Exploring the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region

by

Yugant Patra

B.E., University of Mumbai, 2004
M.S., Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2007

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Educational Leadership
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Abstract

This study explores informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in social organizations. The study looks at a form of leadership that prioritizes relationships, moral agency, emotions, values, and social interaction over authority or hierarchical control. This qualitative multiple-case study research applies the lens of selfless service leadership for positive social change. This lens is derived from a combined conceptual framework: Gandhian philosophy, which emphasizes selfless service and the upliftment of all; servant leadership theory, which champions serving to lead and leading to serve; and the social change model of leadership, which provides an operational architecture for promoting change. Through this lens, the study examined the lived experiences of adult volunteers in social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region and explains the informal distributed leadership behavior they understand and practice. Volunteer participants from three social organizations were studied as three respective cases. Case A generated the themes of: esprit de corps, navigating the urban sprawl, precious cargo, and the family and self as factors in altruistic calling; Case B revealed the themes of: the social reason for volunteering, physicality, please don't stop the music, and food security as a fundamental humanitarian right; and Case C presented the themes of: I am an Umbrella, the offering of labor, the spiritual state of mind, implicit coordination, and empathy. Cross-case analysis was also performed, aggregating data from the three cases. The cross-case findings were condensed into themes of: the enormity of commitment to service, the understanding of leadership, hierarchy, and agents of social change. These findings are discussed in relation to how they align with and extend from the existing literature on informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers. Implications for practice and recommendations for future studies are also provided.

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Abstract

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Dedication

To my guiding light, the late Dr. B. B. Jena, and to all the volunteers.

Chapter 1: Introduction

An observation made about 5 years ago developed into a sustained inquiry, which has led to this research study examining the nature of informal distributed leadership behavior among urban adult volunteers. This work seeks to explore the human essence of leadership, one that is co-created, deeply relational, and rooted in cooperation. The research looks to provide insights into how more inclusive expression of leadership can thrive, particularly in spaces where people come together voluntarily to serve a common cause. What I observed was the following:

> The food bank had food lines set up; each line started at the kitchen, where the meals were prepared, and went to downstream lines, where they were packed, labeled, and stored. Each line also had volunteers for utensil clean-up and general work area cleanliness. The setup did not differ from a commercial food packing set up. During one such work effort, a retiree gentleman on the packing line had an issue because he had been standing for so long that he left his spot to take a break. A young adult volunteer from the cleaning crew observed the gap, put on sanitized gloves, took the vacant position, and started packing. After about 30 minutes, the retiree gentleman returned from his unscheduled break, tapped the young adult on his shoulder, gave him a smile, and took his position back, and the young adult returned to cleaning services. The entire exchange happened without any words spoken—just a set of gestures and smiles. This behavior was repeated often among the larger group. Typically, similar commercial setups have a line manager whose job it is to ensure continuity in the line and identify and fill gaps, but that position did not exist at the food bank.

The phenomenon of informal distributed leadership among volunteers in social organizations is thought-provoking. It refers to the absence of a formal, hierarchical leader, with individuals or groups collaboratively assuming leadership roles (Bolden, 2011). This setup is not about leaderless organizations or leaders who are absent, but rather about peer networks fulfilling leadership needs when no one is formally assigned more responsibility or power, and when no formal power structure is present. Leadership research has typically focused on formal leadership; however, in many social organizations, such as volunteer-supported nonprofits, leadership emerges instead through influence, expertise, trust, and relational credibility rather than hierarchy. Studying informal distributed leadership among volunteers helps explain who leads, when, and how, even without official authority. Despite its prevalence, research currently lacks clarity about the mechanisms and processes through which such leadership develops and is maintained among volunteers without formal authority. Therefore, there is a research gap concerning how informal distributed leadership emerges and is sustained among adult volunteers in urban social organizations.

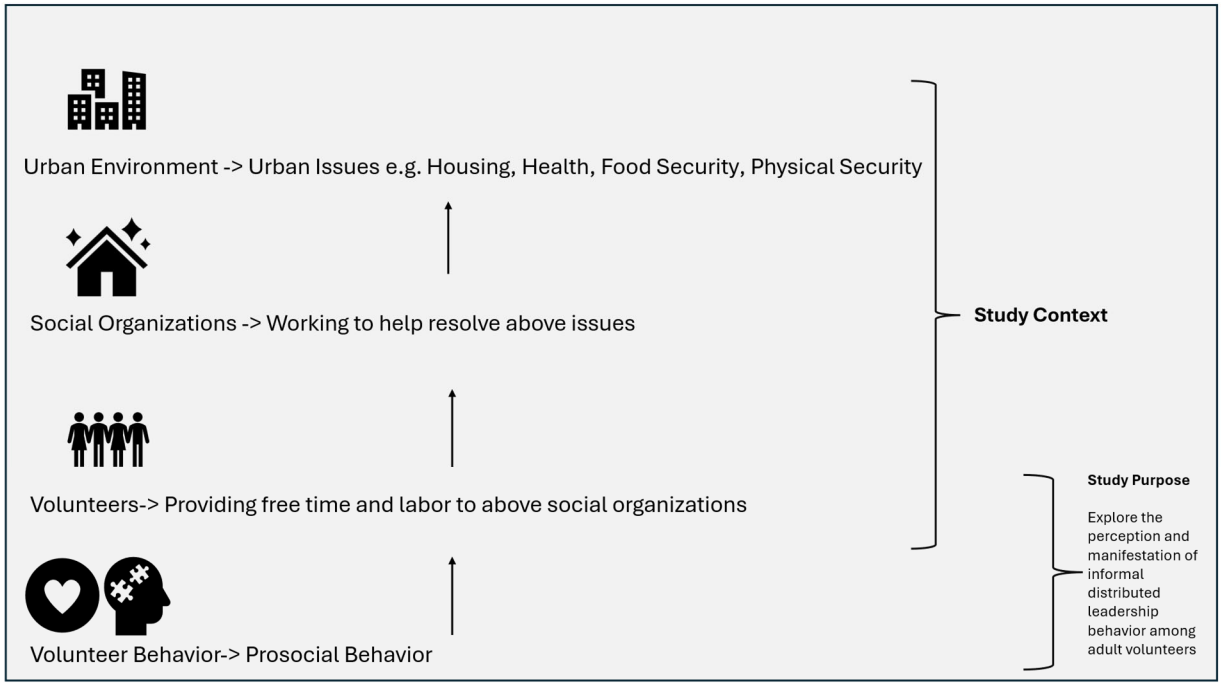
Context

This study explored the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations. The urban landscape is characterized by a complex configuration of social and economic challenges, including population density, resource inequality, and rapid social change. Social organizations within these environments frequently rely on volunteers who contribute their skills, labor, and time to resolve urban social and economic challenges (Chambré, 2020). Due to extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors, volunteers exhibit leadership behavioral attributes, such as problem-solving, mentoring, initiative-taking, and coordination, to support social organizations focused on alleviating urban

challenges. In the absence of rigid hierarchical control in such organizations, leadership often emerges organically as volunteers respond to situational demands, leverage self-knowledge, and mobilize peer networks, shaping task completion without formal authority. Figure 1 provides a schematic view of the context, with the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region serving as the urban setting for this study.

