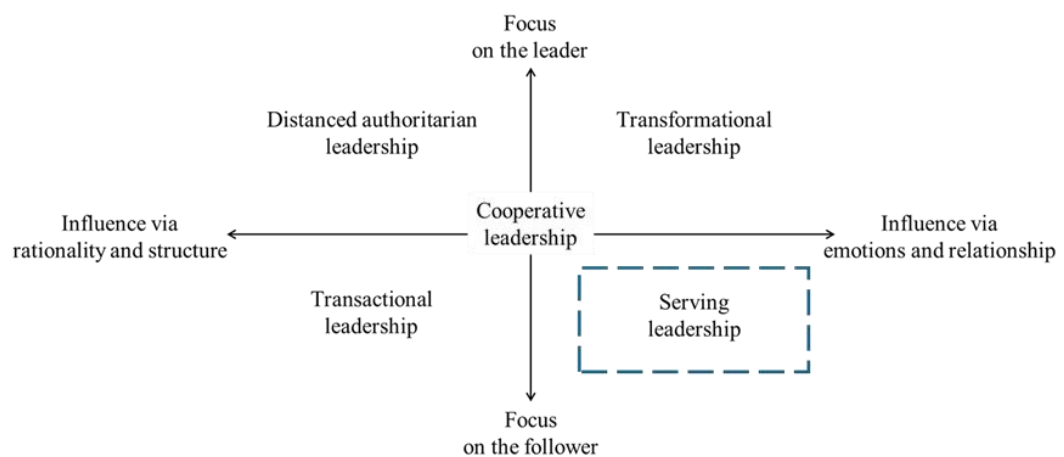
Recent scholarships have increasingly emphasized positive leadership approaches that support not only organizational performance but also followers' well-being, development, and engagement. Among the most influential models are transformational, transactional, and servant leadership (Hoch et al., 2018). While transformational and transactional leadership have long dominated theory, originally conceptualized by Burns (1978) and later elaborated by Bass (1990) and Bass & Riggio (2006), servant leadership has emerged as a compelling alternative that redefines leadership by prioritizing follower development, empowerment, and holistic well-being (Greenleaf, 1970; Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011). Although all three styles aim to foster positive organizational outcomes, they differ in core orientation and mechanisms of influence. Transformational leadership is leader-centric and emotionally driven, characterized by vision, charisma, and intellectual stimulation. Its central aim is organizational transformation, with follower development serving that goal (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Followers are motivated by perceptions of leader effectiveness and inspired to transcend self-interest in pursuit of collective success. Transactional leadership, in contrast, is based on structured exchanges between leaders and followers, emphasizing contingent rewards and corrective monitoring (Bass, 1990). While effective in maintaining short-term performance and order, it remains task-focused and rationally structured, with limited attention to followers' intrinsic motivation or developmental needs.

A key conceptual distinction between transformational and servant leadership is outlined by Stone et al. (2003). While both emphasize positive development, transformational leadership prioritizes organizational goals by leveraging follower

development to that end. Servant leadership inverts this logic: it prioritizes followers' growth and well-being, viewing organizational performance as a natural byproduct of serving others. Empirical research supports this distinction. The meta-analysis by Hoch et al. (2018) found that servant leadership accounted for incremental variance in outcomes such as engagement and well-being beyond transformational and transactional leadership. Similarly, van Dierendonck et al. (2014) showed that while both transformational and servant leadership predict engagement, their effects are mediated differently: leader effectiveness in the case of transformational leadership and psychological need fulfillment in the case of servant leadership. Other studies confirm these differences: Podsakoff et al. (2006) link transformational leadership to innovation and performance, while Liden et al. (2014) demonstrate that servant leadership fosters a culture of service, enhancing organizational citizenship behaviors and long-term outcomes. By contrast, transactional leadership, while useful for compliance and routine functioning (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), contributes little to deeper relational or motivational outcomes.

These leadership approaches are better understood when situated within a broader conceptual typology, as illustrated in Figure 2 (adapted from Gmür & Lang, 2020).

Figure 2: Typology of Leadership Styles Based on Locus of Focus and Mechanisms of Influence



According to this typology, leadership styles vary along two key dimensions: locus of focus (leader- or follower-centered) and dominant mechanisms of influence, which may be emotional-behavioral, or cognitive-behavioral (Hernandez et al., 2011). Within this framework, the four leadership styles can be distinguished as follows:

- Servant leadership is follower-focused and emotionally-behaviorally driven, emphasizing trust, personal growth, and care.

- Transformational leadership is leader-focused and emotionally-behaviorally driven, emphasizing vision, charisma, and inspiration.
- Transactional leadership is follower-focused but cognitive-behavioral, operating through structured exchanges, such as contingent rewards and corrective monitoring.
- Authoritarian leadership is leader-focused and cognitive-behavioral, relying on discipline, directive influence, and top-down control.

By mapping servant leadership alongside these established styles, this typology clarifies both its distinctive logic and its complementary potential. However, given their emphasis on control, compliance, and task execution. Accordingly, this dissertation compares servant and transformational leadership, both emotionally and behaviorally driven models, examining how they shape follower motivation and leadership development through distinct relational and psychological mechanisms.

Inclusion Through Servant Leadership in Public Service Organizations

Contemporary organizations are increasingly characterized by diversity and multiculturalism, shaped by globalization, demographic change, and evolving societal expectations. However, demographic diversity alone does not guarantee inclusion or equitable participation in leadership. This dissertation focuses on two public service contexts where the gap between diversity and inclusion is particularly pronounced: the military and the police. These hierarchical, mission-driven institutions operate within a multilingual and culturally diverse society such as Switzerland. Yet gender and language minorities may often remain underrepresented in leadership roles, not due to a lack of competence or aspiration, but because of persistent structural barriers, cultural norms, and leadership models that may unintentionally constrain aspirations and hinder access to leadership positions. In male-dominated organizations, where traditional ideals of leadership continue to reflect masculine and majority-language norms, the risks of implicit bias and marginalization are especially high. These conditions make such institutions critical sites for examining how leadership can foster inclusion and expand leadership pathways for underrepresented groups.

Building on this foundation, it is important to recognize that the challenges of translating diversity into meaningful organizational outcomes are magnified in certain institutional settings. Two such contexts are central to this dissertation: multilingual organizations, in which linguistic heterogeneity creates both opportunities and relational tensions, and male-dominated organizations, in which traditional gender norms continue to restrict women's access to leadership positions. In both environments, diversity alone does not guarantee progress. What matters is how organizations engage, support, and empower individuals to step into leadership roles in the first place. In Swiss Public Service Organizations, these challenges are particularly evident in the military and the police, which serve as the empirical focus of this dissertation. The military, as a highly multilingual and hierarchical organization, faces growing difficulties in cultivating its future leadership corps, not only because of the complexities of managing multilingual teams, but also due to generational shifts in values, identity, and attitudes toward authority (Holenstein, 2018). Similarly, the police, as a male-dominated institution, continues to grapple with the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, shaped by persistent structural and cultural barriers (KKPKS, 2023). In both settings, leadership development is constrained not only by systemic exclusion but also by declining motivation among emerging leaders to assume formal authority positions. In this context, servant leadership may offer a compelling alternative. Its emphasis on ethical purpose, shared responsibility, and follower empowerment aligns more closely with the values of younger generations, who increasingly favor relational, participatory, and purpose-driven forms of leadership. By prioritizing empowerment, humility, authenticity, stewardship, and standing back, rather than relying on hierarchy, control, or personal dominance, servant leadership may reduce resistance to leadership by reframing it as a socially meaningful and personally authentic endeavor (Lacroix & Verdorfer, 2017). This redefinition has the potential to reinvigorate leadership engagement in institutions that urgently need to cultivate new leaders amid evolving demographic and cultural realities.

Research on diversity shows that diverse teams can outperform homogeneous groups by integrating multiple perspectives, thereby enhancing decision-making and problem-solving (Herring, 2009; Hunt et al., 2015). However, diversity can also produce miscommunication, subgroup formation, and reduced cohesion when differences become salient (Cox et al., 1991). These contradictory outcomes reflect competing

theoretical perspectives: similarity–attraction theory (Byrne, 1971) and social identity/self-categorization theories (Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner et al., 1987) emphasize the risks of intergroup bias, while the information/decision-making perspective (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) and upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) stress the cognitive advantages of diversity. The categorization–elaboration model (van Knippenberg et al., 2004) integrates these perspectives by showing that diversity can simultaneously foster elaboration of task-relevant information and activate social categorization processes that, through in-group/out-group distinctions, hinder social outcomes. Self-categorization mechanisms drive these dynamics as individuals evaluate group membership based on comparative fit, or the perceived similarities within groups and differences between them; normative fit, which refers to the extent to which groupings align with prevailing social expectations; and cognitive accessibility, defined as the ease with which such distinctions are activated in each context (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). In this sense, organizational diversity is primarily a descriptive construct, denoting observable differences in workforce composition and therefore providing only a static representation of who is present at a given point in time. A proactive approach requires leadership practices that reduce self-categorization, minimize relational tensions, and foster inclusive conditions in which diversity can be leveraged to achieve positive outcomes (Shore et al., 2009). According to inclusion theory, this entails creating environments in which individuals simultaneously experience a sense of belonging, feel accepted and part of the group, and have their uniqueness recognized and valued for their distinct identities and contributions (Shore et al., 2011). When both needs are met, employees are more likely to feel psychologically safe, engage fully, and contribute meaningfully to group objectives.

Leadership plays an important role in cultivating such climates by affirming diverse perspectives, promoting equity, and legitimizing different ways of being and leading. In this sense, leadership becomes the essential bridge between diversity and inclusion: it shapes intergroup dynamics, reduces bias, and promotes equitable participation, ultimately determining whether diversity functions as a liability or an asset. From both an economic and societal perspective, inclusion has become an indispensable condition for navigating and leveraging diversity in contemporary organizations. It is not a discretionary response, but a structural necessity, one that defines whether diversity becomes a source of value or a point of division. Economically, inclusion enables

diverse teams to function effectively by fostering trust, psychological needs, and shared purpose, conditions that underpin superior performance, innovation, and decision-making (Herring, 2009; Hunt et al., 2015; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Without inclusion, diversity alone may lead to fragmentation or conflict rather than advantage. Societally, the imperative for inclusion is rooted in the values of equality, dignity, and participation as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations. General Assembly, 1949). It reflects not only a legal or moral duty, but also a democratic ideal: that every individual should have a meaningful voice and opportunity to contribute. This deeper significance of inclusion invites a more precise conceptual understanding. As Shore et al. (2011) argue, inclusion extends beyond demographic representation or surface-level diversity. Inclusion involves both belongingness and uniqueness. The dual need to be accepted as part of the group while also being recognized for one's individuality. Achieving this balance is essential to creating work environments in which all members can contribute meaningfully and thrive.

Organizations that succeed in meeting both needs are more likely to convert diversity into sustainable advantages for performance, learning, and innovation. Servant leadership provides a leadership philosophy particularly well aligned with this dual demand. As Gotsis and Grimani (2016) argue, servant leadership embodies an inclusive orientation that fosters climates of belongingness and uniqueness by empowering diverse employees, promoting fairness, and enhancing sensitivity to societal expectations. This inclusiveness is grounded in the core dimensions of servant leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011). Empowerment enables followers to develop and realize their potential, while humility ensures that leaders acknowledge others' expertise and contributions, thereby counteracting hierarchical barriers. Authenticity fosters honesty and integrity, encouraging employees to bring their genuine selves to work. Stewardship extends the leader's responsibility beyond organizational goals to the pursuit of equity, social justice, and the common good. Finally, standing back reflects the leader's willingness to prioritize follower needs over self-interest, thereby creating space for marginalized voices (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Taken together, these dimensions cultivate climates of psychological safety, fairness, and participatory decision-making. Servant leaders thus reduce exclusion, dismantle barriers to participation, and encourage constructive engagement across differences. In this way, servant leadership does not merely accommodate diversity but actively transforms it into inclusion by legitimizing

authority through service and empowerment. By combining belongingness with uniqueness, servant leadership becomes a natural ally of inclusion, particularly in diverse cultural and gendered contexts where inclusive practices are essential for organizational sustainability (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Servant Leadership in Multilingual and Male-Dominated Public Service Organizations

Multilingual public service organizations, such as the Swiss Army, are sites where cultural and linguistic heterogeneity presents both significant opportunities and complex relational challenges. Leadership effectiveness in such settings is not culturally neutral. Research on cross-cultural leadership has long shown that leadership attributes are not universally defined but are culturally endorsed. Foundational studies such as those by Dorfman and Howell (1988) and the GLOBE project (House et al., 2004; Chhokar et al., 2007; House et al., 2014) demonstrate that effective leadership depends on alignment with culturally shared expectations. The GLOBE framework identifies six culturally variable leadership dimensions: charismatic/value-based, team-oriented, participative, humane-oriented, autonomous, and self-protective (Dorfman et al., 2012). According to the cultural congruence perspective (Rockstuhl et al., 2023), leaders are perceived as effective when their behavior aligns with culturally normative prototypes. At the same time, leadership can also serve as a compensatory function by addressing cultural gaps, while globalization increasingly fosters convergence in leadership effectiveness (Rockstuhl et al., 2023).

When applied to servant leadership, these insights underscore both universal and culturally contingent aspects. While dimensions such as empowerment and fairness tend to resonate across cultural contexts, others, like humility, authenticity, or standing back, may be interpreted quite differently depending on societal values and leadership expectations (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019). For example, servant leadership aligns more easily with low-power-distance cultures, where participatory practices are appreciated, but may conflict with hierarchical expectations in high-power-distance societies (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012). Similarly, collectivist orientations have been shown to moderate the effect of servant leadership on motivation. In both China and the United States, high collectivism attenuated the association between collectivism and autonomous motivation (Wang et al., 2022). Within Europe, Germanic cultures prioritize

autonomy and performance, which supports the empowerment component of servant leadership, while Latin cultures tend to emphasize relational and charismatic traits (Bobbio et al., 2012; House et al., 2004). Despite these differences, empirical studies confirm that servant leadership fosters trust, psychological safety, and empowerment across a wide range of national contexts, including the United States, Indonesia, Germany, Ghana, and China (Hale & Fields, 2007; Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010). These traits are particularly valuable in multilingual organizations, where successful collaboration depends on legitimizing diverse voices, managing relational tensions, and avoiding exclusionary group dynamics. In this setting, servant leadership does not enforce uniformity but navigates diversity constructively, creating the psychological and relational conditions under which linguistic and cultural differences become assets rather than barriers. Servant leaders accomplish this by combining universal principles (e.g., fairness and care) with the cultural flexibility to adapt behaviors, such as humility and participatory practices, to context-specific expectations. In multilingual environments, servant leadership enables diverse perspectives to be heard, valued, and integrated, transforming potential fault lines into foundations for collaboration and innovation.

Male-dominated organizations constitute a second relevant context in which diversity does not automatically lead to inclusion. Despite important progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles across Europe (EIGE, 2025; Jourová, 2016). This underrepresentation is not explained by a single barrier but by multiple interacting constraints operating at personal, interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Khattab et al., 2020). The metaphor of the “*labyrinth*” (Eagly & Carli, 2007) captures this complexity more effectively than earlier “*glass ceiling*” models. Women face cumulative challenges, biased evaluation processes, limited access to influential networks, disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, and persistent cultural norms regarding gender roles. A particularly enduring obstacle is the “*think manager, think male*” stereotype (Schein, 1973; Koenig et al., 2011), which equates effective leadership with agentic, assertive, and dominant traits typically ascribed to men. Women, by contrast, are socially expected to be communal, warm, and supportive. This creates the so-called “*double bind*” (Eagly & Karau, 2002): if women adopt communal behaviors, they may be seen as less competent; if they display agentic qualities, they risk social backlash for violating gender norms. This no-win situation undermines women’s leadership legitimacy and places them

under constant pressure to navigate conflicting expectations, often resulting in stress and reduced visibility as credible leadership candidates (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018). Even when women attain leadership positions, the surrounding cultural and organizational dynamics continue to reinforce masculine norms, limiting true inclusion. Servant leadership offers an alternative model that directly addresses these barriers. Its emphasis on empowerment, fairness, humility, authenticity, and stewardship supports the development of climates in which women's contributions are recognized and valued and in which the risk of backlash is reduced. By prioritizing the growth of others over self-interest, servant leaders legitimize non-traditional leadership identities and cultivate psychological safety for all followers. This helps dismantle the cultural and structural dynamics that continue to marginalize women in male-dominated settings. Furthermore, servant leaders actively model inclusive behavior and invest in removing systemic barriers that prevent women from fully participating in leadership processes. In male-dominated organizations, then, servant leadership is not merely a relational approach but a structural resource for gender inclusion. It offers an alternative to hierarchical, masculine leadership prototypes and provides both the interpersonal conditions and organizational practices necessary for transforming exclusionary cultures. The broader lesson is that servant leadership has the potential to disrupt entrenched stereotypes, promote identity-safe environments, and support aspirations for leadership among those historically excluded from it.

Taken together, these theoretical, historical, and contextual perspectives underscore the important need for leadership models that not only promote individual development but also foster inclusive leadership pipelines in complex public service environments. Servant leadership offers a promising yet underexplored framework for addressing this challenge. However, relevant questions remain about how, for whom, and under what conditions servant leadership fosters leadership emergence. Accordingly, this dissertation investigates the following overarching research question:

How does servant leadership foster leadership aspiration and actual leadership role occupancy among followers through psychological mechanisms—particularly among linguistic and gender minorities in multilingual, male-dominated public service organizations?

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Summaries of the three Studies

The empirical foundation of this dissertation is built on three studies currently under review and at different stages of the publication process (see Scientific Paper Contributions on pages 8–10), each addressing a distinct facet of servant leadership and relational leadership in contemporary public service organizations. The first study, *The Impact of Servant Leadership on Leadership Role Occupancy in Public Service Organizations*, develops and tests a cross-sectional multi-level model showing how servant leadership influences actual leadership role occupancy through psychological mechanisms, specifically task efficacy and organizational commitment, and how public service motivation conditions these effects. By shifting the analytical focus from leadership intentions to the actual assumption of formal roles, it advances understanding of leadership pipelines in public service organizations. The second study, *Leading Across Languages: How Linguistic Diversity Moderates Leadership Impact*, investigates how leadership effectiveness varies in multilingual teams by conceptualizing linguistic proximity as a continuous cognitive–relational mechanism. Using decomposed leadership components, it demonstrates how linguistic alignment shapes the relationship between perceived servant and transformational leadership and leadership role occupancy, thereby extending relational schema theory and inclusive leadership research to linguistically diverse public service environments. The third study, *Empowering Leadership Aspiration: Servant Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Gender Dynamics in Male-Dominated Organizations*, examines how servant leadership fosters leadership aspiration among uniformed officers in Swiss police organizations, with particular attention to women’s underrepresentation in leadership roles. Grounded in inclusivity theory and psychological safety, the study reveals gender-specific patterns in leadership ambition. It highlights the conditions under which servant leadership strengthens women’s leadership aspirations in male-dominated hierarchical contexts. Taken together, these three studies advance the understanding of ethical, relational, and empowering forms of leadership in public service organizations by showing how servant leadership operates across psychological, linguistic, and gendered mechanisms. Table 2 presents detailed summaries of each study, including their research objectives, theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, key findings, and contributions.

Table 2: Summary of the Dissertation's Three Empirical Studies

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Title	The Impact of Servant Leadership on Leadership Role Occupancy in Public Service Organizations: A Multi-level Quasi-Experimental Study	Leading Across Languages: How Linguistic Diversity Moderates Leadership Impact in a Public Service Organization	Empowering Leadership Aspiration: The Role of Servant Leadership and Psychological Safety in Developing Women's Ambition to Lead
Research Question	<i>Through which psychological mechanisms do followers' perceptions of servant leadership influence their subsequent leadership role occupancy in a public-service organization?</i>	<i>How does the team's linguistic proximity to the leader modify the relationship between teams' perception of servant or transformational leadership and teams' leadership role occupancy?</i>	<i>How do servant leadership and psychological safety influence women's leadership aspirations within the male-dominated context of Swiss police organizations?</i>
Theoretical Approach	Integrates Social Cognitive Theory and Social Identity Theory by positioning task efficacy and organizational commitment as psychological mechanisms and incorporates public service motivation as a boundary condition.	Drawing on relational schema theory and inclusive leadership research, linguistic proximity is conceptualized as a continuous cognitive-relational mechanism that shapes leader-follower alignment in multilingual contexts.	Grounded in inclusivity theory and psychological safety, the study conceptualizes servant leadership as a follower-centered leadership approach that fosters identity-safe climates and strengthens women's leadership aspirations in male-dominated organizations.
Method	Three-time, multilevel quasi-experimental data were analyzed at the individual and team levels to examine how servant leadership, psychological mechanisms, and motivational factors predict actual leadership role occupancy.	Team-level analyses using decomposed leadership components (common leadership core and style-specific residuals) tested whether linguistic proximity moderates the relationship between perceived leadership and leadership role occupancy.	A multilevel leader-follower survey across eight Swiss police corps examined gender differences in leadership aspiration and team-level effects of servant leadership and psychological safety, controlling for organizational size.
Key Findings	At the individual level, servant leadership increased leadership role occupancy, with organizational commitment fully mediating and task efficacy partially mediating; Latin-speaking followers were more likely to assume leadership roles than Germanic-speaking followers. At the team level, servant leadership showed no effect, while smaller teams and higher leader education predicted leadership role occupancy.	Across analyses, linguistic proximity plays a meaningful but non-linear role, with servant and transformational leadership perceived least favorably at moderate proximity and more positively at low or high levels. Linguistic proximity moderates how leadership styles translate into role occupancy, weakening the common leadership core at higher levels of proximity while amplifying style-specific effects, particularly for servant leadership.	Men reported higher leadership aspirations and psychological safety, while women indicated greater support needs; psychological safety predicted aspiration mainly for men. At the team level, servant leadership increased women's leadership aspirations, and psychological safety did not mediate the relationship.

Study 1

The Impact of Servant Leadership on Leadership Role Occupancy in Public Service Organizations: A Multi-level Quasi-Experimental Study

Abstract

This study examines how followers' perceptions of servant leadership influence their leadership role occupancy within a (military) public service organization. It addresses the growing challenge of declining leadership interest in the public sphere among younger generations. Data were collected from soldiers at three time points within a multi-level quasi-experimental design: servant leadership perception (T1), task-efficacy, organizational commitment, and public service motivation (T2), and actual leadership role occupancy one year later (T3). Multi-level analysis distinguishes between individual- and team-level effects, accounting for both personal leadership perceptions and structural influences. The findings reveal that followers who perceive their leaders as servant-oriented develop higher organizational commitment and task-efficacy, with organizational commitment emerging as the strongest and most consistent mediator of leadership role occupancy at both the individual and team levels. At the individual level, servant leadership perception positively predicts leadership role occupancy; however, no direct effect was found at the team level, suggesting that structural factors, such as team size and cultural composition, may exert greater influence in collective contexts. Public service motivation moderates several relationships at the individual level, but its effect is insignificant at the team level. Overall, the results highlight the combined influence of psychological and structural factors in shaping leadership role occupancy and underscore how servant leadership fosters organizational commitment and leadership readiness in a public service environment.

Keywords: Servant Leadership; Leadership Role Occupancy; Organizational Commitment; Task-Efficacy; Public Service Motivation; Multi-level Analysis; Quasi-Experiment.

Introduction

Retaining and developing young talent for future leadership positions is a pressing challenge in today's dynamic and intercultural environment (OECD, 2023). This challenge is compounded by a growing reluctance among younger generations to assume leadership responsibilities, reflecting a marked shift in career preferences compared to previous cohorts (Bottomley & Willie Burgess, 2018; Chudzikowski, 2012). A large-scale survey of 3,625 full-time employees across diverse organizations revealed that only 34% aspired to leadership positions, and a mere 7% targeted C-level roles (Torres, 2014). Such findings underscore a crucial decline in leadership aspirations, raising concerns about the sustainability of leadership pipelines and the future occupancy of formal leadership roles. Existing research has attributed this reluctance to deterrents such as fear of failure, concerns about work–life balance, and apprehensions about the burdens of leadership responsibilities (Aycan & Shelia, 2019). While these studies provide important insights, they largely emphasize leadership aspiration rather than the actual occupation of leadership roles, leaving open the question of why some followers ultimately assume leadership positions while others refrain.

