Leadership Systems for Tackling the System of Poverty

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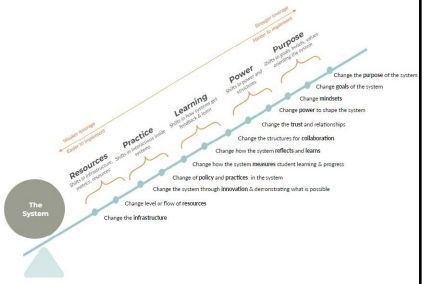
Background

Despite significant national efforts, poverty remains a persistent issue in the United States (Parrott, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2025).

Virginia has experienced decreasing poverty rates, better than the national average (Kutner, 2024), making it a relevant case for examination.

Research suggests the recent success may be due to collective leadership, which is known to enhance community resilience through improved group performance (Arkedis et al., 2023).



Note. From "Collective leadership for sustainable development: Evidence from research and practice," by J. Arkedis, M. Benavides, L. Dessein, L. Kniffin, S. M. Ospina, & K. Priest, 2023, p. 21.

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Background cont…

- Research also shows that collective leadership can fail and cause setbacks if not managed well (Shirk, 2022).
- This supports the need to understand better the civic organizations that have helped reduce poverty by creating networks for supporting underserved communities (Cordeiro, 2024).
- Perceptions of leadership are evolving and adapting to address the wicked problems around us (Grint, 2022).
- Grint (2005) notes that increasing uncertainty surrounding a problem requires a shift from coercion (i.e., hard power) to more normative and collaborative approaches (i.e., soft power)

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Research Questions

1. What factors affect the poverty reduction efforts by civic organizations in the Commonwealth of Virginia?
2. What are the key considerations for effective leadership to alleviate poverty?

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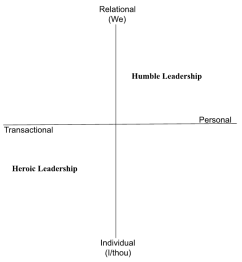
Theoretical Framework

- Schein and Schein (2023) note that humble leadership (as shown in figure) focuses on building trust, fostering relationships, and embracing empathy as a strength.
- Leaders who show humility can work together with the team to improve the organization, and this can lead to exceptional outcomes (Cable, 2018)
- In today's interconnected world, humble leadership is increasingly recognized for its role in countering self-serving leadership and promoting ethical solutions to global challenges (Council & Sowcik, 2020).

Humble Leadership: Leader's Perspective



Note. From "Humble leadership: The power of relationships, openness, and trust (2nd ed.)" by Schein, E. H., & Schein, P. A., 2023.

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Methodology

A **stratified sampling** method was used to ensure diverse leadership perspectives.

Fourteen representatives from civic organizations were interviewed via **60-minute Zoom sessions**.

Participants represented sectors such as **youth development, economic development, education, housing, legal assistance, and food security**.

Open coding and **thematic analysis** were used to identify key leadership trends. Findings were categorized to link leadership strategies to poverty reduction efforts.

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Organizational Representatives and their Organizational Focus

Participant	Organizational Focus
A	Youth Development
B	Economic Development and Education
C	Violence and Assault
D	Economic Development
E	Economic Development, Food, Housing and Mental Health
F	Legal Assistance
G	Economic Development, Food, and Housing
H	Economic Development, Food, Housing, and Education
I	Housing
J	Regional Planning and Collaboration
K	Food and Hunger
L	Housing
M	Economic Development, Education, Housing, and Violence and Assault
N	Grantmaking and Philanthropy

Note. The table represents the alphabetic codes for the civic organizations' representatives and organizational foci.