Figure 1

Study Context



History of Volunteering in the United States

The importance of volunteerism cannot be understated, as it is a vital component of American culture. Ellis and Noyes (1990) referred to the United States as a nation of volunteers. They examined volunteering by clustering fields associated with the social and economic base of society to volunteer activities and used this framework to document the spread and diversity of volunteer activities over the course of U.S. history from the founding of the nation to the 21st century. They looked at volunteerism from all facets, from the civic to the religious and political,

and extending to business, healthcare, social justice, philanthropy, pro-bono services, education, corporate social responsibility, sports, environment, and the military. Ellis and Noyes (1990) also examined the formation of American society through the lens of volunteering; beginning with the nation's founding, the authors traced the volunteer element throughout U.S. history, extending from small social dimensions to major events in which volunteers participated.

A 1998 General Social Survey reported that 56% of the U.S. population had volunteered at some point during the previous year (Wilson, 2000). As of 2004, it was reported that 32.4% of women and 25.0% of men had worked as volunteers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). The AmeriCorps analysis of the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) Supplement data, collected in September 2023, indicated that formal volunteers had served an estimated 4.99 billion hours. Between September 2022 and September 2023, approximately 28.3% of Americans aged 16 and older (about 75.7 million individuals) volunteered through an organization, contributing over $167.2 billion in economic value (Schlachter & Marshall, 2024).

Social Organizations

A social organization is the connected network of relationships within a group and is shaped by culture and sociological factors (Matsueda, 2006). It supports the community by structuring roles, interactions, and societal functions for collective life. According to sociologists, this arrangement fulfills functional needs (Parsons, 1956), maintains social order and shared values (Turner, 1990), and enables goal-oriented cooperation through rational arrangement (Weber, 2009). These varying perspectives shed light on how the structure and interplay of relationships sustain social stability, cooperation, and development.

Social organizations may be formal or informal (Matsueda, 2006). A social organization contains interconnected elements: its structure (formal or informal arrangements), defined roles, guiding norms, core values, and shared goals (Maines, 1977; McDermott & Roth, 1978). Structure determines responsibilities and relationships, while norms and values direct behavior. Goals can range from financial gain to community building. Interaction and authority support these elements and drive collaboration, with authority emerging from hierarchy or respect (Maines, 1977).

Beyond their structure and purpose, adaptability distinguishes social organizations, enabling them to respond to internal and external changes and maintain longevity and relevance in dynamic environments. For example, Janoski (2010) outlined three levels of civil society where volunteering may theoretically be embedded: (1) the private sphere of interactions with friends and family, (2) the civil sphere of voluntary associations and organizations, and (3) the regulatory sphere encompassing political, media, and economic institutions. The social organizations examined in this study fit within the second category, particularly in urban centers.

Within this context, mission-driven social organizations depend on volunteers, who are vital to fulfilling objectives, strengthening communities, and connecting individuals. In urban environments, volunteers boost community engagement by addressing local challenges and delivering essential services, such as food distribution, nutritional support, healthcare, shelter, and providing disaster relief when needed (Chambré, 2020).

From a perspective of volunteers providing labor and services, a social organization can be conceptualized as a container that holds, shapes, and enables volunteer behavior (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013). As a container, the organization provides the structural, relational, and cultural environment within which leadership behaviors among volunteers can be enacted and

interpreted (Brayko et al., 2016). Viewing the organization as a container highlights its role not merely as a backdrop, but as an active medium that influences volunteer behavior. The social organization, as a container, influences the flow of communication, trust-building, and collaboration while providing psychological and social safety.

Social Organizations in Urban Areas

Social organizations are formal or informal groups that mobilize resources, coordinate collective action, and deliver services to improve a community's quality of life. In urban areas, they address complex social, economic, and structural challenges that stem from unmet needs, service gaps, or urbanization-driven inequities (DeFilippis & Saegert, 2007). Serving as intermediaries, they foster engagement, build social capital, and support marginalized populations (Marwell & McQuarrie, 2013). Urban areas with their high population density, cultural diversity, and resource disparities face persistent issues such as housing and food insecurity, limited healthcare access, and social fragmentation (Humphrey et al., 2019; Jacobs, 1961). Social organizations, including nonprofit agencies, mutual-aid groups, religious institutions, and grassroots initiatives, are vital for connecting residents to resources and providing a wide range of support, such as food assistance, housing advocacy, and healthcare outreach (Chambré, 2020).

The structure of social organizations in urban areas varies widely depending on their mission (the central purpose or aim of the organization), size (number of staff, volunteers, or clients served), and funding mechanisms (sources and methods of acquiring financial support). Many urban social organizations are not-for-profit agencies operating with a combination of paid and volunteer staff (Handy et al., 2007). Research indicates that flexibility (the ability to modify practices), adaptability (the capacity to adjust to changing circumstances), and strong community

ties (relationships with local residents and groups) are key features that enable these organizations to function effectively in complex urban environments (Briggs et al., 2009).

Moreover, urban social organizations often collaborate with local government agencies, private sector partners, and philanthropic institutions. These partnerships allow organizations to expand their capacity, secure resources, and improve service delivery (Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Despite their essential roles, social organizations face numerous challenges. Limited funding, high demand for services, and resource scarcity often strain organizational capacity. Additionally, urban social organizations must navigate complex issues influenced by structural inequality, both social and economic (Massey & Denton, 1993). These systemic issues create challenging working environments that require organizations to respond with innovation, resilience, and strategic planning; much of the skill and labor required is then supplemented by volunteers (Chambré, 2020; Ellis & Noyes, 1990). In fulfilling these roles, urban social organizations function as safety nets for vulnerable populations, providing essential services and advocating for positive social change (Stephan et al., 2016). Furthermore, these organizations contribute to social cohesion by fostering relationships among diverse groups, facilitating collaboration, and encouraging civic engagement (Paarlberg et al., 2021).

Building upon these varied functions and challenges, social organizations play an indispensable role in urban environments. They address multifaceted challenges by mobilizing resources, providing essential services, fostering community engagement, and promoting social capital (Garcia, 2024; Mayer, 2003). In turn, such organizations enhance individuals' well-being and strengthen community resilience. As urban populations grow and diversify, the importance of social organizations will only increase further in supporting equitable urban communities.

The Volunteer

A volunteer is a person who offers their time, labor, and skills to help others or a cause without receiving compensation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). This act of giving is performed willingly and not because of force or obligation. Noble (1997) described volunteers as individuals who provide services to a community of their own free will and who do not receive monetary compensation. Volunteers typically exhibit a constellation of traits, including warmth, positive emotions, agreeableness, trust, altruism, and positivity (Elshaug & Metzer, 2001). An adult volunteer is an individual who, according to a country's laws, is formally beyond a certain age limit to be identified as an adult, and who freely offers their time, skills, and services to an organization or cause without receiving compensation. The specific age requirement may vary by local laws or organizational policy, especially for roles involving contact with vulnerable populations (World Health Organization, 2016). The term *volunteer* is used broadly to denote non-salaried service (Cnaan et al., 1996), typically supporting a nonprofit, religious, or humanitarian cause. However, it can also refer to an informal act of helping others. Volunteering can be done at an individual or group level, with the key aspect being the voluntary giving of time and labor to the activity at hand. Cnaan et al. (1996) reviewed over 200 definitions of volunteering and performed a content analysis to arrive at a definition of volunteering, identifying four core axes: (1) free will, (2) the availability and nature of remuneration, (3) proximity to the beneficiaries, and (4) a formal agency.