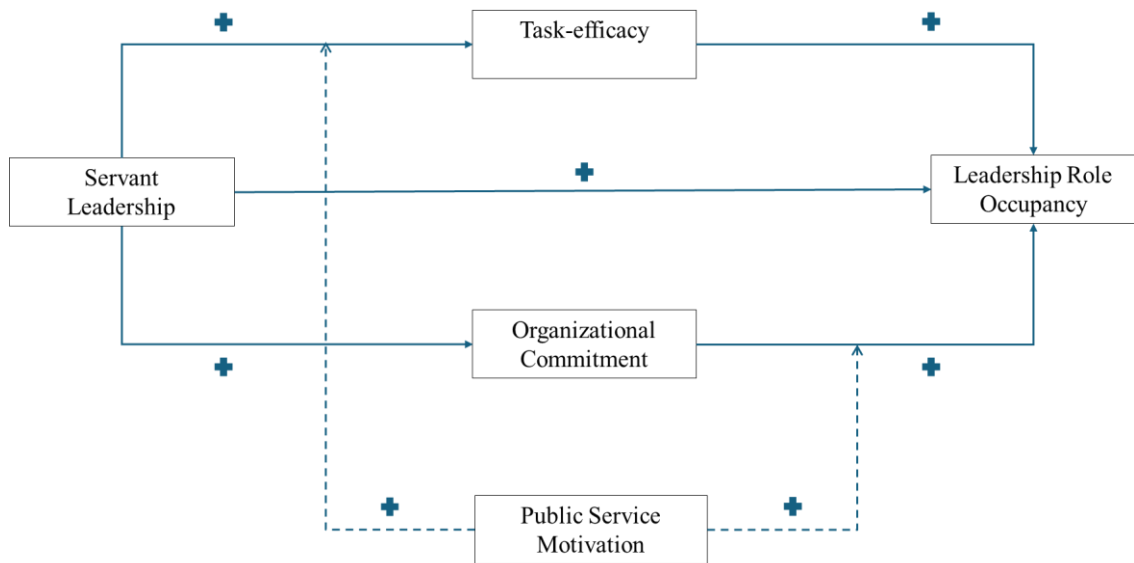
Leaders play a central role in shaping followers' attitudes and behaviors and are key drivers of organizational effectiveness (Hernandez et al., 2011). More specifically, they also influence followers' leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020). Two psychological mechanisms are particularly relevant in the process of developing the aspiration to lead: self-efficacy, rooted in social cognitive theory and defined as the individual's confidence in their ability (Badura et al., 2019; Bandura, 1997; Chan & Drasgow, 2001), and organizational commitment, grounded in social identity theory and referring to followers' emotional attachment to and alignment with the organization's mission (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2017). It is well established that leaders play a crucial role in shaping both mechanisms. The importance of this influence becomes particularly salient in public service organizations, which include both private non-profit organizations and public/state institutions. Unlike profit-maximizing enterprises, these organizations are purpose-driven, focusing on serving members or citizens and advancing the public good. They often rely heavily on volunteer engagement and member participation, making the development of sustainable leadership pipelines especially relevant. In such contexts, leadership effectiveness is measured less by individual achievement than by the capacity to empower

others and advance the collective mission. Within these organizations, leadership role occupancy becomes a pivotal outcome, referring to followers' behavioral decision to assume formal leadership responsibilities. It captures both proactive career advancement and the willingness to take on roles that are essential for ensuring organizational continuity (e.g., Avolio et al., 2009; Hernandez Bark et al., 2016). In public service organizations, the inherent meaningfulness of work enhances followers' task efficacy, defined as their belief in their ability to successfully perform work-related tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Their identification with the organization's mission or mandate fosters organizational commitment and increases their readiness to enter leadership positions. In such contexts, leadership approaches that prioritize service to others may become particularly relevant. Servant leadership, an other-oriented style that emphasizes the growth, empowerment, and well-being of followers (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011), aligns closely with the ethos of mission-driven organizations, which prioritize service to people, organizations, and society (Greenleaf, 1970). Langhof and Güldenbergh (2019a) suggest that servant leadership can be particularly effective in public service organizations, such as the military or voluntary associations that rely heavily on member engagement. By explicitly emphasizing follower development, servant leadership provides a distinctive pathway for simultaneously strengthening self-efficacy and organizational commitment (Eva et al., 2019). Beyond these mechanisms, public service motivation is particularly relevant in public service organizations. As a relatively stable orientation to serve the public good, public service motivation shapes how followers respond to servant leadership by moderating the pathways through which task efficacy and organizational commitment translate into leadership role occupancy (Hameduddin & Engbers, 2021; Perry & Wise, 1990). Despite this conceptual fit, empirical research on servant leadership and leadership role occupancy constitutes a significant gap.

To address these gaps, we develop and test a multi-level model linking servant leadership to followers' role occupancy at both the individual and team levels (see Figure 3). Theoretically, we integrate social cognitive theory and social identity theory by identifying task efficacy and organizational commitment as action mechanisms, and extend the framework by incorporating motivation in public service as a boundary condition. Empirically, we contribute novel behavioral evidence on leadership role occupancy in the underexplored context of public service organizations. Analytically,

we adopt a multi-level design, testing the same model at both the individual and team levels. At the individual level, servant leadership is expected to shape role occupancy via task efficacy and organizational commitment. At the team level, collective perceptions create a shared climate, while aggregation minimizes bias and confounding, enabling a clearer identification of leadership impacts. By testing the model across both levels, our study provides a robust account of leadership dynamics. It advances a comprehensive understanding of how servant leadership fosters sustainable leadership pipelines in mission-oriented organizations.

Figure 3: Research Model



Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Servant leadership and leadership role occupancy

A growing body of research demonstrates that servant leadership exerts a powerful influence on follower outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2016; Kiker et al., 2019; Langhof & Güldenber, 2019b). This effect is attributed to its capacity to foster psychological and relational mechanisms that translate people-centered values into outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). In his seminal work, Greenleaf (1970) argued that leadership begins with the desire to serve and evolves into the choice to lead, with the ultimate test being whether followers grow and can serve others. This serve-first orientation contrasts with traditional leadership models. It is particularly well-suited to public service organizations, where leadership effectiveness is measured less by individual achievement than by empowering members to advance the collective mission and the public good (Liden et al., 2014). Eva et

al. (2019) provide a comprehensive definition of servant leadership: *"Servant leadership is an other-oriented approach to leadership manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community"* (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Three core dimensions underpin this definition: altruistic orientation, a personalized leadership approach, and a shift from self-interest to the well-being of others. These dimensions foster supportive and empowering environments where followers experience their work as meaningful, perceive opportunities for professional development, and recognize their own leadership potential. In public service contexts, such environments are particularly valuable because they cultivate trust and engagement around a higher purpose. Through high-quality mentorship and social support, servant leaders strengthen followers' confidence in their ability and deepen their emotional attachment to the organization. Empirical research provides initial, though fragmented, evidence for the link between servant leadership and followers' assumption of leadership roles. A study has focused on transformational leadership, showing positive effects on followers' leadership role occupancy (Hernandez Bark et al., 2016). Servant leadership has been associated with reduced leadership avoidance, as subordinates under servant leaders display a lower tendency to reject leadership responsibilities (Lacroix & Verdorfer, 2017). It has also been found to foster proactive behaviors and enhance individuals' willingness to assume leadership responsibilities, particularly through its empowering dimension (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015). Similarly, when followers perceive their leader as fair, supportive, and genuinely invested in their growth, they are more likely to view leadership as attainable and desirable (Sendjaya, 2015). While these studies examine different facets of the process, together they suggest that servant leadership may create the psychological conditions under which followers are more inclined to step into formal leadership roles. This fragmented evidence highlights the need for a more integrative model that systematically examines the mechanisms linking servant leadership to leadership role occupancy, particularly in public service organizations. In line with the theoretical and empirical argumentation, we postulate that at both the individual and team levels, perceptions of servant leadership positively predict leadership role occupancy.

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of servant leadership positively predict future leadership role occupancy.

Social cognitive theory, task efficacy, and leadership role occupancy

Self-efficacy, a key concept in Bandura's social cognitive theory, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to complete tasks and overcome obstacles, thereby shaping their motivation and performance (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Key sources of self-efficacy include performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback, all of which contribute to an individual's confidence in their ability to succeed (Bandura, 1997). Leadership self-efficacy, a domain-specific form of self-efficacy, refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to perform leadership roles and plays a crucial role in driving leadership motivation, leadership aspirations, and leadership emergence (Bracht et al., 2021; Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Lartey et al., 2023). Individuals with high leadership self-efficacy are more likely to pursue leadership positions because they perceive themselves as capable of handling leadership challenges and responsibilities (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). We extend the concept of self-efficacy into a task-efficacy perspective, in which perceived efficacy is shaped by an individual's experience of task meaningfulness, responsibility for outcomes, and awareness of results (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). In public service organizations, where task significance and impact are central to both individual and team motivation, intrinsic motivation is strengthened when individuals experience competence, autonomy, and relatedness in their work (Deci & Ryan, 2013). Servant leadership enhances self-efficacy by fostering an environment in which individuals feel competent and empowered (Eva et al., 2019; Kiker et al., 2019). Increased self-efficacy, in turn, strengthens task-efficacy in one's ability to perform work-related tasks successfully, which is a key determinant of occupying a leadership role. Through individualized support, role clarity, and psychological empowerment, servant leaders cultivate followers' confidence, thereby increasing their likelihood of assuming leadership responsibilities (Lacroix & Verdorfer, 2017). Empirical research supports this cascading effect (Chen et al., 2014), demonstrating that self-efficacy and group identification mediate the relationship between servant leadership and service performance behaviors. This suggests that servant leadership enhances individuals' confidence in their capabilities within their roles. Similarly, Westbrook and Peterson (2022) found that servant leadership reduces turnover intentions by strengthening self-efficacy, indicating that individuals who experience servant leadership are more likely to feel competent and remain engaged within their organizations. While these findings highlight the role of self-

efficacy in motivation and performance, they also suggest that enhanced confidence in one's abilities may contribute to occupying leadership roles. In line with the theoretical and empirical argumentation, we postulate that at both the individual and team levels, task efficacy mediates the relationship between servant leadership and leadership role occupancy.

Hypothesis 2: Task efficacy positively mediates the relationship between servant leadership and leadership role occupancy.

Social identity theory, organizational commitment, and leadership role occupancy

Social identity theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals' identification with their organization influences their organizational commitment and behavior, particularly in terms of assuming leadership roles (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Organizational commitment reflects the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in an organization (Mowday et al., 1979). It consists of three dimensions: affective commitment, which reflects an emotional attachment and sense of pride in the organization; normative commitment, which arises from a moral obligation to stay; and continuance commitment, which is based on a rational evaluation of the costs and benefits of remaining (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Organizational commitment emerges through social categorization and identification, guiding individuals to align their actions with the collective goals of the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). A strong sense of organizational identity fosters prosocial behaviors and strengthens alignment with organizational objectives (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). This can manifest in various forms, such as leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2017) or other pro-organizational behaviors (Mercurio, 2015), reflecting an individual's deeper psychological attachment and willingness to contribute to the organization's success. Together, these perspectives underscore the pivotal role of organizational identification in shaping commitment, as individuals who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to internalize its values, actively support its goals, and exhibit behaviors that promote its long-term success. Servant leadership has been consistently linked to higher levels of organizational commitment. It fosters commitment by prioritizing followers' needs satisfaction, thereby creating a supportive and empowering work environment (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Additionally, it strengthens both affective and cognitive trust, reinforcing employees' commitment to

the organization (Miao et al., 2014). Furthermore, servant leadership indirectly fosters organizational identification through its influence on employee job involvement (Akbari et al., 2014). This dynamic is particularly significant in public service organizations, where a strong sense of organizational commitment unites individuals around collective goals and reinforces social identity. In these organizations, identification with the mission fosters a deep sense of purpose and shared responsibility, driving engagement, collaboration, and the emergence of leadership. In line with the theoretical and empirical argumentation, we postulate that at both the individual and team levels, organizational commitment mediates the relationship between servant leadership and leadership role occupancy.

Hypothesis 3: Organizational commitment positively mediates the relationship between servant leadership and leadership role occupancy.

Public service motivation

Public service motivation aligns closely with public service organizations, where individuals prioritize serving the public good over personal gain. Individuals in these organizations often internalize the organizational mission, making public service motivation a key factor in shaping their responses to leadership behaviors (Hameduddin & Engbers, 2021; Perry & Wise, 1990). Public service motivation, defined as an individual's drive to contribute to societal well-being, comprises four key dimensions. Attraction to policy-making reflects a desire to shape public affairs. In contrast, commitment to the public interest underscores dedication to collective well-being. Compassion fosters an emotional connection to others, and self-sacrifice signifies a willingness to prioritize societal needs over personal interests (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). The relationship between public service motivation and leadership is widely examined in the literature. Hameduddin and Engbers (2021) distinguish between two theoretical perspectives regarding public service motivation: a dynamic perspective and an immutable perspective. From the dynamic perspective, public service motivation is viewed as evolving, shaped by leadership behaviors and organizational culture. This perspective aligns closely with social learning theory, which posits that leaders influence public service motivation by shaping followers' sense of purpose and commitment (Hameduddin & Engbers, 2021). Conversely, the immutable perspective conceptualizes public service motivation as a stable attitude that consistently influences leadership-related behaviors. In line with personality theory, this perspective regards

personality as an enduring individual characteristic, independently predictive of various workplace behaviors, encompassing consistent patterns of thought, behavior, and emotional responses (Hameduddin & Engbers, 2021). We conceptualize public service motivation as a moderating factor in the relationship between servant leadership, the psychological mechanisms of task efficacy and organizational commitment, and leadership role occupancy. As a stable orientation to serve the public good, public service motivation makes individuals more receptive to servant leadership. High public service motivation is therefore expected to strengthen the positive effects of servant leadership on task efficacy and organizational commitment, and to increase the extent to which these mechanisms translate into leadership role occupancy.

H4: Followers' public service motivation strengthens the impact of servant leadership on task efficacy and organizational commitment.

H5: Followers' public service motivation strengthens the impact of task efficacy and organizational commitment on future role occupancy.

Method

The Swiss Army is a public service organization that provides a unique and controlled environment for investigating the interplay between leadership, motivation, and long-term effects. Standardized training conditions, random assignment of followers to leaders, and objective behavioral measures provide a quasi-experimental setting. It allows for a rigorous analysis of the determinants of followers' formal leadership role occupancy. The analysis is conducted at two levels: At the individual level, we examine how the perception of servant leadership influences individual outcomes. At the team level, we analyze the broader impact of the leader on the aggregated outcomes.

The Swiss Army, as one of the largest state institutions, plays a crucial role in national defense, maintaining an effective force of approximately 150,000 soldiers (VBS, 2025). However, it faces significant challenges in sustaining a sufficient militia cadre, with projections indicating a 25% shortfall in required personnel over the next decade (Holenstein, 2018). Addressing the issue of leadership role occupancy in military settings requires a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence soldiers' decisions to assume leadership responsibilities. The Swiss Army provides an ideal context for investigating this phenomenon within a public service organization. Military service

is mandatory for Swiss male citizens between the ages of 18 and 20, creating a diverse pool of individuals with varying levels of initial leadership motivation and aspiration. Historically, an officer's career in the Swiss Army has also been regarded as a valid leadership qualification for managerial positions in the private sector, underlining the societal relevance of military leadership development. Moreover, although the Swiss Army has not been engaged in warfare since 1848, it continues to serve as a vital civic institution and melting pot that fosters national identity and social cohesion. Within this system, leadership roles are not strictly assigned but are, in principle, voluntarily assumed, thereby introducing an important element of self-selection into the process. After completing basic training, soldiers face the decision to pursue a leadership track, a choice that signifies a deeper, long-term engagement with the military. This pivotal moment is shaped by everyone's initial motivation and aspiration for leadership. The military setting enables a unique longitudinal perspective, as soldiers' early leadership aspirations can be tracked over time and across rank levels. Entry into leadership roles typically begins with positions such as sergeant, with opportunities for advancement into officer ranks as motivation and experience evolve. This staged progression allows researchers to explore how early intentions are either reinforced or reshaped through experience and institutional engagement. The structured environment of the Swiss Army, combined with the voluntary nature of leadership decisions, creates a powerful framework for examining how individual motivation translates into actual leadership behavior and role occupancy. Here, leadership is not only a matter of formal position but also of voluntary engagement for the public good, measurable by concrete milestones such as service days and career progression. In this way, the Swiss Army provides a comprehensive and dynamic setting to investigate how leadership motivation and aspiration are translated into real-world leadership engagement within a defined institutional framework.

Servant leadership provides a compelling framework for promoting followers' leadership role occupancy within the Swiss Army. The Swiss military service regulations articulate leadership principles grounded in the mission command philosophy (Schweizerische Bundesrat, 2022): higher-rank officers define strategic objectives while subordinates are entrusted with autonomous execution within their respective areas of competence. Although mission command is a military-specific concept, it closely parallels modern organizational practices, such as management by objectives

and management by expectations. The core idea of this leadership approach is the empowerment of followers and the cultivation of responsibility toward both the mission and the broader organization. Notably, both mission command and servant leadership emphasize decentralized decision-making and encourage initiative-taking within clearly defined boundaries, aligning with institutional goals (Knevelsrud et al., 2024). This structure requires followers to engage in critical thinking, act independently, and assume accountability for their decisions and performance. Empirical evidence supports the relevance of this framework in the context of the Swiss Army. Lang et al. (2022) found that servant leadership behaviors among young Swiss Army officers are strongly and positively correlated with their intrinsic motivation to assume leadership roles. The Swiss Armed Forces function primarily as a training army and therefore operate largely in static contexts. As Humphreys (2005) suggests, servant leadership can be particularly effective in such stable environments. At the same time, Langhof and Güldenbergs (2019a) demonstrate that servant leadership also proves highly effective in crisis situations, such as disaster relief operations, where the Swiss Army is frequently deployed. Furthermore, in line with Liden's (2014) assertion that servant leaders cultivate servant behavior among their followers, we argue that servant leadership enhances followers' leadership role occupancy by inspiring and equipping them for long-term leadership commitments within the Swiss Army.

Quasi-Experimental Study Design

This study employs a quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of servant leadership perception on followers' leadership role occupancy within the structured training environment of the Swiss Army. Data are analyzed at two levels: at the individual level, the study investigates how followers' perceptions of servant leadership influence their leadership development; at the team level, data are aggregated at the platoon level to assess how a leader's servant leadership behavior affects team-wide outcomes. To ensure meaningful comparisons, only teams meeting a minimum threshold of leadership role occupancy were included in the analysis, preventing unreliable comparisons due to insufficient leadership transitions. Equal distribution of leadership motivations is assured through the random assignment of followers at the beginning of service. Unlike in experimental designs, where leadership styles are deliberately manipulated, servant leadership exposure varies based on leaders' individual behaviors. This design enables strong causal inferences while maintaining the ecological

validity of a real-world military setting. Since all soldiers undergo identical training, living conditions, and professional expectations, potential confounding variables related to environmental or structural differences are eliminated. Additionally, the study employs multi-wave data collection and objective behavioral measures to further enhance methodological rigor. Data was collected across three time points, allowing for temporal separation of key variables and reducing the risk of common method variance. Leadership role occupancy was measured using administrative personnel data, providing a robust observable indicator of leadership career progression. While randomization reduces selection bias, the study remains quasi-experimental because servant leadership exposure is not experimentally controlled. However, this approach aligns with quasi-experimental field research in organizational psychology and leadership studies, providing valuable insights into how leadership behaviors influence the emergence of leadership in hierarchical organizations.

Sample

This study employs a multi-level analysis encompassing both individual- and team-level data. At the individual level, the sample consists of $N = 783$ male militia soldiers from four Swiss Armed Forces troop branches. The mean age of the followers is 20.20 years ($SD = 1.60$). 43.8% hold a Swiss Federal Baccalaureate, the qualification required for university admission in Switzerland, while 56.2% do not possess this diploma. Participants were further categorized into two language groups based on their dominant thinking language: the German-speaking group comprises 77.4% of the sample, while the Latin-speaking group (French, Italian, and Romansh speakers) accounts for 22.6%. Regarding military rank, 88.1% of participants were recruits, while 11.9% held the rank of sergeant. Female soldiers were excluded from the individual-level sample because, unlike men, their military service is voluntary rather than compulsory. This selective decision reduces systematic self-selection effects, as women who choose to enlist are likely to differ in motivation, commitment, and career aspirations from conscripted men, potentially confounding the analysis of servant leadership effects.

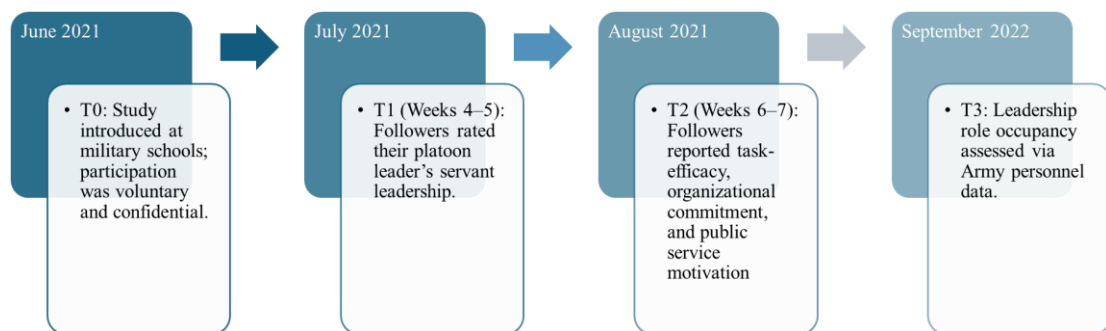
At the team level, the sample includes $N = 62$ platoon leaders, with a mean age of 21 years ($SD = 1.29$). 38 leaders (61%) belong to the German-speaking group, while 24 (39%) are from the Latin-speaking group. 61% ($N = 38$) of the leaders hold a Swiss Federal Baccalaureate, while 38% ($N = 24$) do not. The sample also includes three

female leaders. In contrast to the individual level, female leaders were retained because platoon leaders undergo the same selection and training process regardless of gender, ensuring comparability. Moreover, the small number of women does not affect the statistical robustness of the aggregated team-level analyses. Since platoons are assigned to a fixed number of soldiers at the start of training, it can be assumed that each team at T1 consists of approximately an equal number of individuals.

Procedure

This study employed a three-stage data collection process to ensure temporal separation of measurements and minimize common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Data were collected via the Swiss Army's Learning Management System (LMS) and supplemented by objective records from the Army Personnel Service. Data collection occurred in three waves throughout the study (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Procedure of the data collection



Before the formal data collection process began (T0), researchers visited official military schools to introduce the study to future platoon leaders. These sessions emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and assured confidentiality, ensuring that participants fully understood the study's purpose and procedures. During the fourth and fifth weeks of recruit school (T1), followers completed an online survey evaluating their platoon leaders' servant leadership behavior. Two weeks later (T2, during the sixth and seventh weeks of recruit school), followers provided additional survey responses, reporting their task-efficacy, organizational commitment, and public service motivation. The timing of the measurement at T2 allows the observed variance in the moderator and mediator variables to be attributed primarily to differences in leadership. This assumption is justified for two reasons: first, all military schools operate under nearly identical formal-organizational conditions, and second, subordinates are randomly assigned to officers, leaving the officers without influence on the

allocation process. Consequently, it can be assumed that, at the onset of training, team-level averages of the moderator and mediator variables displayed only minimal variance. The final data collection wave (T3, fall 2022) moved beyond self-reported measures to assess leadership role occupancy using objective personnel data from the Army Personnel Service. This approach ensured that leadership career progression was measured through actual career outcomes rather than self-reported intentions. Throughout the study, participation remained entirely voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed to all respondents, reinforcing the study's ethical commitment to confidentiality and informed consent.