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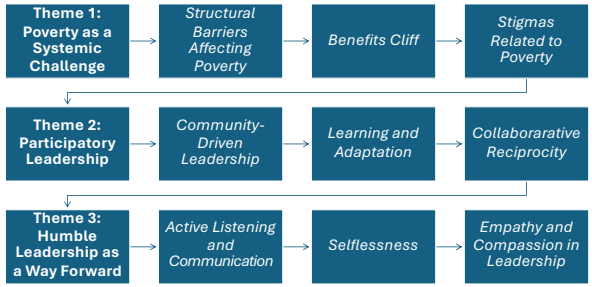
Results



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Theme 1

Poverty as a Systemic Challenge

Structural Barriers Affecting Poverty

- Limited access to **housing, transportation, food**
- Economic stagnation, lack of job/education opportunities

"When relationships and systems don't work how they're supposed to, it creates distorted and messed-up relationships and systems. And as those things create layers and layers and layers of things that aren't working right, poverty is a result of those things."

Benefits Cliff

- Small income increases → sudden loss of benefits
- Harder to escape poverty despite employment

"If you go half a dollar over a threshold, you suddenly lose all benefits."

Stigmas Related to Poverty

- Social isolation & disempowerment
- Poverty often misinterpreted as neglect (esp. in parenting)

"I think there's also the stigma, you know, that accompanies being in poverty and the effect that has on communities. [Like] if you have a high concentration of poverty, it could have really negative impacts."

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Theme 2

Participatory Leadership

Community-Driven Leadership

- Organizations engage individuals with **lived experiences** in leadership roles.
- Ensures decisions are **practical and community-centered**.

"I think some of the most influential and impactful leaders that I've met in this space are individuals who've had lived experiences with poverty."

Learning and Adaptation

- Leadership occurs at **multiple levels** (organizational & community).
- Community **feedback informs** policies and services.

"The capital L leadership is leaders of organizations who are moving and trying to move big agendas forward. I mean, they are critical….then I think there's the lowercase L leadership, where families—who really are the experts on what they're going through—help them understand their roles as leaders."

Collaborative Reciprocity

- Leaders should **build trust-based relationships** to mobilize resources effectively.

"Do we know who works on housing, who works on food insecurity? Do other organizations know that we deal with employment?"

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Theme 3

Humble Leadership as a Way Forward

Active Listening and Communication

- Leaders should **listen to needs** rather than assume them.
- Personalized approaches **consider unique stressors** in people's lives.

"Somebody who listens to what people need rather than assumes what people need."

Selflessness

- Effective leaders **set aside egos** and **embrace collaboration**.
- Open-mindedness and humility drive **real impact**.

"Selflessness… openness to new ideas, willingness to work with other people.. ability to set one's ego aside"

Empathy and Compassion in Leadership

- Poverty impacts **more than material needs**—leaders must see the full picture.
- **Compassionate leadership** fosters long-term, meaningful change.

"Compassion… that they need to see so many different sides of an issue, not just one."

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Recommendations for Practice

- We recommend providing necessary training and resources for organizational leaders to expose them to the evolving research and educational initiatives in this field. Capacity-building programs can help equip leaders with the tools and knowledge of frameworks such as humble leadership.
- We recommend supporting community leadership initiatives and encouraging people to participate actively in poverty reduction efforts. This may be done by creating local decision-making spaces and partnerships between community leaders and organizations.
- We recommend strengthening the network of leaders working for poverty reduction so that they can support one another in achieving the common goal. To achieve this, regular knowledge exchange through workshops, mentorship, and online platforms may be helpful.

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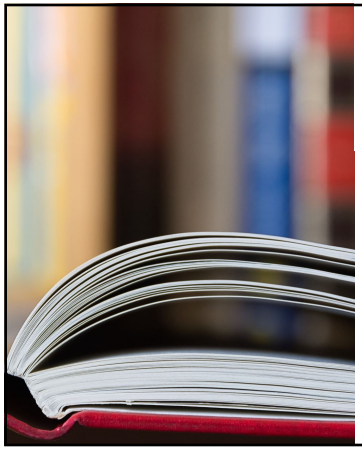

Limitations of Research

- **Regional Focus**: The study is limited to the civic organizations in Virginia, so it may not reflect the challenges and leadership styles found in other regions.
- **Dynamic Nature of Poverty**: Poverty changes with economic, political, and social shifts. Thus, the relevance of findings may also change over time.
- **Subjectivity of Qualitative Data**: The data from the interviews reflect the personal views and experiences of the participants, which may be affected by external factors.

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