The Urban Volunteer

The term *urban volunteer* refers to individuals who participate in community service and civic engagement activities in urban settings. These opportunities cover a wide range of needs, from environmental care to social services, allowing residents to contribute to their local

communities (Paarlberg et al., 2021). Parboteeah et al. (2004) suggested that higher levels of economic development in urban places allow individuals to devote more time to volunteering. Studies have found a positive relationship between individual socioeconomic status and volunteering/prosocial behavior (Wilson, 2012b). In urban contexts, volunteers often respond to pressing social issues, such as homelessness, food insecurity, and the needs of marginalized communities, making their contributions essential to local resilience and social cohesion. The engagement is shaped by factors such as personal motivation, sense of community belonging, and exposure to social problems common in cities. Urban location-based socioeconomic resources, such as education, higher skill levels, and income, also support this dynamic (Grueter et al., 2020; Zwirner & Raihani, 2020). From a practical perspective, individuals living in communities with higher levels of development are less preoccupied with meeting immediate material needs and more willing to invest in cooperative behavior with no immediate return (Grueter et al., 2020; Parboteeah et al., 2004).

Volunteering in Urban America

In the United States, volunteering is a community-oriented and largely altruistic activity (Chambré, 2020). In an urban setting, it has specific characteristics of civic engagement, as well as class, economic, and racial factors. Certain levels of volunteering show greater disparities, with lower participation among lower- and working-class groups (Wuthnow, 1991). These attitudes reflect reduced economic opportunities in the context of deindustrialization and the erosion of values associated with the working class, such as hard work, rootedness in a community, and loyalty. Hochschild (2018) concluded that, “along with blue-collar jobs, a blue-collar way of life [is] going out of fashion” (p. 218). From a racial perspective, civic engagement, including membership and participation in voluntary associations, political

organizations, and volunteering, has been segregated for most of American history, especially in the urban context (Chambré, 2020; Rotolo & Wilson, 2014). Although differences in volunteer participation have narrowed by race, among African Americans volunteering is driven by a strong sense of mutual support and obligation to give back and uplift the Black community (Smith et al., 1999). However, racial disparities disappear among lower-income groups, suggesting that racial disparities in volunteering are mediated by class differences (Carson, 1989). Urban volunteering in the United States has also shown signs of episodic volunteering, with short-duration or single-event volunteering (Handy et al., 2006; MacDuff, 2005).

For this study, the social organizations using volunteers' services in urban areas are not commercial or for-profit organizations. Within the realm of nonprofit organizations, the study focused on volunteerism within the community at urban social organizations supporting healthcare, nutrition, environmental issues, and support systems for families in need of food and shelter. Political, government, religious, and politico-religious institutions, although social organizations, were not in the purview of the study. The study focused on not-for-profit nongovernmental secular entities offering positive social support to communities meeting their physiological needs (food, water, shelter, clothing) and health and safety needs, as laid out in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs.

Prosocial Behavior Among Volunteers

Volunteering is a form of prosocial behavior (Clary & Snyder, 1991). Prosocial behavior encompasses a broad category of voluntary actions that help people or the community by providing beneficial services. While prosocial behavior refers to an action intended to benefit others, altruism is specifically the selfless desire to help others without expecting a personal reward (Clary & Snyder, 1991). The prosocial behavior of volunteers is an important indicator of

social capital in a society (Briggs et al., 2009). When volunteers dedicate their time and effort to helping others, they build social trust, reinforce norms of reciprocity, and strengthen the social networks essential to community wellbeing.

Leadership Behavior Among Volunteers

Leadership behavior in volunteers has mainly been studied through the lens of transformational leadership (Burns, 1998). For example, a study by Catano et al. (2001) found that transformational leadership was associated with volunteers' commitment to the organization and their willingness to stay. However, it is important to note that volunteers do not have followers; rather, they interact primarily with peers. This distinction suggested that new constructs must be explored to explain leadership behavior in volunteer settings. In response, a study by Schneider and George (2011) showed that servant leadership, characterized by ethical behavior and concern for both fellow volunteers and those being served, is positively correlated with volunteer satisfaction and organizational commitment. Building on this idea, the emphasis in servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1970) on service instead of on directing others highlighted the need to understand and acknowledge volunteers' perspectives that provide opportunities for choice, support individual competencies, and encourage personal initiative. Supporting these findings, research by Deci et al. (2001) and Gagné and Deci (2005) showed that volunteer satisfaction and motivation were also linked to servant leadership.

Problem Statement

Informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations reveals how leadership arises and operates in nonhierarchical environments characterized by diversity, resource constraints, and persistent community issues needing resolution. Formal leadership constructs emphasize individual traits, positional authority, and centralized decision-

making, often derived from corporate or military contexts. However, informal distributed leadership in volunteer-driven urban social organizations needed to be studied for its decentralized, relational, and shared influence nature. Urban social organizations frequently operate in fluid, unpredictable contexts, where volunteers navigate overlapping social networks, competing community needs, and limited institutional support. Despite a growing body of leadership scholarship (Allen et al., 2022), existing frameworks remain insufficient for explaining how informal distributed leadership emerges and is sustained among adult volunteers in urban social organizations, particularly in settings where coordination depends on trust, reciprocity, and situational responsiveness rather than formalized chains of command. Addressing this gap was critical for understanding how influence, direction, and collective action are continually constructed and maintained among adult volunteers within complex urban social environments.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region. Traditional leadership configurations have typically focused on individual traits or positions, especially in business, politics, and the military (Gardner, 1990). Extending beyond such traditional leadership configurations, this study investigated leadership as a co-constructed process among adult volunteers in social organizations, where leadership emerged from shared interactions and collective accountability rather than from designated tiles or authority figures. Gronn (2002) and Harris (2009) underscored that distributed leadership is a holistic, social process rather than an individual attribute. Neilson (2004) noted that nonhierarchical leadership supports dignity and autonomy by challenging unequal power dynamics found in conventional leader–follower

structures. In social organizations, volunteers voluntarily forgo status, sharing the same privileges regardless of background, and focus on the collective cause. This research explored how this inclusive, human-centered approach fosters camaraderie, inclusiveness, and cooperation, emphasizing empathy and a shared commitment to positive community change.

Research Questions

To explore the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region, the following research questions (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: What are adult volunteers' understandings of the nature of informal distributed leadership?

RQ2: How do urban adult volunteers demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors?

Conceptual Framework

Leadership cannot be measured and is not computational, linear, or formulaic. It is best studied using an *as-lived* and *as-experienced* inquiry, using discourse, deliberation, and reflection to investigate how people view what they experience and the meaning of that experience (Souba, 2014). The conceptual framework for this study combined Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership. This combined framework offered a compelling lens for examining the intricacies of human behavior and cognition, and the profound influence of subjective experiences in guiding and inspiring others toward collective goals.

The combined framework aligned informal distributed leadership as a morally grounded, relational, and collective process rooted in service to others to achieve positive social change

rather than positional authority. Gandhian philosophy supported this framework by emphasizing self-transformation, humility, and moral responsibility for social action (Biswas et al., 2025). Servant leadership put Gandhi's vision into practice, translating values like humility and empathy into daily leadership tasks. These tasks include observing, listening, mentoring, consensus-building, and shared responsibility (Barnabas & Clifford, 2012). The social change model of leadership furthered this by focusing on community impact (Komives & Wagner, 2016).