A combination of procedural and statistical controls was implemented throughout the study to minimize common method bias. First, temporal separation of measurements was ensured by collecting data at three distinct time points. A two-week interval between T1 and T2 helped reduce potential same-source bias, while the one-year gap before T3 further mitigated the risk of inflated associations due to simultaneous data collection. Second, objective data sources were incorporated to reduce reliance on self-reported measures. Specifically, followers' leadership role occupancy was derived from external administrative records, providing an independent and verifiable behavioral measure of leadership progression. Third, all participants were assured of confidentiality. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous, helping to reduce social desirability bias and response distortions. Finally, a statistical control was applied through Harman's Single-Factor Test to assess the extent of common method bias at T1 and T2. A principal component analysis revealed four distinct factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, with the largest factor accounting for only 26% of the variance, significantly below the 50% threshold that would indicate significant common method bias concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2003). These results suggest that common method bias was not a major issue in this study.

Measures

This section elucidates the methodologies employed for measuring various constructs within the study. It is essential to highlight that the survey was administered in three languages: German, French, and Italian, allowing participants to respond in their preferred language. The questionnaire items, initially in English, were translated into German, French, and Italian using a translate-and-retranslate method. To ensure the

accuracy and linguistic appropriateness of the translations, a panel of experts fluent in these three languages validated the congruence of the questions.

Servant leadership

Servant leadership was assessed using the short version of the Servant Leadership Survey (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). This instrument consists of 18 items measuring five core dimensions of servant leadership: empowerment, stewardship, humility, standing back, and authenticity. Participants responded using a 6-point Likert scale, with terminology adapted to the military context (e.g., replacing “*superior*” with “*platoon leader*”). For example, one sample item states, “*My platoon leader helps me to develop myself.*” Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .90. The analysis used servant leadership as an overall construct rather than examining its dimensions separately. The construct was assessed at two levels: Individual level - Servant leadership was analyzed as a perceived leadership construct, based on individual soldiers' evaluations of their platoon leaders. Team level - Servant leadership perceptions were aggregated at the group level, with the mean value used to represent each leader’s overall servant leadership score. This approach ensured consistency in evaluating servant leadership’s impact on leadership role occupancy, while capturing both individual perceptions at the individual level and group-level leadership characteristics at the team level.

Task-efficacy

Task-efficacy was assessed using a 5-item scale based on Hackman & Oldham (1974), which measures three key dimensions: meaningfulness of work, knowledge of results, and experience of responsibility. Participants responded on a 6-point Likert scale. A sample item is: “*The tasks in my function are significant for me.*” Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .83. The construct was analyzed at two levels: Individual level - task-efficacy was measured at the individual level, capturing soldiers’ self-perceptions of task significance, responsibility, and efficacy-related knowledge. Team level - perceptions of task-efficacy were aggregated at the team level, with the mean score representing each leader’s collective assessment of their team’s task-efficacy. This dual-level approach gave a comprehensive understanding of how task-efficacy functions at the individual and team levels, providing insights into its role in leadership dynamics.

Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment was assessed using a 4-item scale based on Allen and Meyer (1990), measuring two key dimensions: affective and normative commitment. Participants responded on a 6-point Likert scale, with items adapted to the military context (e.g., replacing “*organization*” with “*army*”). A sample item for affective commitment is: “*Service in the army holds great personal significance for me.*” A sample item for normative commitment is: “*I feel a moral obligation to remain dedicated to my military service.*” Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .83. The construct was analyzed at two levels: Individual level – Organizational commitment was measured as individual perceptions, reflecting each soldier’s emotional attachment and sense of obligation toward military service. Team level – Perceptions of organizational commitment were aggregated at the team level, with the mean score representing each leaders’ collective assessment of their team’s commitment. This dual-level approach provided insights into how organizational commitment manifests at the individual and team levels, contributing to a deeper understanding of its role in military leadership and cohesion.

Public service motivation

Public service motivation was measured using a six-item scale, adapted to the military context based on the shortened version developed by Ritz and Brewer (2013). The construct measures three key dimensions: commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale. A sample item is: “*It is important to me to contribute selflessly to the common good.*” Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .86. The construct was analyzed at two levels: Individual level – Public service motivation was measured as individual perceptions, capturing each soldier’s sense of duty, compassion, and willingness to serve. Team level – Perceptions of public service motivation were aggregated at the team level, with the mean score representing each leaders’ collective assessment of their unit’s motivation for public service. This multi-level approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of how public service motivation functions at the individual and team levels, providing insights into its impact on leadership and commitment within the military.

Leadership role occupancy

Leadership role occupancy was assessed using behavioral data obtained from the Armed Forces Personnel Service, offering a valid, reliable, and objective indicator of leadership career pursuit. This approach captures enacted leadership behavior rather than relying solely on self-reported intentions. The construct was analyzed at two levels: Individual level – Leadership role occupancy was measured as a dichotomous variable: soldiers who did not pursue a cadre career were coded as 0, while those who did were coded as 1. Team level – Leadership role occupancy was aggregated at the group level, with the variable expressed as a percentage representing the proportion of subordinates within a leaders' unit who pursued a cadre career. This multi-level approach provides a robust analysis of leadership career pursuit in the Swiss Army militia system, where young individuals voluntarily decide whether to take on leadership roles. By focusing on observable behavior, the study offers a reliable indicator of leadership motivation and aspiration, integrating individual decision-making and team-level leadership dynamics.

Control Variables

This study includes eight control variables: followers' education, leaders' education, leaders' gender, followers' linguistic background, leaders' linguistic background, followers' military rank, team linguistic composition, and team size. These variables were incorporated into the analysis to account for potential influences on followers' leadership role occupancy within the structured environment of the Swiss Army. However, not all control variables were applied at both levels of analysis; each was considered based on its relevance to either the individual or team level. At the individual level, control variables included followers' education, linguistic background, and military rank. Followers' education was measured based on the highest diploma obtained and coded dichotomously (0 = no Swiss Federal Baccalaureate, 1 = Swiss Federal Baccalaureate or higher). Linguistic background was controlled for both the follower and their platoon leader, coded dichotomously (0 = Germanic, 1 = Latin). Followers' military rank was also coded dichotomously (0 = recruit, 1 = sergeant), with recruits occupying the first hierarchical level and sergeants holding the second level as aides to the platoon leader. At the team level, control variables included leaders' education, leaders' gender, leaders' linguistic background, team linguistic composition, and team size. Leaders' education was controlled using the same categorization as at the

individual level (0 = no Swiss Federal Baccalaureate, 1 = Swiss Federal Baccalaureate or higher). Leaders' gender was coded dichotomously (0 = female, 1 = male). Based on their dominant language, leaders' linguistic background was also categorized dichotomously (0 = Germanic, 1 = Latin). Team linguistic composition was examined separately, distinguishing between linguistically homogeneous teams, where all followers shared their leader's linguistic background, and linguistically heterogeneous teams, where Germanic- and Latin-speaking leaders and followers were mixed (0 = homogeneous, 1 = heterogeneous). Team size was also included as a control variable. Although team size was assumed to be constant at T1, the variable was based on respondents' data rather than the actual team composition.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for individual- and team-level variables, including demographic characteristics (e.g., education, gender, linguistic background), military rank, team linguistic composition, team size, and key study measures (e.g., servant leadership, task-efficacy, organizational commitment, public service motivation, and leadership role occupancy). Means and standard deviations are reported for continuous variables, while categorical variables are presented as percentages.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for individual- and team-level variables

Variable	Individual Level (% / M $\pm$ SD)	Team Level (% / M $\pm$ SD)
N	783	62
Education (% with Swiss Federal Baccalaureate or higher)	44% of the Followers	61% of the Leaders
Gender (% of Male)	100% of the Followers	95% of the Leaders
Linguistic Background (% of German-speaking)	77% of the Follower	61% of the Leaders
Military Rank	88% Recruit / 12% Sergeant	100% Lieutenants (Platoon Leaders)
Team Linguistic Composition (% of homogeneous team composition)	N/A	56% of the Teams
Team Size (Min=2, Max=36)	N/A	12.46 $\pm$ 7.78
Servant Leadership	4.40 $\pm$.71	4.43 $\pm$.39
Task-Efficacy	4.00 $\pm$.89	4.05 $\pm$.44
Organizational Commitment	3.34 $\pm$ 1.17	3.54 $\pm$.62
Public Service Motivation	3.30 $\pm$.80	3.12 $\pm$.33
Leadership role occupancy	25% of followers with formal leadership role occupancy in T3	.31 $\pm$.19

The individual-level correlation analysis reveals key patterns in the relationships between followers' education, linguistic background, military rank, and leadership

perception, as well as task-efficacy, organizational commitment, public service motivation, and leadership role occupancy (see Table 4). These results provide valuable insights into how different factors shape followers' leadership role occupancy within the Swiss Army:

- One key observation is the negative correlation between education and task-efficacy, as well as between education and organizational commitment. This suggests that recruits with higher education levels tend to perceive their tasks as less meaningful and exhibit lower commitment to the organization.
- Linguistic background also plays a significant role in shaping leadership-related attitudes. Latin followers exhibit higher levels of organizational commitment and public service motivation than their Germanic counterparts, indicating a stronger intrinsic dedication to military service. This pattern extends to leaders, as the linguistic background of Latin leaders is associated with higher organizational commitment and public service motivation among their followers. These results suggest that both followers' and leaders' linguistic backgrounds positively influence followers' attitudes and behaviors within military units.
- Beyond linguistic differences, military rank also affects servant leadership perceptions and leadership role occupancy. Sergeants, who interact more closely with their platoon leaders than recruits, are more likely to perceive their leaders as servant leaders. Additionally, sergeants report higher task-efficacy, stronger organizational commitment, and greater public service motivation than recruits. These results suggest that closer proximity to leadership may enhance positive perceptions of leadership behaviors and promote greater engagement and motivation in military service.
- A particularly noteworthy result is the positive correlation between servant leadership perception and all outcome variables, including task-efficacy, organizational commitment, and public service motivation. Furthermore, servant leadership perception is positively correlated with leadership role occupancy, meaning that followers who view their leaders as servant leaders are more likely to assume leadership positions themselves. These results suggest that the perception of servant leadership shapes the attitudes and behaviors of followers.

- Lastly, all other measured variables positively correlate with leadership role occupancy, indicating that task-efficacy, organizational commitment, and public service motivation positively influence the likelihood of followers pursuing leadership roles. These findings highlight the crucial role of the perception of servant leadership behaviors, cognitive-motivational factors, linguistic background, and military rank status in shaping leadership role occupancy within the Swiss Army.

Table 4: Spearman-Rho correlation matrix at the individual level, $N=783$

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Followers' education	–							
2. Followers' linguistic background	.19**							
3. Leaders' linguistic background	.18**	.48**						
4. Followers' military rank	-.10**	.03	.02					
5. Followers' servant leadership perception	-.06	-.02	-.04	.17**				
6. Followers' task-efficacy	-.10**	.01	.02	.28**	.39**			
7. Followers' organizational commitment	-.08**	.17**	.10**	.29**	.26**	.60**		
8. Followers' public service motivation	.03	.15**	.07**	.22**	.24**	.53**	.69**	
9. Followers' leadership role occupancy	-.01	.05	-.02	.03	.10**	.27**	.35**	.32**

Note: Significance levels: ** $p < .001$

The team-level correlation analysis reveals several important insights regarding the relationships between leaders' education, gender, and linguistic background, as well as teams' linguistic composition, size, servant leadership perception, task-efficacy, organizational commitment, public service motivation, and leadership role occupancy (see Table 5):

- A key finding is the positive correlation between leaders' education and both teams' public service motivation and teams' leadership role occupancy, suggesting that leaders with higher education levels foster greater motivation and leadership ambition among team members. This may indicate that higher education enhances leaders' ability to cultivate a stronger sense of civic duty and leadership aspiration within their teams.
- Another notable correlation is the negative relationship between team size and multiple outcome variables, including task-efficacy, organizational commitment, public service motivation, and leadership role occupancy. This suggests that in larger teams, members perceive their tasks as less meaningful, feel less

personal responsibility, experience lower confidence in their task efficacy, exhibit weaker emotional attachment to the organization, identify less with it, and show reduced motivation for public service and career advancement through leadership role occupancy.

- Team size does not significantly correlate with team servant leadership perception, indicating that the perception of servant leadership behavior remains stable regardless of team size. This suggests that servant leadership is perceived as an individual leadership style rather than one influenced by structural team characteristics. While larger teams may weaken cognitive-motivational factors, they do not necessarily affect how team members perceive their leaders' servant leadership behaviors.
- Teams' servant leadership perception correlates positively with teams' organizational commitment and teams' task-efficacy. However, it does not significantly correlate with teams' public service motivation or leadership role occupancy. This partial alignment between individual- and team-level analyses suggests a degree of robustness in the findings across both levels.
- Lastly, all measured variables, teams' task-efficacy, organizational commitment, and public service motivation, correlate positively with teams' leadership role occupancy. This reinforces the idea that teams with greater task engagement, stronger organizational commitment, and higher public service motivation are more likely to foster leadership emergence among their members. This also serves as a positive robustness check, confirming the consistency of the relationships observed at both the individual and team levels.

Table 5: Spearman-Rho correlation matrix at the team level, N=62

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Leaders' education	–								
2. Leaders' gender	-.18								
3. Leaders' linguistic background	.18	.03							
4. Teams' linguistic composition	.16	.04	.53**						
5. Teams' size	-.17	.10	.05	.24					
6. Teams' servant leadership perception	-.19	-.02	-.18	-.33*	-.13				
7. Teams' task-efficacy	.01	-.02	-.02	-.09	-.24†	.56**			
8. Teams' organizational commitment	.13	-.02	.17	.04	-.46**	.41**	.59**		
9. Teams' public service motivation	.31*	-.07	.05	.11	-.36**	.20	.49**	.72**	
10. Teams' leadership role occupancy	.24†	.09	-.14	-.12	-.25*	.17	.37**	.45**	.36**

Note: Significance levels: †p<.1; *p<.05; **p<.001

Overall, the alignment of correlation patterns across both levels confirms the robustness of the findings. The stronger correlations at the team level suggest that group dynamics, particularly team size, play a crucial role in shaping leadership-related variables. However, the absence of a significant team-level effect of servant leadership on leadership role occupancy indicates that leadership style alone is insufficient to drive leadership emergence. This highlights the critical role of organizational structures and career pathways in influencing followers' progression into leadership roles within the Swiss Army.

Hypothesis Testing and Results

To test Hypothesis 1, which states that the perception of servant leadership positively influences followers' leadership role occupancy, the relationship was analyzed at both the individual and team levels (see Table 6). At the individual level, a logistic regression analysis examined the effects of followers' education, followers' linguistic background, leaders' linguistic background, followers' military rank, and followers' servant leadership perception on leadership role occupancy. The model was statistically significant, as indicated by the Chi-Square Test ($\chi^2 = 12.26$, $p < .01$), demonstrating that the included predictors contribute to explaining leadership role occupancy beyond chance. However, the Nagelkerke R^2 value of .02 suggests that, while the model provides a statistically meaningful improvement, its overall explanatory power remains limited, indicating that additional factors beyond the analyzed variables likely play a role in followers' leadership role occupancy. Among the predictors, two variables exhibited a significant positive effect on followers' leadership role occupancy.

First, followers' linguistic background played a decisive role, as Latin followers were 58% more likely to assume leadership roles compared to their Germanic counterparts ($\text{Exp}(B) = 1.58, p < .01$). This suggests that Latin followers demonstrate a higher tendency to pursue leadership positions, potentially due to cultural differences in leadership norms, career aspirations, or motivation for hierarchical advancement. Second, followers' perception of servant leadership was also a strong predictor, with a one-unit increase in perceived servant leadership associated with a 36% higher likelihood of leadership role occupancy ($\text{Exp}(B) = 1.36, p < .01$). This supports the notion that followers who perceive their leaders as servant-oriented are more inclined to pursue a leadership career path, highlighting the impact of leadership style perceptions on their leadership role occupancy.

At the team level, a linear multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of leaders' education, leaders' gender, leaders' linguistic background, teams' linguistic composition, teams' size, and teams' perception of servant leadership on teams' leadership role occupancy, the dependent variable. The overall model was statistically significant ($F(6,55) = 2.78, p < .05, R^2 = .14$), indicating that the included predictors collectively explained a meaningful proportion of variance in teams' leadership role occupancy. However, teams' servant leadership perception was not a significant predictor, suggesting that aggregated perceptions of servant leadership do not significantly influence leadership role occupancy. Instead, leaders' education emerged as a positive and considerable predictor, implying that teams led by more highly educated leaders were more likely to produce members who assume leadership roles. Additionally, teams' size had a significant negative effect, indicating that as team size increased, the likelihood of followers assuming leadership roles decreased. The remaining predictors—leaders' gender, leaders' linguistic background, and teams' linguistic composition—did not show significant effects on teams' leadership role occupancy. The findings partially support Hypothesis 1, as perceived servant leadership significantly predicted leadership role occupancy at the individual level but not at the team level. Followers who perceived their leaders as servant-oriented were more likely to pursue leadership roles. However, at the team level, aggregated servant leadership perceptions did not influence leadership emergence, suggesting that its impact is primarily experienced on an individual basis rather than as a collective team phenomenon.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Beta Coefficients at the Individual and Team Levels

Level of analysis	Predictors	Criterion	β
<i>Individual level</i>	Followers' education		-.05
	Followers' linguistic background		.45*
	Leaders' linguistic background	Followers' leadership role occupancy	-.28
	Followers' military rank		.10
	Followers' servant leadership perception		.32**
<i>Team level</i>	Leaders' education		.31*
	Leaders' gender		.14
	Leaders' linguistic background	Teams' leadership role occupancy	-.18
	Teams' linguistic composition		-.03
	Teams' size		-.27*
	Teams' servant leadership perception		.07

Note: Significance levels: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

To test Hypotheses 2 and 3 and examine the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between perceived servant leadership and leadership role occupancy at both the individual and team levels, a mediation analysis was conducted (see Table 7). Hypothesis 2 proposed that task-efficacy mediates this relationship, while Hypothesis 3 suggested that organizational commitment serves as a mediator. The analysis assessed whether followers' and teams' perceived servant leadership indirectly influences leadership role occupancy through these mediators. At the individual level, the results indicate that both followers' task-efficacy and followers' organizational commitment mediate the relationship between followers' perceived servant leadership and followers' leadership role occupancy, with organizational commitment exhibiting a stronger mediating effect. The mediation is full, as the direct effect of followers' perceived servant leadership is not significant, confirming that its impact on followers' leadership emergence operates entirely through these psychological mechanisms. At the team level, mediation occurs only through teams' organizational commitment, while teams' task-efficacy is slightly non-significant, showing a tendency toward significance. The mediation is partial, as the direct effect of teams' perceived servant leadership is negative and significant, suggesting that servant leadership at the team level may, in some cases, reduce leadership aspirations. This unexpected finding may indicate that in larger teams, a stronger emphasis on collective goals diminishes individual motivation for leadership advancement.

To test Hypotheses 4 and 5, moderation analyses were conducted examining whether public service motivation moderates the relationship between servant

leadership and both (a) task-efficacy and (b) organizational commitment at individual and team levels. At the individual level, public service motivation positively moderates the relationship between servant leadership and followers' task-efficacy, indicating that followers with higher public service motivation experience a stronger positive impact of servant leadership on their awareness of task efficacy. However, no significant moderation effect was found between servant leadership and organizational commitment at the individual level. At the team level, moderation effects for both task efficacy and organizational commitment were also not statistically significant, suggesting that moderation by public service motivation primarily occurs at the individual level for task efficacy only.

Table 7: Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effects at the Individual and Team Levels

Level of analysis	Direct effect	Mediation variable	Indirect Effect	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
<i>Individual level</i>	-.15	Followers' task-efficacy	.14*	.01	.28
		Followers' organizational commitment	.29**	.18	.42
<i>Team level</i>	-.12*	Teams' task-efficacy	.02†	-.06	.15
		Teams' organizational commitment	.14**	.04	.25

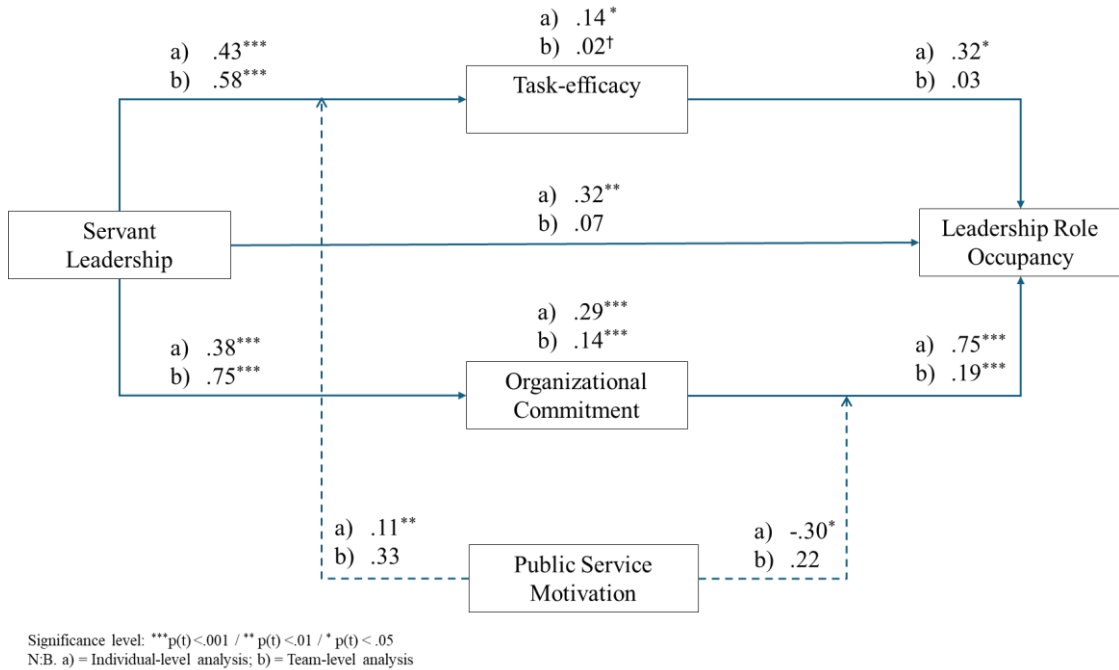
Note: Significance levels: †p<.1; *p<.05; **p<.001

To test Hypothesis 5, moderation analyses were conducted to determine whether public service motivation moderates the relationships of (a) task-efficacy and (b) organizational commitment with leadership role occupancy at both individual and team levels. At the individual follower level, public service motivation negatively moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and leadership role occupancy, implying that highly committed individuals with strong public service motivation may be less inclined to seek leadership positions. Conversely, at the team level, public service motivation positively moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and team leadership role occupancy, suggesting that high levels of public service motivation within teams might foster leadership emergence through increased commitment. However, this team-level moderation effect was not statistically significant. Additionally, no significant moderation effect was found between task-efficacy and leadership role occupancy at either the individual or team levels.

Summary of the results

The findings from this study highlight several key determinants influencing leadership role occupancy within the Swiss Army at both individual and team levels. The main results are reported in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Summary of the results



At the individual level, followers who perceived their leaders as servant-oriented were significantly more likely to assume leadership roles. This relationship was fully mediated by organizational commitment, reinforcing the idea that servant leadership fosters a sense of belonging and dedication, which, in turn, encourages individuals to take on leadership responsibilities. Task-efficacy also played a mediating role, albeit to a lesser extent, indicating that confidence in one's ability to perform tasks effectively contributes to leadership aspirations. Notably, linguistic background emerged as a key predictor, with Latin-speaking followers demonstrating a stronger tendency to pursue leadership roles than their Germanic counterparts. This suggests that cultural factors may influence leadership motivation and the way individuals respond to servant leadership behaviors.

At the team level, aggregated perceptions of servant leadership did not significantly predict leadership role occupancy, challenging the assumption that servant leadership's effects operate similarly at both individual and collective levels. Instead, team size played a critical role—smaller teams exhibited higher levels of leadership

emergence, likely due to greater opportunities for interaction, mentorship, and role modeling. Additionally, leaders' educational levels positively influenced their leadership role occupancy within their teams, suggesting that well-educated leaders may be more effective in fostering a leadership culture. However, public service motivation, while relevant at the individual level, showed limited influence on team-level leadership emergence, indicating that structural and contextual factors may outweigh intrinsic motivation when leadership transitions occur at a collective level.

Discussion

This study develops and tests a multi-level model linking servant leadership to followers' role occupancy at both the individual and team levels. It responds to growing concerns about declining leadership aspirations among younger generations (OECD, 2023; Torres, 2014) by shifting the analytical focus from leadership intentions to the actual occupancy of leadership roles. In doing so, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of how servant leadership perceptions, psychological and motivational mechanisms, and organizational structures interact to shape followers' willingness to assume future formal leadership roles. By focusing on public service organizations, the study extends and integrates multiple theoretical perspectives and offers several key contributions to the literature on leadership pathways and servant leadership. The results demonstrate that perceptions of servant leadership significantly increase the likelihood that followers assume formal leadership roles. This finding validates and extends theoretical claims about the developmental role of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019), corroborates evidence that servant leadership fosters leadership aspiration (Lacroix & Verdorfer, 2017), and strengthens prior qualitative insights with quantitative data showing its effectiveness in mission-oriented contexts such as the military and voluntary sector (Langhof & Güldenbergh, 2019a). Importantly, our study shows that the influence of servant leadership extends beyond follower well-being and performance to encompass long-term career advancement behaviors. This result contributes to the broader discussion on leadership styles and their effectiveness for fostering leadership role occupancy, positioning servant leadership as a valid alternative alongside transformational leadership, which has also been shown to predict leadership role occupancy (Hernandez Bark et al., 2016).

The results deepen the understanding of the psychological mechanisms linking servant leadership to leadership role occupancy. Organizational commitment emerged as the strongest and most consistent mediator across both individual and team levels, supporting the theoretical proposition that followers who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to assume greater responsibilities and so leadership roles (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). This highlights the explanatory power of social identity theory in the context of leaders' development. By contrast, task efficacy awareness, rooted in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997; Hackman & Oldham, 1975), played a more limited role, mediating the relationship only at the individual level. This pattern may reflect the specific nature of the military context, where organizational commitment is tied to a higher collective cause and amplified by servant leaders who verbalize and embody the mission of service to others. In contrast, military tasks are often standardized, repetitive, and procedural “drills”, rendering them less meaningful than tasks in other organizational domains. Consequently, efficacy perceptions may carry less weight in predicting leadership role occupancy than organizational commitment to the broader mission. This nuance underscores the importance of testing the proposed model in other mission-driven contexts, where tasks are more complex, autonomous, and varied, and where task efficacy may have a greater impact on leadership transitions. Future research should also compare servant leadership with alternative leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, to assess which is more effective in fostering leadership role occupancy and how their influence differs in terms of the mediating mechanisms. Such comparative analyses would clarify whether these approaches rely on distinct or overlapping psychological processes and whether their effectiveness varies across organizational settings. A further noteworthy result concerns the negative direct effect of servant leadership in the mediation model at the team level. From a social identity perspective, this pattern may reflect that followers identify with the organization primarily through their leader. Servant leadership behaviors that align strongly with organizational commitment may therefore dominate the mediation pathway, whereas residual aspects of the construct that are less closely tied to commitment manifest as negative in the direct effect. This finding underscores the need to conceptualize servant leadership not as a unitary reflective construct but as a multidimensional phenomenon. Future studies should disentangle its dimensions to clarify how each contributes to shaping leadership role occupancy within mediation frameworks.

We extend the theoretical foundations of servant leadership by incorporating public service motivation as a boundary condition. Consistent with the view of public service motivation as a relatively stable personality trait (Hameduddin & Engbers, 2021), our results indicate that public service motivation strengthens the relationship between servant leadership and task efficacy at the individual level. Individuals high in public service motivation appear particularly receptive to servant leadership, as both emphasize service, altruism, and societal contribution. However, the results also reveal a counterintuitive nuance: public service motivation negatively moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and the occupancy of leadership roles. This suggests that highly service-motivated individuals, despite their strong organizational attachment, may avoid formal leadership roles that they perceive as administratively burdensome or that distance them from direct mission engagement. Such dynamics may be especially salient in military contexts but raise broader questions about how motivational orientations interact with leadership processes. Future research should examine whether this negative effect also emerges in other mission-oriented organizations and whether it extends to leadership styles beyond servant leadership.

Analytically, this study contributes by comparing individual- and team-level processes in a multi-level design. At the individual level, servant leadership significantly predicted leadership role occupancy, with organizational commitment mediating this relationship and task efficacy having a lesser effect. At the team level, however, no direct relationship was found between collective perceptions of servant leadership and leadership role occupancy. This suggests that the developmental influence of servant leadership operates more effectively through individualized perceptions than through shared team climates. Furthermore, structural factors in highly institutionalized contexts, such as fixed quotas for leadership roles, cultural diversity, and rigid group dynamics in the Swiss Armed Forces, may constrain collective effects. These findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between individual- and collective-level processes when examining leadership development and aligning with broader calls for more nuanced multi-level theorizing in leadership research (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008).

Practical implications

In public service organizations, leadership extends beyond authority to encompass service, inspiration, and the development of future leaders. This study highlights the

importance of cultivating servant leadership, which strengthens organizational commitment and promotes task-efficacy, both of which support followers in assuming formal leadership roles. For organizations built on a shared sense of purpose, the challenge lies not only in developing competent leaders but also in creating environments where leadership roles are naturally and sustainably occupied. Servant leadership does not emerge spontaneously; it must be intentionally developed and nurtured. Organizations can promote this leadership style by investing in development programs that prioritize mentorship, ethical decision-making, and individualized support. As emphasized by Eva et al. (2019) and Langhof and Guldenberg (2019a), servant leadership is not about being a “nice guy,” but about deliberately empowering followers and taking their growth seriously. This requires leaders to cultivate specific competencies that enable them to provide authentic support. In this context, self-awareness refers to one’s awareness of one’s own physical, emotional, and mental state, which serves as a critical precursor to empathy and, ultimately, to servant leadership. Core self-evaluations, reflecting a stable and positive self-concept, allow leaders to focus on follower development rather than self-protection or status maintenance (Flynn et al., 2016). Similarly, mindfulness fosters authenticity and attentiveness to the needs of others, thereby reinforcing servant leadership behaviors (Verdorfer, 2016). Effective training interventions should therefore integrate both intra-personal competencies (self-reflection, emotional regulation, mindfulness) and inter-personal competencies (empathy, empowerment), ensuring that leaders are not only able to reinforce organizational values but also to support their teams in meaningful and sustainable ways actively. In military contexts, where servant leadership offers a human- and values-centered alternative to purely hierarchical command models, such training is particularly valuable. Leaders who develop empathy, mindfulness, and a strong sense of ethical responsibility approach both the mission and their subordinates more ethically and humanely. This perspective emphasizes individual responsibility, which—when aligned with the mission—transforms into collective responsibility. In this sense, servant leadership development not only supports individual growth but also strengthens collective commitment to the mission, thereby contributing to more sustainable and ethically grounded leadership pipelines in public service organizations.

Alongside leadership behaviors, fostering task-efficacy is crucial to supporting the occupancy of leadership roles. As defined in this study, task-efficacy refers to

individuals' perception of their work as meaningful, their responsibility for outcomes, and their awareness of results—factors that together enhance intrinsic motivation and readiness to take on greater responsibility. Providing opportunities for hands-on leadership experiences, regular feedback, and task ownership can help cultivate this awareness and prepare individuals for leadership transitions. In structured environments such as the military, where leadership progression is often formalized, reinforcing task-efficacy can help individuals navigate development pathways more effectively. Equally important is organizational commitment, identified in this study as the most significant psychological predictor of leadership role occupancy: Individuals who strongly identify with their organization's mission are more inclined to pursue leadership roles. Therefore, mission-driven organizations must move beyond communicating their purpose; they must actively engage members in shaping and sustaining it. Participatory decision-making, recognition of service, and transparent career progression are key strategies for deepening commitment. Leadership development also occurs within teams and organizational systems. The findings suggest that the impact of servant leadership may be influenced by team size and cultural diversity. In larger teams, leaders may struggle to maintain individualized relationships, which can weaken the developmental impact of servant leadership. Organizations can address this by implementing sub-leadership roles to preserve leader–follower engagement. Similarly, cultural diversity can shape how leadership behaviors are interpreted. Inclusive leadership practices that recognize and adapt to different expectations around service, authority, and support are essential for ensuring that servant leadership resonates across diverse teams. Ultimately, mission-driven organizations succeed when they foster a culture that values leadership at every level. By intentionally cultivating servant leadership, reinforcing task-efficacy, and strengthening organizational commitment, they can ensure that leadership role occupancy is not a matter of chance but a deliberate outcome of engagement, support, and shared purpose.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between servant leadership and leadership role occupancy in a mission-driven context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample is homogeneous, consisting exclusively of young male participants, due to the mandatory military service structure in Switzerland. This limits the generalizability of the findings, as leadership perceptions and

leadership role occupancy may differ across gender and age groups. Future research should investigate whether these dynamics vary among women and explore generational differences in leadership development. Second, although linguistic background was included as a control variable, the study did not systematically analyze cross-cultural differences in leadership perceptions. The results suggest that language group may influence how servant leadership is received, yet this aspect remains underexplored. Future research should investigate how cultural values and communication styles shape the perception and impact of servant leadership, particularly in multicultural or international organizations. Third, servant leadership was assessed through follower self-reports, which may be subject to perceptual biases such as social desirability or variation in interpretation. While objective behavioral data provide methodological rigor in assessing leadership role occupancy, future research should incorporate multi-source assessments (e.g., peer or supervisor ratings) to improve the validity of leadership style measurements. Fourth, while the quasi-experimental design controls many environmental variables, the study did not directly account for organizational structures, policies, or career incentives that may influence the occupancy of leadership roles. Future research should model these structural variables to better understand their interaction with leadership behaviors in shaping the emergence of leadership. Finally, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalized to other mission-driven organizations outside the military. The Swiss Army's hierarchical and formalized environment may influence leadership development differently compared to more decentralized settings, such as nonprofit organizations or healthcare institutions. Further research is needed to assess whether servant leadership functions similarly across different mission-driven contexts.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized ChatGPT to enhance the clarity of the text, improve readability, and refine certain theoretical explanations.

After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Study 2

Leading Across Languages: How Linguistic Diversity Moderates Leadership Impact in a Public Service Organization

Abstract

This study examines the impact of linguistic proximity to the leader on perceptions of leadership and the occupation of leadership roles in a multilingual public service context. Drawing on relational schema theory and inclusive leadership research, we conceptualize teams' linguistic proximity as a continuous cognitive-relational mechanism in leader–team interactions. Data stem from 68 platoon leaders and 755 followers in the Swiss Army, surveyed at four time points and linked to objective career records. Hierarchical regressions indicate that servant and transformational leadership exhibit a U-shaped relationship with linguistic proximity, with the lowest evaluations occurring at moderate proximity. Linguistic proximity also predicts leadership role occupancy above and beyond leadership style and motivation, and moderates the effects of a common leadership core and style-specific components. Servant leadership exhibits a dual-channel, near-universal pattern, whereas transformational leadership operates as a linguistically contingent, compensation-based style. The findings position language as a central relational mechanism in multilingual leadership and leadership development.

Keywords: Multilingual Leadership, Linguistic Proximity, Servant Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Leadership Role Occupancy, Quasi-Experimental Study

Introduction

Multilingual Leadership as a Relational Challenge

Leadership in multilingual contexts requires more than the application of universal leadership traits or culturally dominant prototypes, as commonly emphasized in cross-cultural leadership research (Chhokar et al., 2007; House et al., 2004; House et al., 2014). Multilingualism refers to the coexistence and use of multiple languages in organizations, across both formal and informal interactions. In such contexts, leaders and followers must continually navigate differences in values, expectations, and communicative styles. This relational complexity aligns with recent critiques in cultural research, which argue that contemporary workplaces are shaped not by single, nation-based cultural categories but by multiple, overlapping, and context-dependent cultural identities (Philipps & Sackmann, 2015; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004). Because these identities are enacted and negotiated through communication, language serves as a primary medium through which individuals express their belonging, interpret intentions, and manage relational boundaries. In multilingual teams, language therefore functions not only as a vehicle for information exchange but also as a salient socio-cultural cue that shapes interpersonal perceptions and leader–follower alignment (Henderson, 2005). Building on this perspective, this study advances the discussion by examining teams’ linguistic proximity with the leader as a relational mechanism that shapes leader–team interactions in multilingual settings. From this perspective, teams’ linguistic proximity to the leader becomes a key contextual factor that structures how cultural meanings are negotiated in leader–team relationships. Building on this relational perspective, a team’s linguistic proximity to the leader may shape the extent to which leaders and followers develop shared psychological schemas. When such schema congruence is achieved, alignment between leaders and followers enhances the quality of leader–member exchange, promoting trust, knowledge sharing, and reduced turnover intentions (Liu et al., 2025; Tsai et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2023). When incongruence prevails, divergent expectations disrupt communication, reduce relational quality, and may even foster disengagement or dysfunctional behaviors (Tsai et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2024). Language is central to sensemaking processes, functioning not merely as a medium of communication but as a cognitive mechanism through which schemas, frames, and associations are activated, interpreted, and negotiated in organizational contexts (Whittle et al., 2023). While cross-cultural leadership research,

such as the GLOBE study (Chhokar et al., 2007; House et al., 2004; House et al., 2014), has provided important insights into culturally endorsed leadership prototypes and value alignment, it has largely overlooked the relational and linguistic mechanisms through which leader–team schemas are enacted in practice (Adler & Aycan, 2018; Hartog & Hoogh, 2024). The social categorization model suggests that leadership moderates the effects of diversity by reducing subgroup distinctions and fostering information elaboration, thereby transforming linguistic diversity into a resource (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing teams’ linguistic proximity to the leader as a cognitive-relational contextual mechanism that shapes the quality of leader–team interactions in multilingual environments.

Building on a social-cognitive perspective (Tyler & Lind, 1992), we emphasize the role of relational schemas, implicit mental models that individuals use to interpret and respond to social interactions (Baldwin, 1992; Engle & Lord, 1997). These schemas serve as cognitive templates, shaped by cultural norms, past experiences, and contextual cues, that guide expectations regarding roles, authority, and interpersonal behavior. In leadership contexts, relational schemas influence how followers interpret leaders’ actions and how leaders anticipate and respond to followers’ needs. In multilingual settings, high teams’ linguistic proximity to the leader may facilitate schema alignment through shared communicative norms, mutual understanding, and coordination. By contrast, low teams’ linguistic proximity to the leader, arising from proficiency gaps, idiomatic variation, or culturally embedded styles, can disrupt schema activation, leading to misinterpretation, ambiguity, and weakened exchanges. By integrating relational schema theory with the dynamics of language use, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how leaders and followers construct shared meaning, transcending static models of value alignment.

Inclusive Leadership in Multilingual Teams

To address schema misalignment, we focus on inclusive leadership approaches, particularly servant and transformational leadership. Though distinct in their theoretical roots (Stone et al., 2003; van Dierendonck et al., 2014), both styles promote inclusion by fostering trust, alignment, and identification (Assefa & Mujtaba, 2025; Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Inclusion is defined as the simultaneous experience of belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2009; Shore et al., 2011). Inclusion is achieved through the recognition and integration of differences. Servant leadership supports this

process by cultivating trust, mutual adjustment, and psychological safety through empathy, humility, and relational repair (Eva et al., 2019). Transformational leadership promotes alignment by articulating a compelling shared vision, reinforcing value congruence, and strengthening group identification (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Together, these styles provide relational mechanisms that may bridge linguistic barriers in multilingual teams.

The multicultural leadership literature offers important complementary insights. The GLOBE project (Chhokar et al., 2007; House et al., 2004; House et al., 2014) demonstrated that leadership effectiveness is shaped by culturally endorsed implicit leadership theories, or schemas of what constitutes effective leadership. More recently, Rockstuhl et al. (2023) identified three perspectives for understanding leadership effectiveness across contexts: (1) the cultural congruence perspective, which argues that leadership is most effective when aligned with culturally shared expectations; (2) the cultural compensation perspective, which suggests leadership can offset cultural gaps through structured behaviors; and (3) the near-universality perspective, which posits that certain styles, especially transformational and servant leadership, are broadly effective across cultures, partly due to converging global work norms (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Rockstuhl et al., 2023). However, despite these advances, most research has focused on alignment at the level of values or prototypes, while the relational, dyadic, and language-driven processes of schema congruence remain underexplored.

The Swiss Public Service Context

The Swiss context provides an ideal setting to investigate these dynamics. With four national languages and a tradition of receptive multilingualism, Switzerland institutionalizes linguistic diversity, particularly in public service organizations. Receptive multilingualism, in which individuals communicate in their own language while relying on others' partial comprehension and accommodation, is not only tolerated but also widely practiced in these organizations (Berthele & Wittlin, 2013). Unlike in many international or business firms, no lingua franca such as English is typically used, making communication contingent on mutual adjustment. Leaders and followers must therefore continually negotiate meaning across language boundaries. These dynamics are especially salient between Swiss Germanic, Swiss French, and Swiss Italian groups, which differ in communication styles and leadership prototypes (Brodbeck et al., 2000), making relational alignment both essential and fragile. Public service

organizations, including non-profit associations, government bodies, civic institutions, and the Swiss Army, offer a particularly relevant empirical context. As a compulsory and national institution, the Swiss Army not only reflects Switzerland's linguistic and cultural diversity but also depends heavily on multilingual coordination, intergroup cooperation, and inclusive leadership. Unlike profit-oriented firms, these organizations depend on sustained participation, volunteer engagement, and alignment with values. Their continuity, therefore, hinges not only on formal structures but also on members' willingness to assume leadership responsibility. In this environment, leadership role occupancy emerges as a decisive success factor: stepping into leadership roles ensures accountability, continuity, and strategic renewal, while signaling commitment and organizational identification (Avolio et al., 2009; Schuh et al., 2014). However, the conditions that foster or hinder such role transitions remain underexplored, particularly in multilingual public service settings where linguistic barriers and diverse expectations complicate relational dynamics. This study examines leadership in the Swiss Army, where multilingual interactions are a routine occurrence. Using the loci and mechanisms of leadership framework (Hernandez et al., 2011), this study investigates leadership at the dyadic level, focusing on how team members perceive their leader's style (servant or transformational) within relationships characterized by varying degrees of linguistic proximity. It further examines how these perceptions influence followers' willingness to assume leadership roles. In this context, language functions as a key mechanism through which relational schemas are formed, aligned, or disrupted.

Leadership in the Military

Research in the military has traditionally examined the effects of transformational and transactional leadership. In a Canadian military study, Tremblay (2010) found that transformational leadership can simultaneously strengthen and weaken soldiers' commitment and turnover intentions, depending on whether leaders are perceived as fair and trustworthy. In contrast, transactional leadership tends to reduce commitment and increase intentions to leave. Swiss military research similarly shows that transformational leadership elicits substantially more extra effort from subordinates than transactional leadership (Stadelmann, 2010). Although these studies emphasize established leadership models, they also reveal conceptual gaps, particularly regarding the relational and value-oriented dimensions of leadership in public service settings. Recent

work addresses this gap by examining servant leadership in the military. Richardson et al. (2023) notes that although servant leadership behaviors are evident within military cultures, the concept remains largely absent from leadership development programs such as those in the United States Air Force, despite its alignment with institutional core values. Complementing this perspective, Wuli et al. (2020) show that servant leadership can transform conflict management within military environments. Their qualitative study of the Indonesian Military Ordinarate documents a shift from coercive, security-driven approaches to more humanistic practices grounded in dialogue, mutual respect, and compassion. Together, these findings suggest that the military may benefit from broadening leadership frameworks beyond performance-oriented models toward approaches that emphasize relational quality, ethics, and human dignity, dimensions that become particularly salient in multilingual and culturally diverse environments.

Contributions and Research Framework

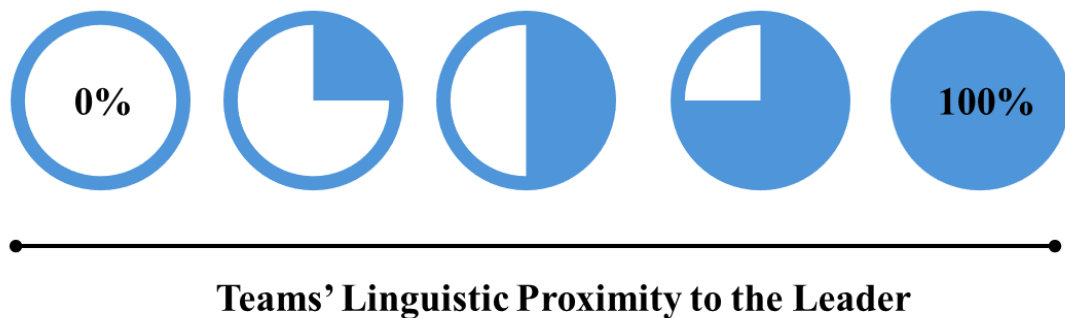
Building on this contextual and theoretical foundation, the study makes three contributions. First, it introduces teams' linguistic proximity to the leader as a novel cognitive-relational contextual variable, extending cross-cultural and multilingual leadership research by conceptualizing language as a continuous, perception-based mechanism rather than a categorical demographic attribute. Second, it demonstrates that linguistic proximity shapes perceptions of servant and transformational leadership. By showing that teams interpret and evaluate their leader's behavior through the lens of relational linguistic alignment, the study advances understanding of how leadership perceptions emerge in multilingual teams. Third, it demonstrates that linguistic proximity serves as a contextual moderator, influencing the relationship between leadership style (servant and transformational) and the occupancy of leadership roles. By positioning leadership role occupancy as a novel outcome, the study contributes to understanding how inclusive leadership supports sustainable leadership development in multilingual public service organizations. From this theoretical integration, the study derives two core research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does the team's linguistic proximity to the leader influence teams' perceptions of servant and transformational leadership?

RQ2: How does the team's linguistic proximity to the leader modify the relationship between teams' perception of servant or transformational leadership and teams' leadership role occupancy?

The first stage introduces teams' linguistic proximity to the leader as a continuous cognitive-relational variable that captures the perceived degree of linguistic alignment within leader–team dyads (see Figure 6). Rather than relying on categorical distinctions such as linguistic congruence or incongruence, linguistic proximity reflects the nuanced realities of multilingual interaction in which team members may differ in their fluency, comprehension, and communicative ease with their leader. Conceptualizing language in this way positions proximity as a theoretically grounded and empirically sensitive indicator of relational alignment, enabling a more fine-grained understanding of how language-based dynamics shape leader–team interactions in multilingual settings. This variable provides the foundation for investigating how linguistic alignment influences perceptions of leadership.

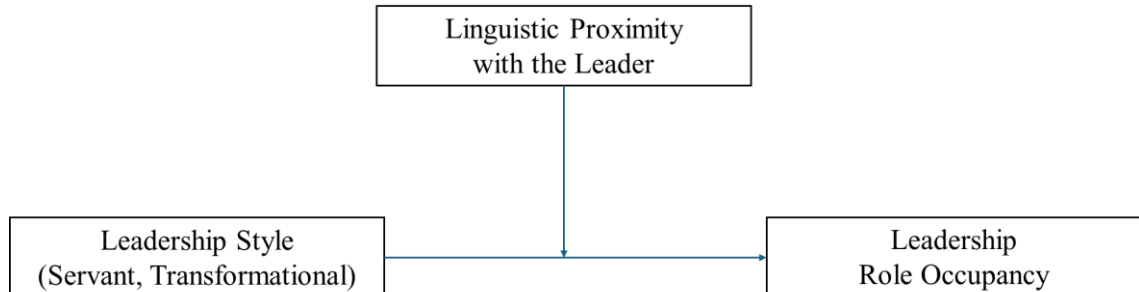
Figure 6: Teams' Linguistic Proximity to the Leader



The second stage, depicted in Figure 7, presents the conceptual research model. In this model, servant and transformational leadership operate as independent variables predicting leadership role occupancy, defined as a behavioral and objective indicator of followers' attainment of formal leadership positions within the organization (Avolio et al., 2009; Schuh et al., 2014). Teams' linguistic proximity to the leader is introduced as a contextual exogenous moderator that conditions this relationship. By capturing the degree of perceived linguistic alignment within the dyad, linguistic proximity reflects how communicative ease, shared understanding, and relational attunement shape the extent to which leadership behaviors translate into followers' willingness to assume leadership roles. This framework thus conceptualizes language not as a

background demographic attribute but as a central relational mechanism through which leadership behavior influences followers' future occupancy of formal leadership roles.