Gandhian Philosophy

The philosophical lens for this study is Gandhian in nature. Gandhian philosophy is a key pillar in Eastern philosophical thought. Eastern philosophical thought is grounded in holistic, relational, and ethical conceptions of human existence, emphasizing the interdependence of self, society, and the natural world, in comparison to dominant Western philosophical traditions, which often privilege individualism, rationalism, and instrumental reasoning (Billington, 1998). According to Datta (1953), the key tenets of Gandhian philosophy include *seva* (selfless service), *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *swaraj* (self-rule), and *sarvodaya* (upliftment of all: positive social change). Gandhi believed that each individual's good in society consists of their efforts to achieve the good of all (Nikam, 1954; Tähtinen, 1979). This effort to achieve good for all stresses Gandhi's philosophy of *seva*, i.e., selfless service to the community and to society at large. The Gandhian philosophy of service sits in contrast to political and economic centralization (Sarma, 1980) and is selfless in nature (Pandey, 2025).

Gandhi's philosophy of positive social change was grounded in the conviction that enduring societal transformation emerges from moral self-discipline, collective responsibility, and nonviolent action rather than from coercion or institutional force (Keeler, 1972; Prasad,

1960). From a Gandhian perspective, this process is most coherently articulated through the philosophical tenet of *sarvodaya*, which envisions social progress as the upliftment of all, with particular concern for the most vulnerable members of society (Kumar & Saini, 2024). Gandhi emphasized leadership from within, with the need for patience, idealism, resourcefulness, and, most importantly, a skill in fostering relationships among community organizers seeking to effect positive social change (Gangrade, 1991).

Leadership, within this philosophy, is service-oriented, expressed through sacrifice, humility, and commitment to the well-being of others rather than through positional control. Gandhi sought to prevent the massive concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the few and to distribute it to the multitude, minimizing competition and exploitation in the economic and human resource sphere and instead encouraging cooperation (Sarma, 1980). The socioeconomic structure of his vision of society was characterized by equality, voluntary simplicity, and the absence of exploitation, where every individual was free to devote themself to social service (volunteerism) according to their motives and means (Dhawan, 1946). Gandhian philosophy proposes a transformational style of ethical leadership, supplemented by a value system that focuses on duty, selfless service, and the promotion of a conflict-free environment (Varghese et al., 2017). It strengthens the value and morality aspect of leadership behavior.

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership theory emphasizes service to others and the recognition that the role of organizations is to create people who can build a better tomorrow linked to ethics, virtues, and morality. This theory provided a strong lens to study informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers in social organizations. Greenleaf (1970) coined the term *servant leadership* and viewed it as a way of life rather than as a leadership technique. Four key reviews of servant

leadership have helped provide insight into how researchers have organized Greenleaf's (1970) complex concepts of servant leadership into a theory. Russell and Stone (2002) revealed nine functional attributes, or operative qualities and distinctive characteristics, of servant leaders: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) conducted a comprehensive literature review to developed an integrated model of servant leadership, and they synthesized the attributes of servant leadership into five factors: altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, and organizational stewardship. Spears (2010) offered a list of 10 characteristics of servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Finally, van Dierendonck (2011) identified six key theorized characteristics of servant leadership: empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship. According to Greenleaf (1970), the key essence of servant leadership is the willingness of the leader to serve others.

Social Change Model of Leadership

The social change model of leadership was created in 1993 by the Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA to enhance student learning and facilitate positive social change. The model emphasizes the need to understand oneself and others to create community change (Astin et al., 1996). Crawford et al. (2000) defined the social change model of leadership as the focus on what, how, and why leadership is. The central theme of this model is about creating change: personal, organizational, and societal. It promotes the development of social change agents who address and solve community problems. The model has three foundational principles: creating change, collaboration, and civic leadership. Social change model of

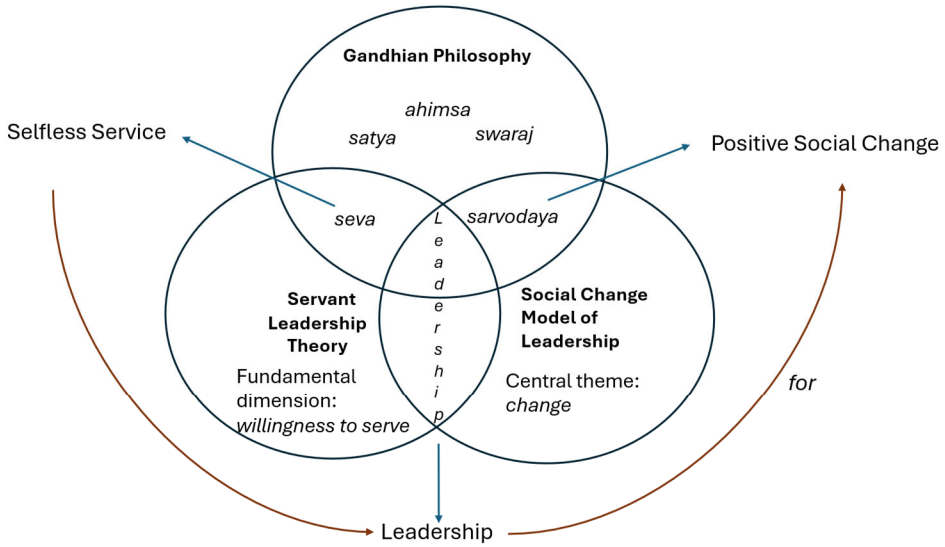
leadership advocates contend that leadership is not what leaders do; rather, it is what followers and leaders do together for the common good. The premise of the model is that people must work together to effectively deal with changes in the internal and external environments they face on a daily basis (Watt, 2009).

Integrated Lens for the Study

The combined conceptual framework of Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership has shaped the *selfless service leadership for positive social change lens* that guided my understanding of informal distributed leadership among urban adult volunteers. This lens, grounded in selflessness, service-oriented practices, and a drive for positive social change, redefined leadership as a journey of selfless service resulting in tangible community impact. Figure 2 visually represents this study's integrated lens.

Figure 2

Integrated Lens for the Study



The lens provided an integrated perspective on selfless service leadership for positive social change, allowing me to explain how shared consciousness, intentionality, and an understanding of volunteers' experiences shape leadership. These influences interact with the pursuit of the common good in urban communities. Thus, this lens enables us to view informal distributed leadership as a process enacted through volunteer networks that diagnose problems, mobilize resources, and co-create solutions for local urban realities.

Methodology

This section provides a description of the research design, methodological choices, procedures for data collection and analysis, and the rationale that aligns these decisions with the study's purpose and research questions.

Qualitative Method

The research questions of this study were addressed best through qualitative research methods. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to compare groups or establish relationships between variables (asking *why*), I chose qualitative methods for this study because the research questions focus on *how*, *what*, and *in what ways* in studying leadership behavior (Creswell, 1998). The research questions were designed to explore and describe the phenomenon of *informal distributed leadership behavior* under the study. Qualitative research has been key to exploring new areas of leadership, such as shared leadership, e-leadership, and environmental leadership, and to ask questions of what we mean by leadership and how the phenomenon should be investigated (Bryman, 2004). This study explored informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in social organizations, where shared consciousness, intentionality, and a deep understanding of members' lived experiences shape the combined leadership dynamic. The study also explored the importance of embracing and exploring the richness of the collective

human experience within these unique collaborative structures, using the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens derived from the combined conceptual framework of Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership.