Figure 7: Conceptual research model



Method

The Swiss Army is one of the country's largest public service organizations, with an active force of about 150,000 soldiers (VBS, 2025). As a militia-based institution, it depends on civic duty and, for leadership roles, on voluntary engagement. Most personnel serve part-time while balancing civilian careers or studies, creating a fluid leadership pipeline where individuals regularly transition between follower and leader roles. The willingness to assume formal leadership responsibility is, therefore, central to sustaining both operational effectiveness and organizational continuity.

The Army is explicitly structured to integrate soldiers from all cultural regions, thereby promoting national cohesion and mutual understanding (Schweizer-Eidgenossenschaft, 2022). With four national languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansh), it mirrors the diversity of Swiss society. Historically, units were organized along territorial lines; however, ongoing restructuring and increased specialization have led to the creation of more mixed-language units, making multilingual collaboration a routine feature of training and operations (Jager, 2020). Regulations recognize this diversity: Article 57 of the Army's service code mandates that commanders address subordinates in their mother tongue whenever possible (Der Schweizerische Bundesrat, 2018). In practice, however, this principle is difficult to implement consistently. Mixed-language units often rely on the standardized written forms of German, French, or Italian (Jager, 2020). Spoken communication presents additional challenges: Swiss German dialects, widely used informally, differ substantially from the

Standard German taught in schools, creating barriers for speakers of Latin languages. These linguistic hurdles can undermine communication, strain leadership, and erode cohesion, underscoring the importance of intercultural competence for operational effectiveness. Empirical studies in the Swiss Army context confirm that practice diverges from regulation. German dominates much of everyday interaction, while French is underrepresented outside Romandie, Italian is nearly absent, and Romansh plays a mostly symbolic role (Berthele & Wittlin, 2013). In response, the Army has come to rely heavily on receptive multilingualism: soldiers speak their own native language and rely on others' receptive abilities to follow. This practice is valued for protecting minority rights and fostering solidarity, but it is also criticized for imprecision and the risk of misunderstandings in operationally critical moments. Acceptance of receptive multilingualism increases with experience, suggesting that it is a learned practice rather than an innate ability (Berthele & Wittlin, 2013). Unlike in international and business organizations, where English often serves as a lingua franca, the Swiss Army has no neutral bridging language, making linguistic (in)congruence in leader–follower dyads a daily, unavoidable challenge.

Beyond its multilingual composition, the Army offers unique methodological advantages for leadership research. Training conditions are highly standardized, and followers are randomly assigned to leaders, creating a quasi-experimental environment that allows for rigorous analysis of leadership effects. Soldiers' decision to pursue leadership training after basic service introduces an element of self-selection, making leadership role occupancy a meaningful behavioral outcome. Compulsory service for Swiss men aged 18 to 20 ensures a diverse pool of recruits, many of whom enter with varying levels of leadership motivation. Leadership service has historically been recognized as a valuable credential in civilian life, underscoring the Army's broader societal role. Although the Swiss Army has not engaged in warfare since 1848, it remains a vital civic institution contributing to disaster relief, infrastructure support, and national cohesion. The Swiss Army's leadership doctrine is grounded in mission command, which emphasizes decentralized decision-making: senior officers set objectives, while subordinates are entrusted with autonomous execution (Der Schweizerische Bundesrat, 2022). This approach aligns closely with servant and transformational leadership, which emphasize empowerment, responsibility, and initiative-taking (Knevelsrud et al., 2024). Empirical studies have shown that servant and

transformational leadership behaviors among young Swiss officers are positively associated with their intrinsic motivation to assume leadership roles (Lang et al., 2022). Servant leadership is most effective in stable environments, such as structured training contexts. In contrast, transformational leadership proves especially effective in dynamic or crisis situations, inspiring followers through a shared vision and identification with the mission (Humphreys, 2005). In the Swiss Army, these two styles may operate in tandem: servant leadership strengthens motivation and continuity within the training system, while transformational leadership becomes critical in deployments such as disaster relief or peace support.

Taken together, the Swiss Army combines the defining characteristics of a public service organization (purpose-driven mission, reliance on voluntary leadership, and civic significance) with the unique challenges of multilingual interaction in the absence of a lingua franca. Its standardized, quasi-experimental structure, coupled with the civic nature of leadership pathways, creates a natural laboratory for investigating how linguistic proximity to the leader and inclusive leadership styles shape perceptions of leadership and influence the filling of leadership roles

Sample

The sample consisted of 68 leader–team dyads (68 leaders, 755 followers). The leaders were drawn from three officer training schools of the Swiss Army, where they had completed the standardized military training pathway, including basic training, the non-commissioned officer course, and the practical phase as group leaders, before entering the 15-week officer school and assuming formal command over a platoon. The average age of leaders was 20.9 years ($SD = 1.25$). Only male leaders were included in the analyses. Although three women served as platoon leaders in the sample, they were excluded because military service is voluntary for women but compulsory for men. This structural difference introduces systematic self-selection: women who choose to enlist are likely to differ from conscripted men in motivation, commitment, and career orientation. Including female leaders would therefore have introduced variance attributable to selection effects rather than leadership behavior itself. Restricting the analytical sample to male leaders reduces this source of bias and ensures comparability. Regarding linguistic background, the leaders closely reflected Switzerland's national distribution, with 61% German-speaking, 34% French-speaking, and 5% Italian-speaking officers. In terms of education, 70% of the leaders had not obtained a

Swiss Federal Baccalaureate (Matura), while 30% had. The Matura represents the highest secondary school qualification in Switzerland and constitutes the formal prerequisite for admission to university-level education. Followers also reflected Switzerland's multilingual composition, with 76% of individuals being German-speaking, 18% French-speaking, 4% Italian-speaking, and 1% Romansh-speaking. This distribution broadly aligns with national demographics, though German speakers were slightly overrepresented compared to their proportion in the general population. The average age of followers was 20.2 years ($SD = 1.60$). Female followers were likewise excluded for the same reason as female leaders, since voluntary service introduces systematic self-selection effects that differ from those of conscripted men. Team sizes varied from 2 to 34 members ($M = 16.52$, Median = 15).

Procedure

Data were collected at four points in time within the highly standardized training environment of the Swiss Army, which provides a unique quasi-experimental setting for leadership research. At the first measurement point (T1), demographic information about the leader, including native language, was collected. At the second measurement point (T2), followers evaluated their platoon leaders using validated scales of servant and transformational leadership. At the third point (T3), approximately four weeks later, the same followers completed measures of motivational variables, specifically public service motivation and extrinsic motivation for a leadership career, which served as control variables in this study. At the fourth measurement point (T4), leadership role occupancy was determined using objective administrative personnel records obtained from the Army's Personnel Service. These official data reflect whether individuals were promoted into formal leadership positions, thereby capturing an observable behavioral outcome rather than self-reported aspirations or intentions. The quasi-experimental design of the Swiss Army context enhances internal validity in several ways. First, followers were randomly assigned to leaders through standardized allocation procedures, eliminating self-selection and reducing common-source bias. Second, all participants were exposed to identical training schedules, shared accommodation, and uniform professional demands, creating an environment of controlled situational variance. Although leadership style was not experimentally manipulated, these structural conditions provide an as-if random assignment framework in which the effects of naturally occurring leadership behaviors can be observed under

rigorously standardized circumstances. This allows for stronger causal inference than typical cross-sectional survey designs. To evaluate potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor tests were conducted separately for the leadership and motivational data. For the leadership variables (T2), the first unrotated factor explained 42% of the total variance. For the motivational variables (T3), the first factor explained 43%, which is well below the conventional 50% threshold for factor loadings. These findings, combined with the temporal separation of measurement points and the inclusion of objective outcome data (T4), suggest that common method variance was not a major concern (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Overall, this multi-time and partially objective research design provides a robust quasi-experimental framework for examining how leadership style and the exogenous contextual variable of teams' linguistic proximity to the leader jointly predict leadership role occupancy within a real-world institutional setting.

Measures

This section outlines the procedures employed to assess the study's key constructs. Surveys were offered in German, French, and Italian to enable participants to respond in their preferred language. The original English questionnaire was translated into these languages using a back-translation process. To ensure linguistic precision and conceptual alignment, a panel of multilingual experts reviewed the translations for equivalence and clarity.

Linguistic Proximity with the Leader

Linguistic proximity was assessed based on the match between the leader's and followers' native languages. First, native language information was collected for all participants. For each leader-follower dyad, a binary match score was created (1 = same native language; 0 = different native language). These values were then aggregated at the team level by calculating the proportion of followers who shared the leader's native language. This resulted in a continuous percentage-based score ranging from 1 to 10, where a score of 1 represents 0–10% linguistic proximity and a score of 10 represents 90–100% linguistic proximity, reflecting the degree of linguistic alignment within each platoon leader.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership was measured using the Servant Leadership Survey (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The instrument consists of 18 items that capture five core dimensions: empowerment, stewardship, humility, standing back, and authenticity. Responses were recorded on a six-point Likert scale. The item wording was adapted to reflect the operational language of the military context, enhancing clarity and relevance. A representative item states, *“My platoon leader helps me to develop myself.”* Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .90. Followers’ ratings of servant leadership were aggregated to the team level by computing the mean score within each platoon, reflecting shared team perceptions of the leader’s behavior.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership was measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (B. Bass & Avolio, 1995). The instrument comprises 16 items that capture four core dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence (behavior), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Responses were recorded on a six-point Likert scale. The wording of the item was adapted to reflect the military context, enhancing clarity and relevance. A representative item states, *“My platoon leader makes it clear how important it is to commit 100% to the mission.”* Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .93. Followers’ ratings were aggregated to the team level by computing the mean score within each platoon, reflecting the shared team perception of the leader’s transformational leadership.

Leadership Role Occupancy

Leadership role occupancy was assessed using objective behavioral data from the Armed Forces Personnel Service, providing a valid and reliable indicator of leadership career pursuit within the Swiss Army. This measure captures enacted leadership behavior rather than self-reported intentions or aspirations. At the individual level, the variable was coded dichotomously (0 = did not pursue a cadre career; 1 = voluntarily continued into formal leadership training). These values were then aggregated at the team level by calculating the proportion of followers within each platoon who entered a leadership role. This resulted in a continuous percentage score reflecting each team’s overall leadership advancement rate.

Control Variables

To account for contextual variation across platoons, leader education and two motivational variables were included in the analyses. Leader education was coded based on whether the platoon leader had completed the Swiss Federal Matura (0 = no Matura; 1 = Matura). Two motivational orientations toward leadership service were also considered. Public service motivation refers to an intrinsic commitment to the public interest and willingness to prioritize collective welfare over personal benefit. This construct was measured with five items adapted to the military context (Ritz & Brewer, 2013; Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). A representative item reads: *"It is important to me to contribute selflessly to the common good."* Extrinsic motivation, in contrast, reflects the external incentives associated with leadership training, such as its recognized value for future civilian careers (Schweizer Armee, 2025). It was measured using four items rated on a five-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$), for example: *"Pursuing leadership training is valuable because it benefits my future civilian career."* An exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring, oblimin rotation) confirmed that the two motivational constructs represent empirically distinct dimensions. Two factors with eigenvalues greater than one emerged, jointly explaining 71% of the total variance (57% and 14%, respectively), with strong positive loadings for public service motivation items on the first factor and strong negative loadings for extrinsic motivation items on the second, and minimal cross-loadings ($< .30$), supporting conceptual distinction. Because the unit of analysis in this study is the leader–team dyad, the motivation scores were first aggregated at the team level by averaging the responses of followers within each platoon, resulting in shared motivational profiles for each team.

Analytical Strategy

All analyses were conducted at the team level. We began by computing Spearman rank-order correlations to explore the bivariate relationships among the control variables, teams' linguistic proximity to the leader, perceived leadership styles, team motivational variables, and leadership role occupancy. This initial step provided a descriptive overview of how these constructs relate to one another, before moving on to more complex modeling.

To address RQ1, we examined whether teams' linguistic proximity to the leader shapes teams' perceptions of servant and transformational leadership. For each leadership outcome, we estimated a series of hierarchical multiple regression models. In the baseline model, only leader education and the team-level motivational variables (public service motivation and extrinsic motivation) were entered. This provided a reference point for evaluating the incremental explanatory value of linguistic proximity. In the next step, linguistic proximity was added as a linear predictor. Finally, to test for potential curvilinear effects, we added a quadratic term for linguistic proximity. This decision reflects theoretical accounts suggesting that leadership styles are interpreted through culturally and linguistically shaped schemas, which may produce perception patterns that are not necessarily linear but vary across degrees of linguistic alignment (Lang et al., 2022; Rockstuhl et al., 2023). Linguistic proximity was mean-centered prior to analysis, and the quadratic component was computed from the centered term.

To address RQ2, we examined whether teams' linguistic proximity to the leader conditions the relationship between perceived leadership and leadership role occupancy. These analyses controlled for leader education and the team-level motivational variables. A methodological challenge arose due to the extremely high correlation between servant and transformational leadership ($r = .91$), which made it inappropriate to enter both variables simultaneously in their raw form. To disentangle their common and unique components, perceived leadership was decomposed into three elements: (a) a Common Leadership Core (CLC) capturing the variance common to both servant and transformational leadership, and (b) two residualized variables representing the unique variance specific to servant leadership and to transformational leadership, respectively. This decomposition allowed us to examine how both the common core and the style-specific aspects of leadership relate to leadership role occupancy, and how these relationships vary as a function of linguistic proximity. Using this decomposition, we estimated a series of hierarchical regression models. We first introduced the control variables, followed by an examination of linguistic proximity. We then entered the CLC and, in separate steps, the servant leadership residual and the transformational leadership residual. To test moderation effects, we added interaction terms between linguistic proximity and the leadership components, first with the CLC, and then with the style-specific residuals. Parallel sets of models were estimated for residual servant

and transformational leadership. Changes in explained variance across successive models were used to evaluate whether linguistic proximity, leadership components, or their interactions contributed significantly to predicting leadership role occupancy.

Taken together, this analytic strategy enabled us to assess both the direct influence of linguistic proximity on leadership perceptions and leadership role occupancy, as well as its moderating role in shaping how the common and style-specific components of perceived leadership translate into actual leadership advancement within teams.

Results

Table 8 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among the primary study variables. Several consistent patterns emerge. Leader education shows meaningful associations with team motivation and leadership role occupancy, suggesting that more formally educated leaders tend to foster motivational climates linked to sustained leadership involvement. At the same time, leader education relates differently to linguistic proximity and servant leadership, indicating that formal education does not necessarily align with perceived relational closeness or servant leadership behavior. Team public service motivation correlates with both motivational and leadership-related variables, pointing to a broader attitudinal constellation in which a shared public service ethos accompanies more positive evaluations of leadership and a higher likelihood of assuming formal roles. A comparable pattern appears for extrinsic motivation. Linguistic proximity is systematically associated with perceptions of servant and transformational leadership, underscoring the role of language alignment as a relational mechanism shaping leadership evaluations. Finally, servant and transformational leadership are strongly interconnected, and both relate to leadership role occupancy.

Table 8: Descriptive statistics and Spearman rank-order correlations among the study variables

Variable	M ± SD	Range	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Leader's Education (0 = no Matura, 1 = Matura)	.71 ± .45	0 - 1						
2. Teams' Public Service Motivation	2.98 ± .30	2.30 - 4.00	.17**					
3. Teams' Extrinsic Motivation	2.65 ± .53	1.25 - 4.75	.11**	.80**				
4. Teams' Linguistic Proximity with the Leader	7.54 ± 3.42	1 - 10	-.26**	-.24**	-.17**			
5. Teams' Perception of Servant Leadership	4.41 ± .37	3.59 - 5.61	-.08**	.21**	.25**	.37**		
6. Teams' Perception of Transformational Leadership	4.65 ± .38	3.50 - 5.95	-.01	.25**	.27**	.37**	.91**	
7. Teams' Leadership Role Occupancy	.25 ± .14	0 - 1	.16**	.25**	.36**	.04	.13**	.15**

Note: Significance levels: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; $N = 759$; $K = 71$

To examine whether linguistic proximity between team members and their leader influences perceptions of the leader's style, specifically, servant and transformational leadership, we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses for each outcome variable. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 9. For each dependent variable, three models were estimated: a baseline model that included only control variables, a second model that added linguistic proximity as a linear predictor, and a third model that included both linear and quadratic terms to test for potential curvilinear effects.

Table 9: Hierarchical Regression Model for RQ1

Variable	Teams' Perception of Servant Leadership			Teams' Perception of Transformational Leadership		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Leader's Education	-.10**	-.04	-.07*	-.04	.04	.01
Teams' Public Service Motivation	.11	.16**	.20**	.19**	.26**	.30**
Teams' Extrinsic Motivation	.17**	.14**	.18**	.10	.06	.10*
Teams' Linguistic Proximity with the Leader		.25**	.83**		.33**	.88**
Teams' Linguistic Proximity with the Leader ²			.66**			.64**
<i>F-Value</i>	20.38**	29.53**	48.83**	22.00**	41.04**	59.01**
<i>R</i> ²	.075	.136	.246	.081	.180	.283
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	.072	.131	.241	.077	.175	.278
ΔR^2		.061**	.110**		.099**	.103**

Note: Significance levels: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; $N = 759$; $K = 71$

In the case of servant leadership, both public service motivation and extrinsic motivation emerged as similarly strong predictors in the baseline model. Adding linguistic proximity as a linear predictor improved model fit, indicating that greater language similarity between the leader and the team was associated with more favorable

perceptions of servant leadership. When the quadratic term for proximity was included, the model improved further. The positive quadratic coefficient indicated a U-shaped relationship, suggesting that perceptions of servant leadership were lowest at moderate levels of linguistic proximity and higher when proximity was either low or high. This pattern implies that the effect of linguistic proximity on leadership perceptions is not linear and may reflect different relational or psychological dynamics depending on the degree of linguistic similarity. A similar, though slightly differentiated pattern appeared for transformational leadership. Public service motivation was the strongest predictor across all models, while extrinsic motivation played only a marginal role. The inclusion of linguistic proximity improved the model, and the quadratic term again indicated a U-shaped relationship. Although the curvature was less pronounced than in the case of servant leadership, the pattern still suggested that transformational leadership was perceived more favorably at both low and high levels of linguistic proximity, and less favorably at moderate levels. These findings indicate that linguistic similarity is associated with more positive evaluations of leadership style, but in a curvilinear rather than linear way. Taken together, both servant and transformational leadership exhibit clear U-shaped curves, with the lowest predicted values at moderate proximity and higher values at the extremes. These results offer a nuanced answer to Research Question 1: linguistic proximity plays a meaningful but non-linear role in shaping perceptions of leadership style. Both leadership styles are perceived more positively when linguistic proximity is either high or low, whereas moderate proximity appears less conducive to favorable evaluations. These curvilinear effects suggest that different psychological mechanisms may operate at different levels of linguistic alignment, with linguistic proximity primarily functioning as a relational signal that shapes how leadership is perceived rather than enacted.

To address RQ2, we examined whether teams' linguistic proximity with the leader modifies the relationships between leadership perceptions and leadership role occupancy, while controlling for leader and team motivational characteristics (see Table 10). For this purpose, we decomposed teams' perceived leadership into three components: a Common Leadership Core (CLC) capturing the common variance between servant and transformational leadership, and two residualized variables representing the unique servant-specific and transformational-specific components.

Table 10: Hierarchical Regression Model for RQ2

Variables	Teams' Leadership Role Occupancy								
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Leader's Education	.11**	.15**	.15**	.16**	.16**	.20**	.16**	.16**	.20**
Teams' Public Service Motivation	.06	.09†	.11*	.12*	.15**	.14**	.12*	.15**	.14**
Teams' Extrinsic Motivation	.33**	.31**	.32**	.31**	.30**	.25**	.31**	.30**	.25**
Teams' Linguistic Proximity with the Leader (LP)	-	.15**	.17**	.18**	.15**	.14**	.18**	.15**	.13**
Teams' Perceived Common Leadership Core (CLC)	-	-	-.08*	-.09*	.42**	.38**	-.07*	.43**	.22
Teams' Perceived Servant Leadership Residual (SL-R)	-	-	-	.04	.05	.06†	-	-	-
Teams' Perceived Transformational Leadership Residual (TFL-R)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.04	-.05	-.06†
LP × CLC	-	-	-	-	-.52**	-.48**	-	-.52**	-.27†
LP × SL-R	-	-	-	-	-	.24**	-	-	-
LP × TFL-R	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.25**
<i>F-Value</i>	53.15**	45.74**	37.81**	31.81**	29.64**	35.10**	31.81**	29.64**	35.10**
<i>R</i> ²	.175	.196	.202	.203	.217	.274	.203	.217	.274
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	.172	.192	.196	.197	.210	.266	.197	.210	.266
<i>Adjusted ΔR</i> ²		.021** (in relation to model 1)	.005* (in relation to model 2)	.002 (in relation to model 3)	.014** (in relation to model 4)	.056** (in relation to model 5)	.002 (in relation to model 3)	.014** (in relation to model 7)	.056** (in relation to model 8)

Note: Significance levels: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; *N* = 759; *K* = 71

Across all analyses, leaders' education emerged as a stable and robust predictor: teams led by more highly educated leaders consistently showed higher rates of leadership role occupancy. In the baseline model with controls only, leaders' education and teams' extrinsic motivation were positively associated with occupying a leadership role, whereas public service motivation was not yet significant. When teams' linguistic proximity with the leader was added, the model improved, and linguistic proximity emerged as a positive predictor. In this extended specification, public service motivation also became positive, while extrinsic motivation remained robust. Introducing the teams' perceived leadership common variance index (CLC) led to a further improvement, with leader education, public service motivation, extrinsic motivation, and linguistic proximity all remaining significantly positive. At the same time, the CLC showed a small negative association with leadership role occupancy.

Adding the teams' perceived servant leadership alongside the CLC did not change model fit. Leader education, public service motivation, extrinsic motivation, and linguistic proximity remained positive, the CLC remained negative, and the servant leadership residual was not significant. When the interaction between the CLC and linguistic proximity was introduced, the model improved, and the interaction was strongly negative, indicating that the positive effect of the common leadership core weakens as linguistic proximity increases. In a more comprehensive specification that included both the CLC and the servant leadership residual, the model improved further. Leader

education, public service motivation, extrinsic motivation, and linguistic proximity all remained significant. The CLC showed a positive main effect, while the servant leadership residual showed a marginally positive tendency. Two interactions appeared: the $\text{CLC} \times \text{linguistic proximity}$ interaction remained negative, whereas the servant leadership residual $\times$ linguistic proximity interaction was positive. This pattern suggests that the common leadership core becomes less beneficial at higher linguistic proximity, while servant-specific components become more important as leaders and followers are linguistically closer.

The parallel set of models for transformational leadership showed a similar structure. Adding the teams' perceived transformational leadership residual to the CLC model did not improve model fit. In this model, leader education, public service motivation, extrinsic motivation, and linguistic proximity remained positive, the CLC was negative, and the transformational leadership residual was not significant. Adding the $\text{CLC} \times \text{linguistic proximity}$ interaction improved the model, yielding a negative interaction effect again. In the full specification, which included both leadership components and interactions, the model improved further. Leader education, public service motivation, extrinsic motivation, and linguistic proximity remained positive. The CLC was no longer significant as a main effect; the transformational leadership residual showed a marginally negative tendency; the $\text{CLC} \times \text{linguistic proximity}$ interaction was marginally negative; and the transformational leadership residual $\times$ linguistic proximity interaction was significantly negative. This indicates that the transformational-specific leadership component becomes increasingly negatively associated with leadership role occupancy as linguistic proximity increases. Across all models, leaders' education was consistently the strongest and most stable predictor. Teams' public service motivation became more robust once leadership variables were included, while extrinsic motivation remained positive but weakened slightly as model complexity increased. Overall, the analyses show that teams' linguistic proximity with the leader not only directly enhances leadership role occupancy but also systematically moderates how both the common leadership core and the style-specific components relate to leadership development within teams.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the emerging conversation on multilingual leadership as a relational challenge by demonstrating that linguistic proximity to the leader meaningfully shapes perceptions of leadership and its relationship to followers' willingness to assume leadership roles. Building on relational schema theory, multicultural leadership research, and inclusive leadership scholarship, the findings show that leadership in multilingual contexts is not simply a matter of universal leadership traits but depends on how leaders and followers navigate linguistic boundaries that structure relational alignment and expectations. This aligns with recent critiques in cultural research that emphasize that contemporary workplaces are shaped by multiple, context-dependent cultural identities rather than single national categories (Sackmann & Phillips, 2004; Phillips & Sackmann, 2020).

A central insight of this study is that servant and transformational leadership are not perceived uniformly across linguistic contexts but follow a U-shaped pattern: perceptions are lowest at moderate levels of linguistic proximity and more favorable at both very high and very low proximity. This suggests that different relational and psychological processes operate across the continuum of proximity. At high linguistic proximity, communication is fluent, relational cues are unambiguous, and schema alignment is readily established, fostering procedural fairness and reinforcing legitimacy (Tyler & Lind, 1992). At very low proximity, leaders appear to compensate through more explicit, structured, and intentional communication, which heightens the salience of fairness cues and can be interpreted as strong relational signals. In contrast, moderate proximity creates an "ambiguity zone" where communication is neither fluent nor challenging enough to trigger compensatory behaviors. Relational cues become inconsistent, procedural fairness is perceived unevenly, and schema alignment weakens, explaining the dip in leadership evaluations at this midpoint.

A second major insight concerns whether linguistic proximity conditions the relationship between perceived leadership and leadership role occupancy. Because servant and transformational leadership are highly correlated at the team-perception level ($r = .91$), decomposing them into a common core (CLC) and style-specific residuals provided a more fine-grained perspective. Servant leadership shows a dual-channel pattern of effectiveness across linguistic contexts. The common leadership core is

particularly influential under low proximity, supporting the compensatory view that value-based elements retain effectiveness when relational cues are difficult to decode (Rockstuhl et al., 2023). In contrast, the servant-specific residual becomes more influential when linguistic proximity is high, consistent with van Dierendonck's (2011) view that servant leadership activates followers' psychological needs through subtle cues that require clear communication to be perceived. Together, these dual patterns support the near-universality perspective, indicating that servant leadership remains effective across linguistic contexts, albeit through different relational mechanisms depending on the degree of linguistic alignment (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Rockstuhl et al., 2023). Transformational leadership follows a more linguistically contingent trajectory. Its style-specific component is more effective under low proximity, where followers rely on expressive or visionary cues to reduce uncertainty, again consistent with the compensation perspective. However, transformation-specific behaviors lose relevance and may be perceived negatively in proximity, particularly in cultural contexts such as the Germanic-Swiss setting, where restraint and factual objectivity are normatively preferred (House et al., 2004). Thus, transformational leadership can be effective in low-proximity contexts but lacks the dual-context adaptability characteristic of servant leadership.

Taken together, these findings yield several theoretical implications. First, linguistic proximity emerges as a relational mechanism that shapes how leadership is interpreted and enacted in multilingual teams, rather than a binary condition—linguistic alignment functions as a continuous, relational process that structures the clarity and coherence of relational cues. Second, the results advance a relational-linguistic perspective on inclusive leadership, showing that servant and transformational leadership promote a sense of belonging and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2009) through distinct pathways, depending on linguistic context. Third, linguistic proximity predicts leadership role occupancy above and beyond leadership style and motivational factors, suggesting that linguistic alignment shapes developmental trajectories rather than merely perceptions. In multilingual public service environments, linguistic proximity therefore represents an overlooked dimension of leadership development and relational coordination.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that warrant consideration in future research. First, the very high intercorrelation between servant and transformational leadership raises the possibility of multicollinearity. Although the two constructs have distinct theoretical roots (Stone et al., 2003; van Dierendonck et al., 2014), their substantial empirical overlap suggests that followers may perceive them as complementary facets of a broader inclusive leadership schema. While this study addressed the issue by decomposing the constructs into common and style-specific components, future research should apply more advanced analytical approaches to disentangle their unique and common variance more precisely. Alternatively, scholars may conceptualize servant and transformational leadership as formative rather than reflective constructs and examine their effects at the sub-dimensional level, thereby enabling a more granular understanding of which specific behaviors drive follower outcomes across varying linguistic conditions. Second, the study did not explicitly capture individual bilingualism or language proficiency gradients, which are highly relevant in multilingual environments, such as the Swiss Army. Linguistic proximity was operationalized as a continuous team-level variable, reflecting the percentage of followers who shared the leader's native language. This approach overlooks the fluidity of bilingual communication and receptive multilingualism, which are central to real-world interactions in Switzerland. Future research should adopt more fine-grained linguistic measures that account for self-assessed proficiency, habitual language use, and communicative switching behaviors. Third, the study did not include data on participants' migration backgrounds, a factor that substantially shapes linguistic identity, cultural orientation, and perceptions of leadership in Swiss public service contexts. Including this variable would allow for a deeper understanding of how intersectional forms of diversity, linguistic, cultural, and migratory, jointly influence leadership dynamics. Finally, while the quasi-experimental setting of the Swiss Army enhances internal validity through standardized structures and random assignment, it may also limit external validity. The hierarchical, male-dominated, and mission-oriented nature of this organization differs from that of many civilian public service institutions, non-profit associations, or corporate environments. Replications across varied organizational and national contexts are therefore necessary to assess the generalizability of both the inverted-U relationship between linguistic proximity and leadership

perceptions and the moderating role of linguistic proximity in shaping the relationships among different components of leadership and leadership role occupancy.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

While preparing this work, the authors used ChatGPT to enhance clarity, improve readability, and refine certain theoretical explanations. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the publication's content.

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Study 3

Empowering Leadership Aspiration: The Role of Servant Leadership and Psychological Safety in Developing Women's Ambition to Lead

Abstract

Despite growing awareness of gender inequality, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly in male-dominated environments such as policing. This study investigates how servant leadership and psychological safety influence leadership aspirations among uniformed officers in Swiss police organizations. Drawing on data from 406 followers and 68 leaders across eight Swiss police corps, the study employs a multilevel design to examine gender differences and organizational context. Results show that women report significantly lower leadership aspirations and psychological safety than men, especially in large organizations. In small organizations, servant leadership positively predicts women's leadership aspirations in these contexts but does not significantly affect men's. Contrary to expectations, psychological safety does not mediate this relationship. Findings underscore the importance of supervisory support and inclusive leadership behaviors in fostering ambition among underrepresented groups. The study contributes to leadership and gender research by highlighting servant leadership as a promising, though context-dependent, approach to promoting equity in hierarchical, male-dominated organizations.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Leadership Aspiration, Psychological Safety, Male-Dominated Organizations, Multi-Level Analysis

Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions is a pressing issue across many European countries, sectors, and industries (Jourová, 2016). Despite growing societal awareness and the implementation of various equality initiatives, progress remains limited, particularly at the highest levels of corporate governance. Recent data underscore the severity of this issue; for example, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) reports a persistent gender gap in top decision-making positions between men and women, with only marginal improvements observed in recent years (EIGE, 2025). A key determinant of career advancement is leadership aspiration (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020). It reflects an individual's intrinsic motivation and long-term ambition to attain leadership roles, often serving as a precursor to taking on leadership-related responsibilities and development opportunities (Lord & Hall, 2005; Maurer & London, 2018). Women encounter a range of personal, interpersonal, and structural barriers that constrain their leadership aspirations (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Khattab et al., 2020; Ni & Huo, 2018; Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019). This challenge is particularly acute in male-dominated organizations, where persistent stereotypes and exclusionary dynamics further erode women's leadership aspirations. Understanding how these aspirations are shaped is therefore crucial to addressing women's continued underrepresentation in such contexts (O'Brien et al., 2023). Despite its significance, the literature on gender differences in leadership aspiration remains fragmented and, at times, contradictory (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020). This underscores the need for more nuanced, context-sensitive analyses of the barriers and support mechanisms that shape women's leadership trajectories.

While much of the existing literature emphasizes the structural and psychological barriers that hinder women's leadership aspirations, relatively little attention has been paid to the positive conditions that could help mitigate these challenges and promote leadership ambition (Dwivedi et al., 2022). One such critical condition is the workplace environment, which plays a vital role in shaping whether individuals, especially women, feel safe, supported, and motivated to pursue leadership roles (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018). Psychological safety has emerged as a key enabler of leadership aspiration (Davies et al., 2005; Dwivedi et al., 2022). Defined as the belief that one can express ideas, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999), psychological safety is essential for encouraging women to

overcome internalized stereotypes, engage in visible behaviors, and take on leadership challenges (Dwivedi et al., 2022). In male-dominated environments, where women often face stereotype threat and greater scrutiny (Morabito & Shelley, 2018; O'Brien et al., 2023), psychological safety becomes even more relevant. It fosters a sense of belonging and reduces fear of failure, conditions necessary for building confidence, self-efficacy, and career ambition (Dwivedi et al., 2022; Halliday et al., 2022). Without this sense of security, the barriers to leadership remain deeply entrenched, and women are less likely to assert themselves or pursue advancement opportunities. Creating such psychologically safe environments requires leadership that emphasizes support, trust, and personal development. Here, servant leadership offers a promising approach. As a people-centered leadership style, servant leadership prioritizes the well-being, growth, and empowerment of followers (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011). Through mentoring, active listening, and fostering trusting relationships, servant leaders cultivate high levels of psychological safety within teams (Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2016). Research has shown that this leadership style not only reduces leadership avoidance (Lacroix & Verdorfer, 2017) but also nurtures a climate where individuals feel valued, supported, and valorized (van Dierendonck, 2011). In male-dominated organizational contexts, servant leadership may thus serve as a key facilitator of women's leadership aspirations by enhancing psychological safety, dismantling gendered barriers, and promoting an inclusive work environment.

This study addresses a significant gap in leadership and gender research by exploring the role of servant leadership in shaping women's leadership aspirations, particularly within male-dominated organizational contexts. While much of the existing literature focuses on the structural and psychological barriers that hinder women's leadership trajectories, relatively little attention has been paid to positive leadership behaviors that may actively foster women's leadership aspirations. Adopting a multifaceted perspective, it examines leadership aspiration through the lens of followers and teams, as well as the direct and indirect, though psychological safety, influence leaders may exert in stimulating such aspirations. First, from the follower perspective, the research investigates whether gender differences exist in the desire to pursue leadership roles. It identifies factors that support leadership aspirations among both men and women. Second, from a team perspective, it examines the influence of servant leadership behavior on women's leadership aspirations, with a particular focus on the mediating

role of psychological safety. Special focus is given to how servant leadership behaviors may differentially impact male and female followers, shaping their leadership aspirations within male-dominated environments. By providing insights into gender differences and the mechanisms underlying leadership development, this study aims to investigate whether servant leadership can enhance leadership aspirations and mitigate some of the barriers women face in these settings.

Barriers to Women's Leadership Aspiration

The path to leadership roles for women is not blocked by a single, visible barrier. Still, it is instead shaped by a series of interconnected challenges, a labyrinth, as Eagly and Carli (2018) describe it. This metaphor captures the complex and cumulative nature of the obstacles women encounter as they advance toward leadership roles. These include gender stereotypes, biased evaluations, limited access to informal networks, and the unequal burden of family responsibilities. Such structural and cultural barriers not only hinder women's progression but also shape their perceptions of what is possible or desirable in their careers. In this sense, the labyrinth does not merely obstruct movement; it actively influences the development of leadership aspirations. Women's ambition to lead is therefore not solely a matter of individual motivation, but also a response to the relational and organizational context in which that motivation is either supported or constrained. Understanding how leadership aspirations are formed and how they are shaped by the interplay of personal, relational, and systemic factors is essential for addressing the persistent gender gap in leadership. Within this complex landscape, leadership aspiration emerges as a multifaceted construct. On a personal level, attributes such as self-efficacy and confidence play a crucial role in shaping whether individuals perceive themselves as capable of assuming leadership positions (Bracht et al., 2021; Lartey et al., 2023). However, these internal resources are not developed in isolation. Interpersonal dynamics, especially relationships with supervisors and peers, and the prevailing leadership style in an organization can either strengthen or erode confidence and aspiration (Morabito & Shelley, 2018; Ni & Huo, 2018). At the organizational level, structures and cultures, including promotion systems, norms around work-life balance, and access to informal networks, significantly affect the extent to which leadership is seen as attainable (Netchaeva et al., 2022). These individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors do not operate in isolation, but are deeply shaped by wider societal norms and gendered expectations about

leadership. Stereotypical associations between leadership and masculinity continue to influence how leadership potential is perceived and developed, especially for women. One influential concept that helps explain this phenomenon is the “think manager, think male” paradigm, which posits that managerial roles are typically associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein, 1973). For instance, in the German-speaking context, Gmür (2004) found that women in leadership positions frequently encounter stereotypical assumptions that undermine both external perceptions of their competence and their internal self-perception. Women are often stereotyped as communal and collaborative, traits that may be valued in teams but are seen as misaligned with traditional leadership prototypes. The role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) extends this understanding by highlighting a double bind: women who adopt agentic, masculine behaviors may face social backlash for violating gender norms, while those who conform to communal, feminine expectations are seen as less competent leaders. This paradox leads to diminished self-efficacy. Similarly, Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018) show that societal expectations contribute to women’s lower self-confidence in leadership contexts. Building on these arguments, we contend that the persistent association of leadership with masculine traits, as explained by the “think manager, think male” paradigm and role congruity theory, contributes to a pronounced confidence and self-efficacy gap for women. These frameworks help explain why women in male-dominated environments often perceive leadership as less attainable or desirable. The resulting internalization of doubt, combined with external biases, undermines the development of leadership aspirations. In such contexts, structural and cultural pressures reinforce these perceptions, discouraging women from pursuing leadership roles and perpetuating gender disparities in ambition. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Compared to men, women show lower leadership aspirations

The Role of Social Support

Given the well-established barriers women face in pursuing leadership roles, the focus must now shift to identifying the types of social support that enable women to aspire to and succeed in leadership. Relational support, particularly the availability and quality of direct supervisor support, plays a crucial role in shaping women’s leadership

aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020; Silva et al., 2012). Leadership support structures are not uniformly experienced across genders; women often face differential access and perceive the availability and effectiveness of support in distinct ways due to organizational and social dynamics. For example, O'Brien et al. (2023) highlight that men often benefit from informal mentorship networks that actively support their advancement into leadership roles, particularly in male-dominated industries. Women, by contrast, are frequently excluded from such networks, resulting in reduced access to equivalent leadership development opportunities. Consequently, women may come to rely more heavily on formal or alternative sources of support, including direct supervisors, colleagues, and family members. The availability and perception of these support structures can significantly influence their leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020; Morabito & Shelley, 2018; Silva et al., 2012). These actors play a pivotal role in encouraging women's leadership aspirations by validating their potential, offering practical guidance, and helping navigate institutional and interpersonal barriers. One significant challenge that further exacerbates gender disparities in leadership aspiration is the work–family balance dilemma. As noted by Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018), balancing career advancement with caregiving responsibilities remains a substantial obstacle for many women. In organizations that fail to offer flexible work arrangements or family-supportive policies, women are often forced to choose between advancing their careers and fulfilling their family obligations. This tension can undermine self-efficacy and discourage women from pursuing leadership roles. In this context, human resources (HR) departments play a pivotal role in mitigating these challenges. By implementing flexible work policies, promoting work–life balance, and fostering a culture of inclusivity, HR can help create organizational conditions that enable women to aspire to and succeed in leadership positions. These compounded structural and relational barriers, ranging from exclusion from informal networks to limited organizational flexibility, can significantly constrain women's leadership trajectories. Women in male-dominated environments face unique structural and psychological barriers, such as limited access to informal networks, greater work–family conflict, and stereotype-based doubts, that can undermine their leadership aspirations. In such contexts, social support from supervisors, colleagues, HR professionals, and family members plays a critical role in offsetting these challenges. While support benefits all aspiring leaders, women are more reliant on it due to the disproportionate obstacles they face.

H2: Compared to men, women require higher levels of social support to aspire to leadership positions.

Servant Leadership and Inclusive Organizational Cultures

Addressing gender disparities in leadership aspiration requires more than removing barriers, it calls for building environments that actively support inclusion and belonging. Inclusivity theory, emphasizing belongingness and the recognition of individuality, serves as a foundational framework for promoting equitable and supportive organizational environments (Shore et al., 2009; Shore et al., 2011). Psychological safety, defined as the belief that individuals can express themselves without fear of negative repercussions (Edmondson, 1999), plays a particularly important role in these settings. For women who often face stereotype-based risks, psychological safety, particularly identity safety, reduces threat-related avoidance and enables greater willingness to express ideas and challenge norms. In an experimental setting, women exposed to gender-stereotypic cues reported lower leadership aspirations, but when the task environment was made identity-safe, these negative effects disappeared (Davies et al., 2005). A sense of security enables women to overcome fears of judgment or backlash, fostering confidence and ambition in leadership roles. In this context, servant leadership emerges as a relevant leadership style for addressing these challenges. By prioritizing the needs of followers, servant leaders foster a supportive environment grounded in fairness, mutual trust, and psychological safety (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). This approach emphasizes personal growth, empowering individuals to reach their potential and take ownership of their career aspirations (Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2018). Distinct from transformational leadership, which focuses on broad organizational change (Stone et al., 2003), servant leadership centers on the development of individuals, creating an inclusive environment that dismantles gender-related barriers (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). It aligns closely with traits traditionally associated with feminine leadership, such as empathy and collaboration, making it particularly impactful for minorities in organizational settings (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). By addressing the psychological needs of their followers, servant leaders cultivate high-quality relationships within teams, encouraging women to express their ideas, share concerns, and challenge norms without fear of negative consequences (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Moreover, servant leadership significantly reduces leadership avoidance across genders (Lacroix & Verdorfer, 2017). Servant leadership, with its active and follower-

centered approach, fosters positive outcomes for marginalized groups through core practices such as empowerment, direction, and stewardship (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Empowerment supports women in overcoming structural barriers by boosting self-efficacy and enabling leadership aspirations. Providing direction helps manage tasks and identity-related tensions, fostering a sense of inclusion and shared purpose. Stewardship, through socially responsible behavior, promotes equality and creates supportive environments for leadership development. Additionally, servant leaders act as mentors, strengthening informal networks and interpersonal support systems (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). These behaviors provide women with the relational and social support needed to navigate challenges, build confidence, and pursue leadership opportunities. Based on the arguments presented, we propose the following hypotheses to explore the relationship between servant leadership, psychological safety, and leadership aspirations in male-dominated environments:

H3: Psychological safety positively influences leadership aspirations, with a stronger effect on women.

H4: Servant leadership positively influences leadership aspirations in both men and women, with a stronger effect on women.

H5: The relationship between servant leadership and leadership aspirations is mediated by psychological safety, with a more pronounced mediating effect for women.

Method

The Swiss Police Context

Switzerland's policing framework is characterized by a highly decentralized structure, comprising 26 cantonal police corps and a single federal police corp. Each corps is hierarchically organized under the leadership of a commander, with considerable variation in size and organizational complexity reflecting cantonal population density and resource allocation. Swiss police organizations employ both civilian personnel and uniformed officers, with only the latter authorized to exercise police force. This structural distinction is particularly important in analyses of gender distribution. While women account for approximately 25% of the total police workforce, their representation among uniformed officers, those classified under Pol I to Pol IV, drops to around

17%ⁱ. Moreover, despite increased recruitment efforts and gradual progress in overall female representation, a persistent gender imbalance remains most evident in leadership positions, where women continue to be significantly underrepresented (KKPKS, 2023, 2025). Addressing this disparity has become a strategic focus for public institutions, in line with broader national efforts to achieve gender parity (BFS, 2024). This study focuses exclusively on uniformed officers classified from Pol I to Pol IV, who are authorized to use police force. These internal ranks denote increasing levels of professional experience, specialization, and leadership responsibility: Pol I typically refers to entry-level patrol officers, while Pol IV includes senior command and strategic leadership roles. The Pol I–IV structure defines the formal career trajectory within Swiss police organizations (KKPKS, 2025). In 2023, the largest cantonal police corps employed 2'122,6 full-time equivalents (FTEs) of uniformed officers (Pol I–IV), while the smallest comprised only 31 FTEs of uniformed officers (Pol I–IV). The median corps size across cantons was 417 FTEs, reflecting the wide variation in personnel allocation. This disparity corresponds to substantial differences in internal hierarchy and leadership structures across the cantonal police corps. This wide variation in corps size corresponds to substantial differences in internal hierarchy and leadership structure across cantons. Police training in Switzerland is nationally standardized and spans two years. The first year consists of theoretical instruction at one of six regional police academies, culminating in a national preliminary examination. The second year is practice-oriented, taking place within police units under the supervision of experienced mentors, and concludes with a final professional examination. This dual-track system ensures consistency in professional standards across cantons and fosters the development of technical, cognitive, and interpersonal competencies essential to modern policing (SPI, 2025).

Sample

This study utilizes a multi-level dataset comprising 406 followers and 68 leaders from eight Swiss police corps, with analyses conducted at both individual and team levels. To account for structural variation, participating organizations were categorized as either small or large corps based on the median number of full-time equivalent (FTE) uniformed officers (Pol I–IV), which was 417 FTEs. Corps below this threshold were classified as small, while those above were classified as large (see Table 11). This clustering was used as a control variable across all analyses to account for

organizational differences, such as hierarchical complexity, access to leadership positions, and internal support structures, that may influence both individual attitudes and team-level relationships. This approach ensured that observed patterns could be interpreted in consideration of the organizational context.

Table 11: Classification of the Police Corps in Switzerland by Size

Organizational Size Categories	Small (N=4)		Large (N=4)	
FTE Range per Cluster ¹	30 – 450 FTE		450- 2'200 FTE	
FTE-Weighted Mean Percentage of Women by Organizational Cluster ¹	15%		16%	
Role	Follower	Leader	Follower	Leader
N	74	34	332	34
Proportion of Female Study Participants per Cluster	46%	12%	30%	24%
Percentage of Participants Younger Than 42	65%	12%	62%	29%
Percentage of Participants with a University Degree	37%	15%	17%	12%

¹ FTE = Full-Time Equivalent. The data were provided by KKPKS.

To enable meaningful gender-based comparisons, the sampling strategy was deliberately designed to ensure balanced representation of male and female respondents. Only teams that included at least one female officer were eligible for inclusion. For each identified woman, a male colleague from the same team was selected, aiming to achieve a consistent 1:1 gender ratio within the sampled teams. While this targeted approach introduces a degree of selectivity, it aligns with the study's objective of exploring gender-specific dynamics in leadership aspirations within male-dominated environments. As a result of this approach, the number of respondents varied between organizational clusters. Although the actual share of women in operational roles (Pol I-IV) remains low, 15% in small organizations, 16% in large organizations, and approximately 17% nationallyⁱ, small corps tend to have fewer teams with female officers, thereby reducing the pool of eligible participants. Nevertheless, women constituted 46% of the follower sample in small organizations and 30% in large organizations, reflecting a purposeful oversampling strategy. This was necessary to ensure sufficient statistical power for gender-based analysis. Notably, the sample also includes a higher proportion of female leaders than the national average, where only 2% of uniformed leadership positions are held by women (KKPKS, 2023). This may be attributed to targeted institutional efforts to increase the visibility of women in leadership

roles as ambassadors and mentors for other aspiring women. Recent initiatives in Swiss police forces have promoted the creation of women-led networks, peer mentoring programs, and career development events designed to connect senior female officers with younger, high-potential women (KKPKS, 2023). These efforts may also explain the observed tendency in this study for female team members to be more frequently led by female supervisors, reinforcing the importance of representation in shaping leadership aspirations.

Procedure

Data collection took place between spring 2023 and summer 2024. Coordination was facilitated by the General Secretariat of the Cantonal Police Commanders' Conference (KKPKS), which established contact with each participating police corps and appointed a local HR liaison officer. These representatives oversaw local implementation, distributed the questionnaires, and ensured adherence to standardized study protocols. Two separate online questionnaires were administered: one for leaders, who rated their servant leadership behaviors, and one for followers, who reported on their experiences of leadership aspirations, psychological safety, and social support requirements. Each leader received a unique code, which their followers used to link their responses to the corresponding team while maintaining anonymity. Instructions and materials were disseminated digitally, including via platforms such as Microsoft Teams, ensuring consistency across corps with varying infrastructure. To minimize common method bias, both procedural and statistical controls were applied. Following (Podsakoff et al., 2024) the use of separate surveys for leaders and followers reduced source overlap. Furthermore, Harman's single-factor test indicated no serious common method variance, with the first unrotated factor accounting for only 40% of the total variance, well below the accepted 50% threshold. Before analysis, the dataset was carefully cleaned. Only participants linked to a valid police corps were retained. In addition, followers who rated their leadership aspiration as "1" (strongly disagree) across all items were excluded, as this score was interpreted as a complete lack of leadership interest. Focusing on respondents with at least some leadership aspiration enhanced the study's relevance and validity.