Multiple Case Study

Yin (2018) defined a case study as an empirical inquiry using multiple data sources to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. Additionally, Merriam (1998) noted that a qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit, which may involve studying a person, program, policy, or any other phenomenon intrinsically bound to the researcher's interests. In this approach, the researcher documents what can be understood, gathered, interpreted, and analyzed from time shared with a participant and is invested in reporting the inquiry's results from the multiple data sources (Patton, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Building on these foundational definitions, I employed a multiple-case study approach to explore the development of informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations. I examined individual cases across three separate case sites. The case sites were the Philadelphia chapter of a major nationwide humanitarian crisis support and blood donation supplier, a sustainable and equitable food and nutrition provider based in Philadelphia, and the South Jersey chapter of a shelter and nutrition support provider for families whose children are hospitalized or in treatment. Stake (1995) defines a multiple-case study as a qualitative research approach in which several cases are studied jointly to understand a phenomenon, population, or general condition more deeply. In this study, the cases were bound by location, time, and setting, focusing specifically on three social organizations utilizing adult

volunteer services in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region. These cases served as the basis for conducting qualitative interviews with participants (adult volunteers) and for observing their behavioral and physical cues in their natural setting while volunteering. The informal distributed leadership behavior exhibited by the adult volunteers was the unit of analysis for this study. By focusing on a single unit of analysis, the research study departs from a multi-case nested design. In a multi-case nested design, the researcher investigates several bounded systems, such as organizations, projects, or communities, while simultaneously focusing on specific, smaller subunits within each case (Mills et al., 2010). However, the present study prioritized an in-depth exploration of a single, clearly defined unit of analysis, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

This study used semistructured interviews and in-person observations as its data collection methods. At a fundamental level, semistructured interviews and in-person observations are the most applicable data-gathering methods for a qualitative multiple case study because they most directly capture meaning, behavior, and context simultaneously, which is the core purpose of qualitative inquiry (Bhattacharya, 2017; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Creswell, 1998; DeMarrais, 2004). In studying informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations, semistructured interviews and in-person observations better enabled the examination of a phenomenon as it is non-positional, fluid, and situationally situated. Semistructured interviews helped surface implicit leadership experiences, motivations, and ethical orientations, while observations allow the researcher to identify leadership enacted through everyday interactions, influence, and collaboration. The multiple data collection

approach ensured that I examined leadership both as a lived experience and as an observable practice.

I identified and recruited participants through purposive sampling, and interviewed the participants in this study in person or via Zoom, and asked open-ended questions. I also asked follow-up questions if required based on the participants' responses to develop further understanding of the phenomenon. The interview questions used in this study elicited narratives, perceptions, and understandings of the volunteers' experiences.

In addition to interviews, I conducted in-person observations of volunteer behavior at the case sites. Observing participants in their regular activities enabled me to capture authentic interactions, routines, and situational dynamics that were not evident from self-reports. This approach aligned with the qualitative case study methodology, which emphasizes phenomena in real-life contexts (Gray, 2009; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Through non-intrusive observation, I documented behavioral patterns, communication styles, roles, and situational responses that revealed how volunteers make meaning of their experiences and enact leadership. I used observational logs to record descriptive details of settings, activities, movements and interactions, along with reflective notes for analytical insights.

The data collected from semistructured interviews and in-person observations provided a richer, more holistic understanding of the cases. I used the data to identify emerging themes or patterns. Collectively, this multi-source approach facilitated a more nuanced, and contextually detailed understanding of the case by capturing both the subjective meanings and observable perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers in urban social organizational settings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis used in this study is best described by the steps of the thematic analysis protocol (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research strategy for identifying, analyzing, and reporting identifiable themes or patterns within data. There are multiple phases to this process: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data; (2) generating initial codes or categories for possible placement of themes; (3) collating these codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing the chosen themes and checking that these work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, effectively generating a thematic "map" of the analysis; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) producing the report. In this research, I interpreted the data using a process of categorical aggregation based on the conceptual framework of the study, and I applied the integrated lens derived from the framework to analyze the data to guide my analysis and interpretation. In this process, I established patterns that correspond to the themes by developing a detailed analytical memo for each case and by producing the respective case reports. In addition to respective case analysis, cross-case analysis was also performed. I used the detailed analytical memos from each case to produce a cross-case report. The cross-case analysis using the respective analytical memos as the dataset allowed me to identify meaningful patterns and explanations across the multiple sites, enabling me to develop a case report that holistically examines informal distributed leadership behavior in social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region.

Significance of the Study

This study furthered leadership scholarship by foregrounding an Eastern philosophical perspective on leadership, an area that remains marginal within the current body of leadership scholarship. Much leadership literature has been largely shaped by Western, individual-oriented,

and authority-centered paradigms (Dodamgoda et al., 2024; Ellahi Khan et al., 2021; Trinh & Castillo, 2020). In the American context, sociologist and Nobel laureate Jane Addams championed a care-based approach to leadership, emphasizing collective democratic problem-solving and community emancipation (Burnier, 2022). Similarly, contemporary scholars and social change advocates such as Simpson (2024) and Brown (2017) have moved scholarship on leadership towards collaborative leadership, emphasizing association, experimentation, feelings, and care, and by moving away from individualistic models. Based on the emergent strategy, such leadership operates from a diffractive and relational method, shifting away from rigid control towards organic, adaptive, and fractal change. Hence, to add to the body of work on nonhierarchical, organic leadership development, this study of informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in social organizations is of substantial significance. The study responded to growing scholarly calls to further examine leadership knowledge systems from an Eastern philosophical perspective that prioritizes community over individualism, and to examine leadership enacted through relational influence, shared responsibility, and contextual practice (Dodamgoda et al., 2024; Ellahi Khan et al., 2021; Trinh & Castillo, 2020).

Secondly, by centering leadership principles grounded in selfless service, and a commitment to positive change, the study advanced an alternative conceptualization of leadership that provides alternate views to dominant power- and position-based frameworks and their limitations (Knights & O'Leary, 2006; Pyles, 2020). Building on traditional perspectives, Janda (1960) and Burns (1978) argued that leadership must be viewed from the perspective of power, as leadership is a special form of power. Power in its various forms (coercive, legitimate, reward, expert, bureaucratic, and charismatic) is present to some degree in any leader–follower relationship (French & Raven, 1959). At the same time, values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors

persist across generations, cultures, and social evolution, underscoring the importance of various leadership forms in different situations. Leadership studies scholar Uhl-Bien (2021) explains this from a complexity leadership theory of generative emergence perspective, to better understand leadership during crisis and complexity, where leaders and followers adapt rather than ignore or retreat. Given this complexity, there is a spectrum of leadership needs that different leadership formulations can address, and this study added to that spectrum by examining informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers. Furthermore, the study aimed to contribute to de-individualized leadership literature by exploring behavior beyond the complications of ego and self-interest (Ciulla, 2004), thereby underscoring the need to study alternative leadership practices. Moving from theoretical exploration to practical investigation, this research examined how such alternative leadership orientations emerge, are enacted, and are sustained within organizational contexts, thereby demonstrating their conceptual and practical significance.

Finally, the study responded to ongoing structural transformations characterized by the gradual flattening of hierarchical organizational arrangements. This gradual flattening is driven by generational, technological, and economic shifts (Rajan & Wulf, 2006). As leadership expectations continue to evolve, particularly among Generation Z, there is an increasing need to explore leadership frameworks that emphasize relational influence, collective agency, and ethical service (Dwidienawati et al., 2022).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was subject to some limitations that should be considered. First, the focus on informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region necessarily narrowed the scope of inquiry to a limited

demographic and geographic area. Notably, the study's construct of informal distributed leadership was distinct from leaderless or headless structures; instead, it examined how leadership emerges informally in environments where formal roles may exist but are not the primary focus. Furthermore, the study deliberately avoided engaging with the complex scholarly distinctions among leaders, managers, administrators, and visionaries and concentrated on understanding informal leadership behaviors as they emerged among adult volunteers in urban settings. While this focus enabled an in-depth exploration of informal distributed leadership dynamics, it may have limited the transferability of findings to contexts where leadership is more formally defined or structurally embedded.