This study employs a multilevel design, with analyses conducted at both the individual and team levels while controlling for organizational context. At the individual level, the focus was on gender differences in leadership aspirations, psychological

safety, and perceived social support. All analyses controlled for organizational size by comparing small and large corps. To examine relational patterns, Spearman correlations were calculated separately for each cluster, and Fisher's z-transformation (Fisher, 1921) was applied to test for statistically significant differences in correlation strength across organizational sizes. Multiple regression analyses were employed to evaluate the predictive value of psychological safety and social support on leadership aspiration. At the team level, analyses focused on the relationship between leaders' self-rated servant leadership and aggregated team outcomes, specifically team members' psychological safety and leadership aspirations. Teams were disaggregated by gender (female vs. male team members) to explore possible differences in how leadership behaviors affect team outcomes. Organizational size was again included as a control variable in all models. Due to limited information on team composition (e.g., exact number of participants per team), gender-specific weighting at the team level was not applied. Instead, consistent use of organizational size as a control mitigated potential structural biases.

Measures

This section details the methodologies employed to measure the various constructs in the study. The survey was provided in three languages (German, French, and Italian), allowing respondents to complete it in their native language. The original English questionnaire underwent a rigorous forward and backward translation process to ensure linguistic accuracy and consistency. Additionally, a panel of bilingual experts, fluent in all three languages, reviewed the translated versions to verify the consistency and cultural appropriateness of the items, ensuring that the constructs were measured reliably across different linguistic contexts. All individual-level variables were based on followers' self-reports. For team-level analyses, these were aggregated per team, separately for male and female team members, to capture gender-specific dynamics in leadership aspiration and psychological safety. Servant leadership was measured at the leader level.

Leadership aspiration

Leadership aspiration was assessed using four items adapted from (Gray & O'Brien, 2007), measuring individuals' career ambition and their intention to pursue leadership roles. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 =

strongly agree). A sample item is: *"I hope to one day take on a leadership role within the police corps."* Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .93. At the team level, leadership aspiration scores were aggregated separately for male and female team members.

Psychological safety

Psychological safety was measured using four items adapted from Edmondson (1999), which assessed the extent to which team members felt safe taking interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences. A sample item is: *"Members of this team feel safe to take risks without fear of negative consequences."* Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .81. At the team level, psychological safety scores were aggregated separately for male and female team members.

Social Support

Social Support was measured using four self-developed items, each reflecting a distinct source of support perceived as necessary for leadership advancement. Participants rated the importance of (1) support from their direct supervisor, (2) acceptance by colleagues, (3) assistance from the HR department (e.g., favorable conditions), and (4) support from their private environment. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Given the low internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .60$), the construct was treated as formative: each item represents a qualitatively distinct type of social support rather than reflecting a single latent dimension. This approach is theoretically grounded in literature showing that women often face more complex barriers to leadership and require diverse support mechanisms, both structural and interpersonal, as well as familial, compared to men (Silva et al., 2012). Analyzing the four dimensions separately enables a more accurate assessment of how different forms of support influence leadership aspirations, particularly for women in male-dominated environments. This construct was analyzed exclusively at the individual level. Since the items capture highly personal perceptions of needed support for leadership advancement, they are inherently subjective and vary according to each respondent's experiences, context, and identity. Aggregating these ratings at the team level would obscure meaningful individual variation and potentially dilute the relevance of each support dimension.

Servant leadership

The frequency of servant leadership behaviors was assessed using the 9-item short version of the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) developed by (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). This instrument evaluates two key dimensions of servant leadership: empowerment and stewardship. Empowerment captures the leader's capacity to enhance team members' self-confidence, fostering their autonomy and influence. Stewardship reflects the leader's commitment to organizational responsibility, prioritizing service control over self-interest, and acting as a caregiver and role model for the team. Leaders themselves evaluated their servant leadership behaviors, rating the frequency of these behaviors on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (always). To enhance the instrument's contextual relevance, all items were explicitly adapted to the police's context. For example, a sample item for empowerment is, *"I help my team members to develop themselves,"* while a sample item for stewardship is, *"I emphasize how important it is to pay attention to the entire team."* Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .80.

Control variables

To account for potential confounding effects, several control variables were included at both the individual and team levels. At the individual level, follower age (measured in age categories), gender (coded as 0 for male and 1 for female), and academic degree (coded as 0 for no and 1 for yes) were included. At the team level, the respective characteristics of the team leader were used as control variables. Specifically, leader age (measured in age categories), gender (coded as 0 for male and 1 for female), and academic degree (coded as 0 for no and 1 for yes) were included in the analysis. In addition, organization size (coded as 0 = small and 1 = large) was included as a control variable.

Results

The following sections report the results of two levels of analysis: the individual level, which examines gender differences in leadership aspiration, psychological safety, and social support across organizational contexts (small and large organizations); and the team level, which assesses the relationship between leaders' self-rated

servant leadership and aggregated team-level outcomes across the same organizational contexts.

Individual-Level Analysis

The first set of analyses presents descriptive and comparative results for the core variables of interest: followers' leadership aspiration, psychological safety, and four dimensions of perceived social support, namely, support from the direct supervisor, HR, colleagues, and the private (see Table 12).

Table 12: Descriptive and Comparative Statistics for Leadership Aspiration, Psychological Safety, and Perceived Social Support

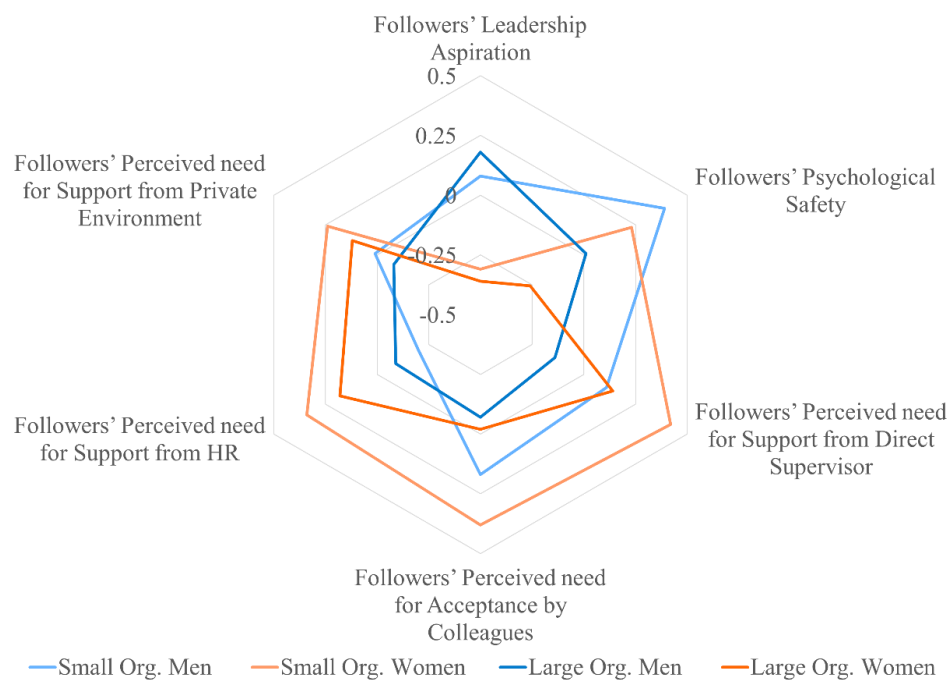
Variable, N=406	Small		Large	
	M ± SD	Mean difference with men	M ± SD	Mean difference with men
Followers' Leadership Aspiration	3.30 ± 1.08	– .43 [†]	3.43 ± 1.08	– .60 ^{**}
Followers' Psychological Safety	4.22 ± .66	– .13	3.90 ± .83	– .22 [*]
Followers' Perceived need for Support from the Direct Supervisor	4.24 ± .79	+ .31 [†]	3.94 ± 1.01	+ .28 [*]
Followers' Perceived need for Acceptance by Colleagues	4.24 ± .80	+ .20	3.92 ± 1.01	+ .04
Followers' Perceived need for Support from HR	3.88 ± .96	+ .55 [*]	3.82 ± 1.01	+ .28 [*]
Followers' Perceived need for Support from the Private Environment	4.14 ± .92	+ .24	3.98 ± 1.01	+ .21 [†]

Note: Significance levels: [†] $p < .1$ ^{*} $p < .05$ ^{**} $p < .01$

These constructs were examined for gender differences across two organizational contexts: small and large organizations. Two hypotheses guided the analysis: H1, which proposed that women would report lower leadership aspirations compared to men, and H2, which posited that women would report higher social support requirements in aspiring to leadership positions. An analysis of gender differences across six follower-related variables revealed context-dependent patterns. In small organizations, male followers reported slightly higher leadership aspiration than female followers, with the difference approaching significance. This gender difference was more pronounced in large organizations, where male followers reported a significantly higher level of leadership aspiration than female followers. For followers' psychological safety, no gender differences were observed in small organizations. In large organizations, however, male followers reported significantly higher psychological safety compared to female followers. In both organizational contexts, female followers consistently reported a higher perceived need for support from their direct supervisor. This

difference was marginal in small organizations but statistically significant in large organizations. No gender differences emerged in the followers' perceived need for acceptance by colleagues, regardless of organizational size. Regarding support through favorable HR conditions, female followers reported significantly higher perceived needs than male followers in both small and large organizations. Finally, for followers' perceived need for support from the private environment, no gender differences were found in small organizations. In large organizations, however, female followers showed a tendency toward a higher perceived need, with the difference approaching significance. A visual summary of these gender differences across follower-related variables in small and large organizations is presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Gender Differences in Follower-Related Variables Across Organizational Size



A Spearman correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between followers' leadership aspiration, gender, age, psychological safety, and various dimensions of perceived social support (see Table 13). The analysis identified several significant associations. Followers' age showed a negative correlation with both followers' leadership aspiration and psychological safety, indicating that younger followers tend to report lower leadership aspirations and feel less psychologically safe in their work environments compared to older followers. Followers' gender was negatively correlated with followers' leadership aspiration and psychological safety, indicating that male followers reported higher leadership aspirations and greater psychological

safety than female followers. Followers' gender was also positively correlated with several dimensions of social support, including the perceived need for support from the direct supervisor, support from HR, and support from the private environment. This suggests that female followers express a stronger perceived need for external support in their leadership trajectory. A significant positive correlation was found between followers' psychological safety and leadership aspiration, suggesting that higher psychological safety is associated with stronger motivation to pursue leadership roles. Among the dimensions of social support, the perceived need for support from the direct supervisor, the perceived need for acceptance by colleagues, and the perceived need for support from HR were positively correlated with leadership aspiration, indicating that immediate interpersonal and structural support within the organization is particularly relevant to aspiring leaders. In addition, organization size was negatively correlated with followers' psychological safety, the perceived need for support from the direct supervisor, and the perceived need for acceptance by colleagues, indicating that followers in larger police corps reported lower levels on these variables than those in smaller corps. Finally, the four dimensions of social support, support from the direct supervisor, acceptance by colleagues, support from HR, and support from the private environment, were moderately intercorrelated, with all correlations being positive and statistically significant. This pattern supports the conceptualization of these elements as part of a broader social support construct.

Table 13: Spearman Correlations at the Individual-Level

Variable, N=406	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Followers' Age									
2. Followers' Gender	-.05								
3. Followers' Academic Degree	.04	-.25**							
4. Organization Size	.00	-.13**	.18**						
5. Followers' Leadership Aspiration	-.13**	-.25**	.08	.04					
6. Followers' Psychological Safety	-.13**	-.11*	.00	-.14**	.18**				
7. Followers' Perceived need for Support from the Direct Supervisor	.01	.15**	.05	-.11*	.16**	.11*			
8. Followers' Perceived need for Acceptance by Colleagues	-.08	.04	.00	-.12*	.17**	.21**	.32**		
9. Followers' Perceived need for Support from HR	.04	.14**	.07	-.01	.18**	.05	.41**	.25**	
10. Followers' Perceived need for Support from the Private Environment	-.08†	.09†	.08	-.04	.06	.10*	.27**	.31**	.25**

*Note: Significance levels: †p < .1 *p < .05 **p < .01*

A multiple regression analysis was conducted separately for male and female followers to examine the predictors of leadership aspiration. Psychological safety and social support variables were entered at the item level, while organization size was included as a control variable in both models (see Table 14). The analysis also tested Hypothesis 3 (H3), which pro-posed that psychological safety has a significant positive influence on leadership aspiration, with a stronger effect for women. For male followers, the overall model was statistically significant and explained 13% of the variance in leadership aspiration. Younger age was associated with higher leadership aspiration, while psychological safety, the perceived need for acceptance by colleagues, and the perceived need for support from HR were significant positive predictors. These findings suggest that both an encouraging work environment and perceived organizational support are associated with stronger leadership aspirations among male followers. For female followers, the overall model was marginally significant. Among the predictors, only the perceived need for support from the direct supervisor was positively and significantly associated with leadership aspiration. This finding suggests that direct supervisory support may play a particularly important role in fostering leadership aspirations among female followers, whereas the other factors included in the model did not show significant associations.

Table 14: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Followers' Leadership Aspiration at the Individual Level

Predictors		<i>Men (N=274)</i>	<i>Women (N=132)</i>
Followers' Age		-.14*	-.03
Followers' Academic Degree		.01	-.04
Organization Size		.06	.04
Followers' Psychological Safety		.12*	.11
Followers' Perceived Need for Support from the Direct Supervisor	Followers' Leadership Aspiration	.09	.26*
Followers' Perceived need for Acceptance by Colleagues		.15*	.07
Followers' Perceived need for Support from HR		.24**	-.05
Followers' Perceived need for Support from the Private Environment		-.03	.02
<i>F-Value</i>		6.25**	1.70†
<i>Adjusted R²</i>		13%	4%

*Note: Significance levels: †p < .1 *p < .05 **p < .01*

Team-Level Analysis

Table 15 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables at their respective levels of analysis. No significant correlation was found between organization size and

leaders' self-rated servant leadership. These findings suggest that organizational size does not meaningfully influence leaders' self-perceptions of their leadership behaviors. The Spearman correlation analysis revealed several meaningful relationships among the variables. Leaders' self-rated servant leadership was positively correlated with both psychological safety and leadership aspiration among female team members, suggesting that leaders who exhibit stronger servant leadership behaviors tend to foster more supportive team environments and higher leadership motivation among women. In addition, psychological safety among female team members showed a significant positive correlation with both their leadership aspirations and with the psychological safety reported by male team members, indicating a degree of shared team-level climate perception. Leadership aspiration among female team members was negatively correlated with that of male team members, suggesting the possibility of perceived competition or exclusivity in leadership opportunities within mixed-gender teams. Psychological safety among male team members also positively correlated with their leadership aspirations, reinforcing the role of psychological safety as a relevant predictor of ambition across gender. Team-level psychological safety demonstrated a negative correlation with female team members' perceptions of psychological safety, indicating a potential divergence in experiences within the same teams. Furthermore, leaders' age was positively correlated with leadership aspiration among female team members and negatively correlated with gender, indicating that younger leaders were more likely to be women. This pattern may reflect generational shifts in leadership development and gender diversity.

Table 15: Spearman Correlations at the Team-Level

Team variables, K=68	M ± SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Leaders' Age	-								
2. Leaders' Gender	-	-.20							
3. Leader's Academic Degree	-	-.01	-.16						
4. Organization Size	-	-.26*	.14	.05					
5. Leader's Self-Rated Servant Leadership	5.13 ± .53	.17	-.07	.13	.06				
6. Psychological Safety (Female Team Members)	4.09 ± .43	.27†	.07	.16	-.03	.35**			
7. Leadership Aspiration (Female Team Members)	2.92 ± .89	.39**	-.04	.15	-.24	.33*	.27†		
8. Psychological Safety (Male Team Members)	4.24 ± .51	-.04	-.06	-.04	-.15	.21	.35**	-.01	
9. Leadership Aspiration (Male Team Members)	3.48 ± .80	-.03	-.07	-.08	-.07	.01	.06	-.31†	.44**

Note: Significance levels: †p < .1 *p < .05 **p < .01

To further explore these relationships, regression analyses were conducted separately for male and female teams, with organization size included as a control variable (see Table 16). Across most models, no statistically significant predictors emerged. However, leaders' self-rated servant leadership was a marginally significant positive predictor of leadership aspiration among female team members. This result provides partial support for Hypothesis 4, which proposed that servant leadership would more strongly influence women's leadership aspirations. No significant effects were found in the remaining models, suggesting that servant leadership may be more relevant for fostering leadership aspirations among female team members than among male team members.

Table 16: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Followers' Leadership Aspiration at the Team-Level

Predictors		<i>Men (K=44)</i>	<i>Women (K=43)</i>
Leaders' Age		-.19	.29
Leaders' Gender		-.14	.04
Leader's Academic Degree	Teams' Leadership Aspiration	-.04	.13
Organization Size		-.12	-.16
Leader's Self-Rated Servant Leadership		.12	.27 [†]
<i>F-Value</i>		.51	3.03 [*]
<i>Adjusted R²</i>		0%	19%

Note: Significance levels: * $p < .1$ † $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

To test Hypothesis 5, which proposed that psychological safety mediates the relationship between leaders' self-rated servant leadership and team members' leadership aspirations, particularly among women, separate analyses were conducted for male team members and female team members across both small and large organizations. However, the results did not support the hypothesized indirect effect in either context. Among female team members, psychological safety did not significantly explain the link between leaders' self-reported servant leadership and leadership aspiration. This suggests that other factors, such as direct relational support, role modeling, or inclusive team dynamics, may be more influential in fostering leadership aspiration among women. Similarly, for male team members, the analysis hinted at a somewhat stronger connection, but the pattern was not statistically robust. Overall, the findings suggest that psychological safety, although important, may not be a key mechanism in the

relationship between servant leadership and leadership aspirations, regardless of organizational size.

Discussion

The analysis revealed that women's leadership aspirations were significantly lower than those of men in both small and large organizations, aligning with prior research that highlights persistent gender gaps in ambition within male-dominated environments (Netchaeva et al., 2022), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. However, other patterns varied by organizational size. In small organizations, the gap in psychological safety between women and men was negligible, suggesting that closer interpersonal relationships, greater familiarity among colleagues, and flatter hierarchies may mitigate the effects of gender stereotypes and exclusionary norms. From the perspective of inclusion theory (Shore et al., 2011), such environments are more likely to promote a balance between belongingness and the recognition of individual uniqueness, thereby reducing the salience of gender as a barrier and enabling women to feel equally safe in expressing leadership ambition. In these settings, women's perceived need for support from their direct supervisor emerged as the strongest predictor of leadership aspiration, alongside psychological safety. In contrast, in large organizations, women reported significantly lower psychological safety than men. The heightened visibility of gender imbalance may explain this disparity, the prevalence of masculine leadership prototypes, and greater exposure to stereotype threat (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In such contexts, hierarchical distance, more formalized processes, and a larger proportion of male colleagues may amplify both implicit and explicit biases, thereby increasing women's sense of risk in taking on leadership-related behaviors. These structural dynamics may also explain why, in large organizations, women expressed a stronger perceived need for direct supervisor and structural support compared to their male counterparts, providing support for Hypothesis 2. From a social support perspective, the findings indicate that women require more support than men in both small and large organizations, reflecting the greater systemic and structural barriers they face in pursuing leadership roles, including societal expectations, workplace biases, and stereotypes that undermine confidence and self-efficacy (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2018). Across contexts, women reported stronger dependence on external sources of encouragement, such as direct supervisor support, HR involvement, and

access to social networks. This pattern aligns with prior research showing that relational support, particularly the quality and availability of supervisor engagement, is a critical determinant of women's leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020; Silva et al., 2012). However, leadership support structures are not experienced uniformly across genders. In male-dominated organizations, men often benefit from informal mentorship networks that facilitate leadership advancement, whereas women are frequently excluded from such networks (O'Brien et al., 2023). As a result, women tend to rely more heavily on formal and alternative sources of support, including supervisors, colleagues, HR professionals, and family members, to validate their potential, provide career guidance, and navigate institutional barriers (Morabito & Shelley, 2018; Silva et al., 2012). Furthermore, the persistent work–family balance dilemma disproportionately affects women's career trajectories, as caregiving responsibilities and inflexible organizational policies can diminish self-efficacy and deter leadership ambitions (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018). In this regard, both direct supervisors and HR functions play a pivotal role in mitigating these challenges by fostering inclusive organizational cultures, implementing flexible work arrangements, and developing targeted career advancement initiatives that address the specific needs of women in male-dominated environments such as the Swiss police.

The effectiveness of servant leadership in large organizations aligns with theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of personalized, follower-centered leadership in cultivating inclusive work climates (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; van Dierendonck, 2011). Compared to smaller organizations, where informal interactions and flatter hierarchies may naturally foster inclusion, large organizations often require more intentional leadership behaviors to ensure psychological safety and belonging. Servant leaders, by empowering followers, providing clear direction, and demonstrating stewardship, help build identity-safe environments where women feel supported, valued, and encouraged to aspire to leadership roles. These dynamics are particularly relevant through the lens of inclusion theory (Shore et al., 2011), which suggests that environments promoting both belongingness and uniqueness are crucial for underrepresented groups to thrive. In hierarchical organizations, where formal structures can overshadow informal support systems, servant leadership may serve as a compensatory function by providing direct, individualized support, thereby acting as a catalyst for fostering employee development and engagement. Practices such as mentoring, active

listening, and developmental feedback serve to mitigate the effects of gendered stereotypes and the lack of visibility that women often face in such contexts. However, the mediation analysis did not support the hypothesized indirect effect of psychological safety in the relationship between servant leadership and leadership aspirations. Among female team members, psychological safety did not significantly mediate the relationship between leaders' self-rated servant leadership and leadership aspiration. This finding suggests that, although servant leadership was positively associated with leadership aspiration at the correlational level and emerged as a marginally significant predictor in the regression analysis, psychological safety does not appear to be the underlying mechanism explaining this relationship. Instead, other factors, such as direct relational support, role modelling, or inclusive team dynamics, may better account for how servant leadership influences leadership aspirations. Similarly, no significant indirect effect was found among male team members, indicating that psychological safety did not mediate the relationship between servant leadership and leadership aspiration in either group. This points to a potentially gendered distinction in how leadership styles are perceived and internalized. While women may rely more on relational and identity-affirming cues to gauge their leadership potential, men's leadership aspirations appear to be more influenced by structural or cultural factors, such as organizational hierarchy, advancement norms, or competitive performance metrics. Overall, these findings suggest that servant leadership is particularly effective as a tool for enhancing women's leadership aspirations. However, its impact is neither automatic nor sufficient on its own. Its strength lies in fostering supportive and inclusive climates, but in complex, large-scale organizations, additional structural and cultural interventions, such as formal mentoring programs, inclusive HR policies, and active sponsorship, are likely necessary to sustain these effects and close persistent gender gaps in leadership ambition.

Practical Implications

This study offers important insights for organizations aiming to reduce gender disparities in leadership, particularly in male-dominated environments such as policing. The findings emphasize that effective strategies must be sensitive to organizational context, as the barriers and facilitators of women's leadership aspirations differ notably between small and large organizations. In small organizations, flatter hierarchies and closer interpersonal dynamics appear to foster psychological safety. Women

reported similar levels of psychological safety as their male colleagues, suggesting that familiarity and informal support may buffer against exclusionary norms. In this context, leadership aspiration among women was strongly associated with both psychological safety and encouragement from direct supervisors. The absence of formal HR structures, however, may limit access to institutionalized leadership development. Consequently, it is essential that inclusive leadership practices, such as mentoring, feedback, and open dialogue about career goals, are embedded into the supervisory role. These relational mechanisms ensure that leadership pathways are not only visible but also psychologically safe for underrepresented employees. In contrast, large organizations present a more hierarchical and formalized structure, which can obscure informal support systems. Women in these environments reported lower psychological safety and perceived need for supervisor and structural support. These patterns are likely reinforced by the dominance of masculine leadership norms, reduced access to mentorship, and heightened visibility of gender imbalance. In this context, servant leadership, characterized by a people-centered approach, can help mitigate structural distance by fostering identity-safe environments and making leadership more accessible to women. However, the findings suggest that psychological safety may not fully mediate this relationship. Rather, direct relational support, role modeling, and visibility may be more influential in shaping leadership aspirations in complex organizational settings.