Second, the study was bound by the decision not to examine in detail the formally designated manager or supervisor beyond acknowledging their functional presence. To clarify, these formal leaders, for example, volunteer coordinators, hold official responsibilities for coordination and continuity, but the study's central interest lied in the spontaneous and informal leadership expressed by volunteers rather than those appointed by the organization. This delimitation meant that the study did not consider the specific interplay or overlap between formal authority and emergent informal leadership, focusing instead on the informal leadership processes. In social organizations where the absence or reduced visibility of formal managers can create conditions for informal leaders to emerge, the study may not have accounted for all organizational contingencies that shape leadership behavior, and is primarily focused on adult volunteers who have been associated with the social organization for a considerable period of time.

Third, the study is limited by its examination of settings in which volunteers collectively manage activities without any single individual being formally assigned greater responsibility or

power than others. Here, it is important to clarify that the study distinguished such collectively managed environments from those with formal power structures and examined only those in which leadership arises collaboratively and informally. By focusing on such an environment, the study investigated a specific, constrained leadership ecology appropriate to the study context. These constraints did not diminish the value of the study but instead highlighted the need for continued research into the diverse configurations of leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations.

Operationalization of Terms

The critical operational definitions in this study include *adults, informal distributed leadership*, *urban, volunteers*, and the *Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region*, where the study was based.

Adults: The World Health Organization (2016) defined an adult as someone older than 19 years of age unless specified otherwise by local country laws. This implies that an adult is someone older than 19, but the exact age can vary by context and national law.

Informal Distributed Leadership: Informal distributed leadership is a collaborative form of leadership that emerges organically through everyday interactions rather than formal authority (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Such leadership is distributed among individuals who step into roles based on their skills, trust, and situational needs. This approach emphasizes leadership as a collective, relationship-driven process involving multiple people and contexts.

Urban: An urban area is a densely-populated human settlement with a high concentration of commercial, residential, and industrial infrastructure (Pickett et al., 1997). While the simple definition refers to cities and towns, specific criteria vary significantly depending on the organization or country.

Volunteers: A volunteer is an individual who offers their time, energy, and skills for civic, charitable, or humanitarian reasons without receiving financial compensation. This service is performed voluntarily and without coercion, unlike that of a paid employee. Volunteering can either be *formal*, organized by an official nonprofit or charitable organization, or *informal*, involving simply helping out in one's community. Cnaan et al. (1996) identified four key dimensions in the definition of a volunteer: the voluntary nature of the act, the nature of the reward, the context of the volunteer activity, and the beneficiary of the voluntary activity.

Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region: The Southeastern Pennsylvania Metro Region, also known as the Greater Philadelphia Area, is centered on the city of Philadelphia and includes the Pennsylvania counties of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery. It is also part of a larger multistate Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) that extends into New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland, encompassing the Philadelphia–Camden–Wilmington metropolitan area (philaworks.org, n.d.).

Overview of this Study

This research endeavor was structured into five distinct chapters. Chapter one introduces the research context, delineates the problem, and establishes its significance. It underlines the importance of studying the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers, as it expands understanding of how leadership emerges organically in community-based environments outside formal hierarchies. This chapter also succinctly outlines the problem statement, research purpose, and questions, and delves into the study's significance and limitations.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature on informal distributed leadership, volunteerism, adult volunteer behavior, and leadership within community-

based and social organizations. Chapter two also looks in detail at Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership, which form elements of the conceptual framework for this study. The chapter reviews existing literature on adult volunteer leadership through the Gandhian philosophical lens, the servant leadership theory lens, and the social change model of leadership lens, identifying the gap in the literature that this study addresses in the context of urban social organizations.

Chapter three provides a detailed account of the research design and methodology. It describes how the multiple-case study approach is well-suited to address the research questions. This chapter also delves into the specifics of the research methods, encompassing participant recruitment strategies, data collection and analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

Chapter four is dedicated to presenting the research findings, bolstered by pertinent data from the participant accounts, observations and environmental settings.

Chapter five discusses the research outcomes and positions them within broader academic discourse. It explores the implications of the findings for leadership scholarship, adult development, and volunteerism. The chapter also contributes to conversations on social change and community practice in the urban context. Finally, it offers recommendations for subsequent research and concludes with a summation of the research study.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the study's context, the research problem and purpose, the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the methodology. In this study, I have employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers at social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region. The study examined this phenomenon by drawing on a

combined conceptual framework of Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership, and the social change model of leadership. The combined framework provided the integrated lens of selfless service leadership for positive social change to study informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in urban social organizations. Finally, the chapter covered the study's limitations and delimitations, as well as the operationalization of key terms used throughout.

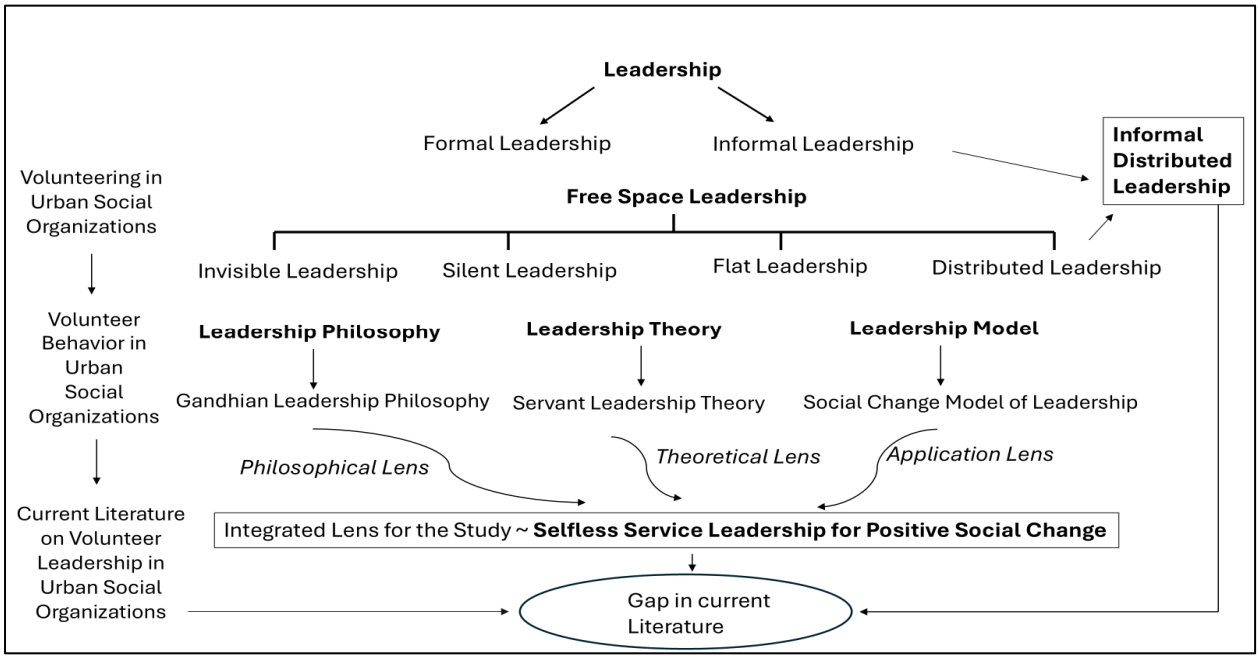
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on the act of volunteering, the urban social organizations in which volunteers provide their services, volunteer behavior, and leadership development among volunteers. I began by examining volunteering in urban contexts, with particular attention to volunteer behavior and characteristics as they manifest within complex, resource-constrained, and socially dense urban environments. I then explored leadership as an evolving construct, highlighting the dichotomy between formal and informal leadership. I also discuss emerging perspectives, such as free space leadership, which conceptualize leadership forms operating beyond formal designations and structures. Building on this foundation, I examined informal distributed leadership as a socially enacted, relational phenomenon that is particularly salient among urban volunteers. The literature review then looked at Gandhian leadership philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership in detail. Together, these frameworks informed the development of the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens: the lens that was applied to study informal distributed leadership among urban volunteers as part of this research. Furthermore, I examined the existing literature on volunteer leadership behavior. The chapter concludes by discussing the current literature on informal distributed leadership among urban volunteers.