Across both contexts, the findings underscore the need to move beyond gendered leadership assumptions. Stereotypes that equate leadership with assertiveness or dominance continue to undermine women's visibility and self-confidence, particularly in large hierarchical environments. Shifting toward competency-based leadership frameworks can help dismantle these biases by clearly defining the skills, values, and responsibilities associated with leadership roles. This is particularly important for individuals excluded from informal advancement pathways, including women and younger employees. Social support is a crucial enabler of leadership aspiration. Women expressed a consistently stronger need for encouragement from supervisors, HR, and personal networks than their male colleagues. Organizations should invest in mentoring, sponsorship, and leadership development initiatives that enhance visibility, guidance, and career support. These programs are essential not only for advancing women's careers but also for reducing the isolation that often characterizes male-

dominated work environments. Leadership development efforts should also promote diverse leadership styles, such as collaboration, empowerment, and stewardship, which are both effective and inclusive alternatives to traditional prototypes. Notably, the study revealed a negative correlation between men's and women's leadership aspirations within teams, potentially indicating perceived competition over limited opportunities. These dynamics highlight the importance of reframing leadership as a collective resource rather than a scarce reward. Strategies such as shared leadership roles, joint goal setting, and team-based performance measures can support this reframing and promote a more inclusive leadership culture. Ultimately, sustainable change requires more than individual leadership behavior; it demands strategic cultural alignment. Senior leaders play a pivotal role in modeling inclusive values and embedding them into recruitment, evaluation, promotion, and everyday practices. Only when diversity and inclusion are institutionalized, not merely aspirational, can organizations meaningfully reduce gender disparities in leadership.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The decentralized structure of the Swiss police corps created inconsistencies in data collection and team matching, which affected the uniformity of the sample and may limit the generalizability of the findings. While efforts were made to reduce common method bias, reliance on self-reported data, particularly leaders' self-assessments of their servant leadership behavior, raises the possibility of subjective bias. The gender-balanced sampling strategy, though necessary for comparative analysis, does not reflect the actual gender distribution in police organizations, and the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation. Moreover, the study focused on selected dimensions of servant leadership, primarily empowerment and stewardship, leaving out other potentially influential aspects such as humility or authenticity. Psychological safety, initially hypothesized as a key mediator, did not significantly explain the relationship between servant leadership and leadership aspiration, suggesting that additional mechanisms may be at play. Future research should therefore adopt longitudinal or mixed-method designs, incorporate multi-source data, and explore alternative mediators, such as mentorship or organizational identification. Expanding the analysis to include other male-dominated sectors would also help assess the broader applicability of these findings.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized ChatGPT to enhance the clarity of the text, improve readability, and refine certain theoretical explanations. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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ⁱ the data were provided by KKPKS

General Discussion

This dissertation examined how servant leadership promotes leadership development within male-dominated, multilingual public service organizations. Drawing on three empirical studies, it investigated how servant leadership style influences both followers' leadership aspiration and leadership role occupancy, particularly among gender and language minorities. A single overarching question guided the dissertation:

How does servant leadership foster leadership aspiration and actual leadership role occupancy among followers through psychological mechanisms—particularly among linguistic and gender minorities in multilingual, male-dominated public service organizations?

Each study examined a distinct dimension of this question, illuminating the psychological, relational, and contextual mechanisms by which servant leadership either enables or constrains the development of leaders. Study 1 focused on internal psychological mechanisms, including task efficacy, organizational commitment, and public service motivation. Study 2 investigated how team-level perceptions and language proximity shape leadership outcomes. Study 3 examined how servant leadership influences women's leadership aspirations within a highly gendered institutional environment. Taken together, these studies offer a multi-layered understanding of how servant leadership operates within complex organizational structures to activate leadership potential, particularly among underrepresented groups. This chapter reflects on the findings across all three studies and articulates the dissertation's key contributions. The discussion is structured around three domains of impact:

- Theoretical contributions, which refine and extend the current theoretical model of inclusion theory in relation to servant leadership.
- Methodological contributions, which highlight the study's advances in research design, measurement, and analytical strategies.
- Practical contributions, which offer actionable insights for fostering leadership pipelines in public service organizations.

Theoretical contributions

A central shift in contemporary leadership discussion concerns not merely *who* leads, but *how* leadership potential is activated and realized, especially among individuals facing structural, relational, or identity-based barriers. This dissertation contributes to this shift by advancing a mechanism-based model of inclusive leadership development, conceptualizing servant leadership not just as an ethical ideal, but as a behavioral and relational architecture that enables leadership aspiration and role occupancy through distinct psychological pathways. Anchored in inclusion theory (Shore et al., 2011), which defines inclusion as the simultaneous experience of belongingness and uniqueness, and enriched by the work of Gotsis and Grimani (2016), the model elucidates how servant leadership activates these dual dimensions via differentiated mechanisms: affective embeddedness, motivational congruence, perceived competence, relational inclusion climate, and communicative alignment. In doing so, this research bridges servant leadership and inclusion theory through a multi-level framework, illustrating how servant leadership fosters inclusive perceptions and activates leadership aspirations and leadership role occupancy among individuals historically marginalized or underrepresented within organizational contexts.

Study 1 supports the assumption that leadership role occupancy can be interpreted as a behavioral outcome of inclusion, particularly in public service organizations, where leadership often arises not from hierarchical ambition but from value-based, voluntary engagement. In this context, inclusion is realized when individuals internalize a sense of belongingness and uniqueness, which together shape their motivation and confidence to lead. The study identifies organizational commitment and task efficacy as key mediators linking servant leadership to leadership role occupancy, reflecting the affective and cognitive foundations of inclusion. Organizational commitment, grounded in social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), captures the extent to which individuals identify with and feel emotionally connected to their organization. Servant leadership fosters this commitment by cultivating a climate that reconciles fragmented identities of out-groups, recognizes the value of otherness, and stimulates actions oriented toward the common good, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging in a deeply relational and purpose-driven manner (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Simultaneously, task efficacy, grounded in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997) and job design principles (Hackman & Oldham, 1974, 1975), reflects individuals' belief in

their capability to perform meaningful work and contribute uniquely to collective goals. Servant leaders enhance this sense of uniqueness by providing role clarity, psychological empowerment, and opportunities for personal development (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), thereby strengthening self-efficacy and reinforcing individuals' perception of their distinct value, which, in turn, motivates them to assume leadership roles. In public service contexts, where intrinsic motivation is closely tied to value-based commitment and mission alignment, public service motivation reinforces task efficacy by linking personal meaning with collective purpose. Together with organizational commitment, this creates a powerful psychological foundation for leadership development pipelines. Through these pathways, servant leadership not only shapes how individuals feel within the organization but also how they perceive themselves as capable and rightful leaders, suggesting that inclusion, when fully realized, fosters the willingness and ability to assume leadership roles.

Study 2 builds on the inclusion model by introducing linguistic proximity as a relational moderator, offering a novel contribution to the understanding of inclusive leadership in multilingual public service organizations. The findings demonstrate that leadership role occupancy is shaped not only by psychological mechanisms of belongingness and uniqueness but also by relational conditions of communication. In multilingual environments, linguistic proximity functions as both a social cue of belongingness and a channel for expressing uniqueness, shaping how leader–follower relationships are constructed and experienced. Drawing on relational schema theory (Baldwin, 1992; Engle & Lord, 1997) and the social categorization model (van Knippenberg et al., 2004), the study shows that language facilitates or constrains the alignment of mental models between leaders and followers. When proximity is low and shared communicative norms are absent, inclusion becomes more difficult to achieve. In these conditions of linguistic incongruence, transformational leadership is most effective, compensating for schema misalignment through articulation of vision, structured communication, and signaling of values. However, when linguistic proximity is high, transformational leadership becomes less impactful, as shared understanding and trust are already embedded in the interaction. By contrast, servant leadership proves effective regardless of linguistic proximity. Its emphasis on empathy, listening, and individual support enables it to foster inclusion both when shared language exists and when it does not. Servant leadership adapts to the communicative needs of diverse followers,

creating relational spaces where individuals feel recognized, empowered, and safe to lead. This flexibility allows servant leadership to more consistently moderate the challenges of diversity, transforming linguistic variation from a barrier into a resource for deeper connection. In public service contexts, where leadership often arises from shared purpose and voluntary engagement, such relational adaptability is especially important. Language thus emerges as a mechanism through which inclusion is enacted, schemas are aligned or misaligned, and leadership potential is either enabled or inhibited. Leadership role occupancy, then, becomes a powerful indicator of whether the leadership climate is truly inclusive, not only structurally or ideologically, but relationally and communicatively.

Study 3 further extends the inclusion model by examining how servant leadership influences women's leadership aspirations in male-dominated public service organizations, revealing important gendered dynamics in the enactment and experience of inclusion. While psychological safety, often considered a central mechanism of inclusion, was correlated with both servant leadership and aspiration, it did not consistently mediate the relationship for women, particularly in large organizations. Instead, the findings highlight the critical role of identity affirmation in shaping women's leadership motivation. This suggests that belongingness alone is insufficient for fostering aspiration; for inclusion to result in leadership ambition, uniqueness must be actively and structurally affirmed, especially in environments where dominant leadership prototypes are incongruent with non-masculine identities. Drawing on role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and the "*think manager, think male*" paradigm (Koenig et al., 2011), the study illustrates how entrenched stereotypes can diminish women's self-efficacy and sense of legitimacy as potential leaders. In such contexts, servant leadership emerges as a counter-stereotypical, empowering approach that affirms individual strengths, fosters personal legitimacy, and dismantles symbolic barriers. Unlike leadership styles that rely on top-down vision or performance-based evaluation, servant leadership cultivates inclusive micro-climates by offering individualized support, mentoring, and empowerment. These behaviors help women see themselves not only as accepted members of the organization but as capable and valued leaders. Notably, the findings suggest that the experience of uniqueness, being recognized, affirmed, and supported in one's distinct identity, may be a more significant predictor of leadership aspiration than psychological safety alone, particularly for women in male-dominated

environments. This reframes inclusion not as a generalized sense of safety but as a more identity-sensitive process in which individuals feel authorized, empowered, and recognized to lead. These insights are particularly salient in public service organizations, where leadership is often motivated by value-based commitment and collective purpose. However, hierarchical structures and masculine norms can still create invisible barriers to inclusion. In such settings, the tension between institutional ideals of equality and persistent structural inequities makes affirmed uniqueness not only a matter of personal recognition but a prerequisite for transforming ambition into action. In this light, leadership aspiration functions as a motivational expression of inclusion. Yet, one that is contingent on both felt belongingness and structurally affirmed uniqueness, a condition especially critical for those whose identities deviate from traditional leadership norms, particularly within value-driven yet hierarchically masculine public service organizations.

Taken together, this body of work challenges the assumption of style-neutral leadership effectiveness and underscores the contextual and identity-sensitive nature of inclusion. It contributes to leadership theory by empirically demonstrating that inclusion is not merely a normative ideal or organizational climate, but a structured and multifaceted process, psychological, relational, communicative, and structural, that actively shapes individuals' capacity and willingness to lead. This process unfolds through servant leadership's capacity to empower, recognize, and support individuals, thereby transforming diversity from a demographic fact into a developmental opportunity. In doing so, this dissertation situates leadership development within the broader pursuit of organizational equity and fairness, suggesting that servant leadership, when enacted intentionally, functions not only as a model of ethical leadership but also as a developmental force that bridges the gap between latent potential and active engagement. In the unique context of public service organizations, where leadership legitimacy is often grounded in purpose, service, and collective good, this inclusive model offers a sustainable and democratic approach to cultivating leadership capacity. It affirms that inclusion is not a discretionary virtue, but a structural and psychological necessity, one that determines whether individuals can see themselves, and be seen by others, as rightful leaders. By showing that leadership aspiration and role occupancy are behavioral expressions of inclusion, this research provides a compelling

framework for scholars and practitioners alike who seek to build equitable, empowering, and participatory organizations in an increasingly diverse and complex world.

Methodological Contributions

A central contribution of this dissertation is to operationalize leadership role occupancy as a concrete behavioral outcome. Much of the existing leadership literature relies on intentional constructs that are often constrained by social desirability bias, self-reporting artifacts, and subjective interpretation. In contrast, this research introduces a more objective and behaviorally grounded measure: whether individuals have actually assumed formal leadership roles. Capturing role occupancy as a tangible career milestone offers a more valid and reliable basis for assessing leadership development trajectories in organizational settings. This shift from intentions to enacted behavior is particularly significant in public service organizations, where understanding how leadership pipelines are formed remains an urgent research and policy concern. Unlike most prior work, which focuses on reactive or negatively valenced outcomes (e.g., turnover intentions), this dissertation centers on a positive, forward-oriented behavior: the active assumption of leadership responsibilities. This not only enriches the conceptualization of leadership role attainment but also illuminates the conditions under which leadership behaviors exert influence beyond what is traditionally assumed.

The analytical strength of this approach is further enhanced through temporal sequencing and multi-source data collection. Studies 1 and 2 are based on a multi-wave dataset, allowing for the temporal separation of leadership perceptions, psychological mechanisms, contextual factors, and subsequent role occupancy. This design supports a more plausible interpretation of directional effects than cross-sectional approaches. Study 3 complements this by drawing on independently collected data from leaders and followers, linking leaders' self-perceived servant leadership to followers' leadership aspirations. Together, these designs combine temporal separation and source triangulation, increasing both internal validity and theoretical depth, while acknowledging the limitations of a non-experimental framework. A further methodological innovation lies in the integration of self- and observer-perceptions of leadership behavior. Studies 1 and 2 show that individual- and team-level perceptions of servant leadership are associated with actual role occupancy. In contrast, Study 3 demonstrates that

leaders' self-perceived servant leadership is significantly associated with women's leadership aspirations in large, male-dominated organizations. These findings suggest that both internally held leadership identities and externally perceived behaviors play meaningful roles in shaping the willingness to assume leadership positions. This multifaceted perspective provides a more holistic understanding of leadership development, particularly in multilingual and gendered institutional environments, where alignment between self-concept and social recognition is often fragmented or contested. Across all three studies, this dissertation consistently validates the multidimensional model and measurement of servant leadership proposed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). Whether measured through follower ratings (Studies 1 and 2) or leader self-assessments (Study 3), servant leadership emerges as a robust predictor of either leadership aspiration or role occupancy. These findings reinforce the idea that servant leadership is not merely a normative ideal, but a structural and relational force that shapes those who feel empowered, legitimate, and socially entitled to lead.

Finally, this dissertation challenges classical notions of leadership as a fixed set of observable behaviors. Instead, it supports a view of leadership as a multi-locus construct, shaped by the dynamic interplay of self-concept, social perception, and contextual affordances (Hernandez et al., 2011). Empirically, it demonstrates that leadership development depends not only on what leaders do but also on how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. In this sense, the path to leadership is not merely behavioral but an identity-negotiation process. Leadership, therefore, can be reconceptualized as a relational and socially constructed identity, in which formal roles are not simply assigned or achieved, but co-created through mutual recognition, contextual interpretation, and shared purpose. This insight has far-reaching implications: it shifts the focus of leadership development from skills acquisition to organizational belonging, psychological empowerment, and relational meaning-making. It invites scholars and practitioners alike to approach leadership not only as performance or charisma, but as a process deeply embedded in interpersonal validation, structural opportunity, and identity legitimacy.

Practical Contributions

This dissertation offers several practical contributions for public service organizations, particularly in the public and non-profit sectors. These institutions differ fundamentally from profit-driven enterprises in that they are purpose-oriented, depending on voluntary engagement, and aim to serve citizens or members rather than maximize shareholder value. In such contexts, the assumption of a leadership role is a decisive organizational outcome that helps ensure the organization's continuity. Unlike passive indicators such as turnover or satisfaction, leadership occupancy signals active engagement with the organizational mission, ensuring continuity, accountability, and strategic renewal.

Investing in servant leadership as a strategic, human-centered approach to leadership development is essential for fostering effective and ethical leadership in public organizations. Servant leadership should not be understood as a “*soft*” or “*nice guy*” leadership style, but rather as an evidence-based, scalable approach that strengthens psychological mechanisms and relational quality. Findings from Study 1 indicate that leadership development programs must move beyond a narrow emphasis on technical competencies, performance tools, and managerial control mechanisms and instead deliberately cultivate servant leadership behaviors, empowerment, stewardship, humility, authenticity and standing back. In public service organizations, these behaviors closely align with institutional values, including public responsibility, service orientation, and collective duty, underscoring the need to embed servant leadership structurally within leadership pipelines rather than treating it as an isolated training intervention. This requires mentorship programs that model servant leadership in practice, reflective learning formats that engage leaders with questions of meaning, motivation, and ethical responsibility, and value-based assessment frameworks that evaluate how leadership is enacted rather than merely what outcomes are achieved. To operationalize this shift, leadership development should be more firmly anchored in organizational psychology than in traditional managerial training, adopting human-centered learning formats that address how others experience leadership, what individuals value, and where fears, insecurities, or resistance may emerge. As leadership unfolds through everyday interactions rather than solely through formal authority or decision-making structures, training initiatives must emphasize the quality of human interaction as the core mechanism of leadership effectiveness, reframing leadership as a socially

constructed and relational process grounded in trust, recognition, and mutual understanding.

Recognizing and leveraging linguistic diversity as a core leadership resource is essential for inclusive leadership in multilingual organizational contexts. Study 2 highlights linguistic proximity as a powerful yet underutilized mechanism through which servant leadership fosters trust, inclusion, and perceptions of developmental support. In multilingual settings such as Switzerland, language functions not only as a means of communication but as a central carrier of identity, belonging, and social recognition, shaping how leadership relationships are experienced and interpreted. Servant leaders demonstrate heightened sensitivity to their followers' linguistic backgrounds, whether shared or divergent, and thereby create relational proximity that enhances inclusion and team cohesion. Public organizations should therefore treat linguistic diversity as a strategic leadership resource rather than a challenge to be managed. This requires leadership development initiatives that integrate language-sensitive communication training, mentorship arrangements that account for linguistic backgrounds, and the formal recognition of receptive multilingualism as an organizational reality. Given that leadership is enacted primarily through language, such training should place a strong emphasis on communicative leadership competence by sensitizing leaders to how others perceive their communication and how this perception may diverge from their own self-understanding. Strengthening awareness of the relational effects of language use, tone, and interaction style enables leaders to communicate more inclusively across linguistic and cultural boundaries, reinforcing ethical, relational, and servant-oriented leadership practices.

Study 3 demonstrates that the effectiveness of inclusive leadership is contingent on organizational structure, underscoring inclusion as a structural rather than purely interpersonal challenge. In smaller police units, flatter hierarchies foster psychological safety and informal support, thereby facilitating women's leadership aspirations. In contrast, in larger organizations, hierarchical distance and formalized structures intensify barriers to inclusion, making servant leadership particularly critical. These findings indicate that leadership development initiatives, especially those targeting underrepresented groups, must be tailored to organizational size and context rather than applied uniformly. Smaller units may benefit most from team-level interventions that strengthen trust and psychological safety. At the same time, larger organizations

require structured leadership development programs that sensitize managers to the social and identity-based barriers faced by minority groups. Embedding servant leadership within these initiatives can promote a culture of listening, empathy, and trust, translating inclusive values into daily leadership practices. However, sustainable inclusion cannot remain aspirational; it must be institutionalized by aligning efforts across organizational levels, from strategic policy frameworks to everyday frontline interactions. In public service organizations, this entails senior leaders actively modeling inclusive behavior, embedding diversity and inclusion into recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation systems, and supporting identity-affirming structures such as mentorship, psychological safety, and visible role models. In the Swiss context, characterized by linguistic diversity, civic participation, and traditions of voluntary leadership, such measures are not only feasible but strategically necessary, particularly as institutions such as the Swiss Army and cantonal police corps confront leadership succession challenges among younger generations and underrepresented groups. By acknowledging the structural nature of aspiration and advancement and cultivating servant leadership accordingly, these organizations can build more resilient and equitable leadership pipelines.

Limitations and Future Research

While each of the three studies addresses methodological limitations in detail, there are overarching constraints that apply to the dissertation. Most notably, the sample composition poses challenges for generalizability. Both the Swiss Army and the cantonal police are highly male-dominated and relatively young institutional environments. Although they qualify as public service organizations and represent a broad spectrum of social and regional backgrounds within Switzerland, they do not fully reflect the diversity of public service institutions more broadly, particularly when compared to private non-profit organizations. In such contexts, organizational typologies tend to attract distinct types of individuals; for example, those who work or volunteer in social care institutions may differ significantly in motivation and leadership orientation from those engaged in sports associations or business-related advocacy organizations. This variability complicates generalizability. In sum, the sample used in this dissertation represents its most significant limitation. While the findings provide important initial evidence, they do not fully capture the broader diversity of public service

organizations. As such, the results should be interpreted with caution, and further research is needed to assess the transferability of these insights to other institutional contexts.

Future research should therefore examine whether the inclusive leadership mechanisms observed in this dissertation, particularly the role of servant leadership in fostering leadership aspiration and role occupancy, also apply to other types of public service organizations, including private non-profits. It remains an open question whether different motivational or relational dynamics dominate in those settings. Moreover, measuring leadership emergence and inclusion in such contexts is often more difficult, particularly in volunteer-driven organizations, where formal leadership structures may be less well defined. A promising direction for future studies would be to conduct longitudinal research, tracking volunteers over time to examine whether and how they transition into coordination roles, project responsibilities, or even board membership.

Conclusion

However, the responsibility for inclusion does not lie solely with top management. Particularly in public service contexts, meaningful change must also arise from the bottom up. It is not enough to wait for directives from above; employees at all levels must have the courage to challenge exclusion, question discriminatory norms, and disrupt structures that are outdated, unjust, or undemocratic. This demands a spirit of critical engagement, a readiness to act, even in small ways, with clarity of purpose and integrity. Leadership, in this sense, is not confined to formal authority. Anyone who influences others, even informally, assumes a leadership role, whether they recognize it. With influence comes responsibility: to reflect not only on what one does, but on how one's behavior serves or undermines others. Everyone, regardless of position, status, seniority, or background, must ask: Does my behavior serve the human being, the collective, or merely the system? True inclusion begins when this question is confronted at the personal level and translated into daily practice. Institutional transformation depends not only on alignment from above, but on integrity and accountability from below. Remaining silent in the face of exclusion is not only passive but also negligent. Inclusion, therefore, is not just a leadership ideal to be modeled; it is a

democratic responsibility that must be enacted in the everyday attitudes, actions, and commitments of every member of an organization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

While preparing this dissertation, the author used ChatGPT to enhance clarity, improve readability, and refine certain theoretical explanations. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the publication's content.

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Afterword

I have completed the dissertation; you are about to finish reading it. The question that follows is simple: what comes next?

This doctoral work is not an endpoint, but the beginning of a much larger mission. What starts now is the work of vulgarization, of translation in the most profound sense: bringing knowledge out of its enclosed academic spaces and back to the people. At times, academic discourse becomes highly specialized and inward-looking, making it difficult to access beyond its own circles. Part of the task I undertake here is therefore to build bridges, not only between academia and what my wife likes to call *le commun des mortels*, that is, ordinary people in their everyday lives, but also between languages, ways of thinking, and ways of living.

This is where my project truly begins. My mission is to bring knowledge back to the ground: to translate it, to simplify it without betraying its depth, and to make it accessible to all. In this spirit, I draw inspiration from Niccolò Machiavelli's letter to Francesco Vettori of 10 December 1513. There, Machiavelli describes a life divided between two spheres: during the day, he spends his time in taverns, listening, observing, and absorbing the world as it is; in the evening, he returns to study, to think rigorously, and to engage intellectually with what he has gathered.

This capacity to move between worlds, between lived experience and reflection, is essential to leadership. One must remain open, willing to listen to others, and ready to confront differing perspectives. Only then can one act like an enzyme: bringing together the right elements, transforming what is raw and dispersed into something meaningful, and providing the organism, society itself, with the resources it needs to grow and advance.