Figure 3 provides a schematic representation of the literature review for this study and the pathway applied towards the identification of the gap in the literature that warranted further scholarly investigation. The figure maps the relationships among existing bodies of scholarship and in doing so systematically illustrates how the current study is situated within the broader academic discourse.

Figure 3

Schematic Representation of the Literature Review



Volunteering in Urban Social Organizations

Volunteering within urban social organizations constitutes a critical component of the social infrastructure that supports community functioning in complex metropolitan environments (Paarlberg et al., 2021). Urban social organizations such as community centers, service agencies, healthcare support organizations, food security organizations, urban farms, shelters, and mutual-aid networks operate as vital intermediaries that connect volunteer labor with local community needs (Chambré, 2020; Rotolo & Wilson, 2014). Many of these community needs are shaped by demographic diversity, resource disparities, and social fragmentation. Volunteers in these settings engage in activities that address structural inequities and service gaps, thereby helping deliver essential programs and enhancing community well-being. The heterogeneity of volunteer motivations in urban contexts reflects the multifaceted nature of urban life and encompasses altruistic aims, civic responsibility, identity formation, and social connectedness (Grueter et al.,

2019; Hooghe & Botterman, 2012). Importantly, volunteering in urban social organizations fosters social capital by strengthening networks of trust and reciprocity among residents, countering the anonymity often associated with urban living. Through these contributions, urban volunteerism bolsters community resilience, promotes social cohesion, and supports the functioning of social systems in dynamic, densely populated settings (Chambré, 2020). Hustinx et al. (2010) provided multiple perspectives on volunteering and examined the phenomenon from economic, sociological, psychological, and political perspectives, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of the study of volunteering in social organizations, especially in an urban context.

Economic Perspective

The altruistic nature of volunteerism conflicts with economic models, especially when the costs exceed the benefits. Andreoni (1990), Freeman (1997), and Ziemek (2006) referred to this as *prosocial behavior*. They saw it as a way to strengthen a community's social networks. The *consumption model* highlights private benefits, such as the joy or warmth that volunteers experience (Andreoni, 1990; Rose-Ackerman, 1996). Economists describe volunteers as people who work for others' benefit. This model is based on the idea of pure altruism. Here, volunteers primarily focus on recipients' well-being (Duncan, 1999; Unger, 1991). Some economists, however, say people are "impure altruists" (Andreoni, 1990, p. 467) who value both private and public benefits from volunteering. In this case, giving and volunteering add to a person's utility twice: once as a private good and once as a public good. This brings both private and public rewards. From an organizational perspective, economists focus on the supply and demand of volunteers. Much literature has looked at the supply side. It often assumes that groups will use all volunteer labor offered to them, regardless of job quality or quantity (Freeman, 1997; Menchik &

Weisbrod, 1987; Smith, 1994). In other words, some believe the demand for volunteers is endless when the pay is zero.

Sociological Perspective

Sociologists understand volunteering to be a complex social phenomenon, characterized by patterns of social relationships and interactions among individuals, groups, and organizations. At its core, volunteering raises the classical sociological questions of social order and solidarity, emphasizing the ways individuals are integrated into society (Ellis & Noyes, 1990). In this context, volunteering refers to the social ties that bind people together, forming a distinctive type of bond separate from those based on kinship, professional roles, or state-mandated solidarity (welfare systems). Due to its voluntary, unpaid, and community-focused nature, volunteering is seen as an exceptional form of social solidarity that sustains social cohesion (Hustinx et al., 2010). It is a primary expression of values such as altruism, compassion, generosity, social responsibility, and a sense of community (Wuthnow, 1991). As such, volunteering fosters individuals' sense of belonging and group identity while promoting social integration. Cultural perspectives explore the broader *values of volunteering*, considering both the meaning attributed to volunteering and the processes by which these values are socialized through family, peers, and education (Bekkers, 2007; Cnaan et al., 1996; Janoski et al., 1998; Wuthnow, 1991). While researchers often focus on collective values and the social cohesion that volunteering provides, it is also important to recognize the tangible contributions volunteers make. Volunteer work often complements professional services, provides a personal dimension to professional roles, identifies social needs, challenges injustice, and empowers disadvantaged communities (Ellis & Noyes, 1990).

Psychological Perspective

Among social and personality psychologists, there is a long-standing tradition of research on prosocial behavior (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). The study of volunteerism provides a distinctive perspective on the nature of helping and on prosocial actions (Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Penner, 2002). Volunteering is a sustained and planned form of prosocial behavior that typically results from careful consideration and choice. The psychological study of volunteering thus concerns identifying personality traits that distinguish volunteers from non-volunteers and that relate to various aspects of volunteer behavior (Hustinx et al., 2010). While economists assume rational behavior on the part of all individuals, and sociologists focus on the social determinants of prosocial behavior, psychologists highlight individual differences in psychological characteristics (Bekkers, 2007). Moreover, these personality traits are stable dispositions to act in a certain way, regardless of the situation, and this is why they are appealing: "knowing something about an individual's personality enables us to anticipate how he or she will react to situations, such as being asked to volunteer" (Musick & Wilson, 2007, p. 39). Specific traits that are characteristic of volunteers include social value orientation, empathic concern, perspective-taking, self-efficacy, and positive self-esteem (Bekkers, 2007; Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). More generally, the cluster of traits typical of volunteers is labeled as the *prosocial personality type*, with other-oriented empathy and helpfulness as the two core dimensions (Penner, 2002).

Political Science Perspective

Political science sees volunteerism as a major requirement for an active civic society and democracy (Hustinx et al., 2010). According to Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005), volunteering is considered a way "to instill civic values, enhance political behavior, and improve democracy

and society" (p. 230). People can claim their rights and enrich their community's quality of life only when they are allowed to organize, are capable of doing so, and form their own volunteer-led organizations. Sufficient volunteer labor is a required commodity for civic organizations to sustain the ability to generate bridging social capital, thus assisting communities effectively, and to serve as a buffer between citizens and power centers such as governments and corporations. Without active volunteer participation, society is at risk of being totalitarian and oppressive (Hustinx et al., 2010). Verba et al. (1995) found that volunteer activities provide many citizens with opportunities to acquire civic skills and promote political participation.

Volunteer Behavior and Characteristics

Volunteer activities can range from political undertakings designed to promote social justice and equity to providing basic care for others and supporting community culture and art. This study focuses on volunteer behavior that is aligned with community care, change, and social well-being efforts through the gift of time and labor to social organizations. The underpinning of volunteer actions is the prosocial behavior (Clary & Snyder, 1991). The need for unselfish acts to serve the community and help others can be motivated by religious values, personal beliefs, and positionality. Clary and Snyder (1991) defined *volunteering* as voluntary actions that benefit others or the community, such as offering time, skills, or emotional support. It is important to distinguish prosocial behavior, altruism, and volunteering: prosocial behavior is a broad category encompassing all actions intended to help others; altruism is a specific subset of prosocial behavior that is characterized by selfless assistance given without expectation of benefit to oneself; and volunteering describes actions undertaken deliberately to benefit others or the community, which may be driven by both selfless and personal motivations (Clary & Snyder, 1991). These distinctions are critical in volunteering, since volunteers act for complex reasons,

including altruism, values, social identity, community attachment, and reciprocal benefits. Their prosocial actions are also seen as indicators of social capital. As Briggs et al. (2009) noted, volunteers help build trust, reinforce reciprocity, and sustain the relational networks that support community cohesion. Volunteers foster connections among diverse groups, enable resource exchange, and strengthen communal resilience. Thus, volunteerism functions as both a personal act and a social process (Mannino et al., 2011), generating collective benefits and enhancing communities.

Volunteers are passionate about their cause and motivated to effect positive change. They are driven by motivation, commitment, and service (Erdurmazlı, 2019). Key aspects of volunteering include reliability, volunteer commitment, and alignment with the social organization's mission statement (Musick & Wilson, 2007). Volunteers are social beings and often thrive in community settings. They are often comfortable working in teams with people from all walks of life, assuming both leadership and follower roles at times or simultaneously, and transcending the group-volunteer setting (Shamir, 2007). Persistence is also an essential behavioral attribute of volunteers when meeting community needs. They must aspire to effect positive change and be willing to help, regardless of class, race, age, or background. At its core, volunteering is a selfless gesture; volunteers give their time, skills, or resources to others in need, exhibiting naturally compassionate and empathetic traits.

Van Til (1988) identified five characteristics of volunteerism: (1) people volunteer to satisfy personal and social goals and needs; (2) individuals who volunteer typically do so after carefully weighing alternatives; (3) voluntary action is complex and multifaceted, as different organizational tasks appeal to different motivational forces; (4) concern for others, although not always purely altruistic, remains a key force among volunteers; and (5) the motivation to give is

shaped by broader social realities (e.g., to leave the world a better place and drive positive change). Studies have found that the ability to show empathy, self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, a strong moral foundation, and self-image awareness influences the tendency to volunteer (Piliavin & Charng, 1990; Smith, 1994). Mowen and Sujan (2005) drew parallels to charity-giving, with volunteerism being the gift of time and labor.

Formal volunteering involves structured roles in organizations; informal volunteering happens spontaneously to help others in the community (Lee & Brudney, 2012). Formal volunteering is any unpaid time for organizational activities. Informal volunteering is help given directly to non-household individuals, such as a neighbor or friend (Carson, 1999; Cnaan & Amrofell, 1994; Wilson & Musick, 1997). According to Peters-Davis et al. (2001), volunteering among elderly adults can be understood as a productive role influenced by a combination of cultural, structural, personality, and situational factors.

Among the behavioral predictors of volunteerism, personality traits, in addition to altruism, openness to experience, and structural, cultural, and situational elements, contribute to shaping volunteer engagement (Sundeen, 1990; Sundeen et al., 2007). Volunteer motivation can be seen as an exchange of costs and benefits, or as a social obligation to repay society (Winniford et al., 1997). Studies by Penner and Finkelstein (1998), Penner et al. (1995), and Stukas et al. (2016) have traced prosocial motivations, encompassing a wide range of reasons, as a key behavioral trait driving volunteering. In their studies, participants cited a desire to help others, a sense of altruism, belief in a cause, and a desire to contribute their skills and knowledge as reasons for volunteering. These motivations are often deeply rooted in personal experiences and values and reflect a genuine desire to positively impact the lives of others and the community. These observations align with Cho et al.'s (2020) findings that altruism is the

overarching reason people volunteer; the participants in their study expressed a desire to help and enjoyed the feeling of helping others. Some expressed a desire to give back to the community, citing their upbringing as a reason to be involved.

Extrinsic Motivational Factors in Volunteer Behavior

Extrinsic motivation to volunteer is when someone volunteers to gain an external reward or avoid a negative consequence, rather than out of an internal desire to help. Examples include volunteering to enhance a resume, gain praise, recognition, or receive a tangible benefit, such as a certificate (Cho et al., 2020; Clary et al., 1998; Phillips & Phillips, 2010; Stukas et al., 2008). Extrinsic motivation to volunteer is characterized by external motives for helping, with no evidence of prosocial tendencies or a volunteer self-concept (Finkelstein, 2009). Gidron (1978) grouped extrinsic motivation into five categories: (1) learning and self-development, (2) social interaction with other volunteers, (3) symbols of social recognition, (4) praise, and (5) authority. Additionally, Gidron (1978) concluded that volunteer service is not purely altruistic, as volunteers often express an expectation of various rewards for their service. External regulation, driven by external pressure, or internal regulation, driven by internal pressures, such as a need to prove one's worth, avoid guilt, or please others, leads the volunteer to feel a sense of self-obligation rather than to act because the activity itself is meaningful (Finkelstein, 2009).

With extrinsic motivation, volunteers see the value of the activity, even if it is not enjoyable in itself. They participate because the work aligns with their goals, though the aim remains external. Moreno-Jiménez and Villodres (2010) found that extrinsic motives increase burnout, while intrinsic motives (like values and understanding) reduce it.

Intrinsic Motivational Factors in Volunteer Behavior

Intrinsic motivation is the inner drive to do an activity for its inherent enjoyment, engagement, or satisfaction (Geiser et al., 2014). This drive stems from personal fulfillment, curiosity, or pleasure in mastering a skill, making the activity itself the reward and promoting creativity and sustained engagement. Higher intrinsic motivation is associated with a prosocial personality, internal motives for volunteering, and the development of a volunteer identity (Finkelstein, 2009).

Building on this understanding of intrinsic motivation, volunteer intrinsic motivation has been conceptualized as driven by concern for others' welfare (altruistic motives) or by the desire to feel good about oneself (egoistic motives) (Frisch & Gerrard, 1981). Clary et al. (1996) developed the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI) to assess six motivations underpinning volunteerism: (1) *values*, or the principles that are important; (2) *understanding*, or the ability to learn new information or new skills; (3) *social*, such as the ability to build relationships with new people and build social capital; (4) *protective (functions)*, referring to coping with stress or diminishing negative emotions (e.g., guilt or conflict); (5) *career*, or the building up of existing work-related skills and of human capital; and (6) *enhancement*, or the opportunity to enhance psychological development or personal growth.

Values refer to principles that individuals deem to be important. Building on this, Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) stated that volunteering is an emotional and value-based activity. It often brings culturally diverse groups together. This diversity leads to differences in what is valued and how values are formed. Specifically, value formation in volunteers occurs through the influence of personal experiences, family, friends, community, religion, and society (Allison et al., 2002; Chapman & Morley, 1999; Fletcher & Major, 2004; Gage & Thapa, 2012).

Furthermore, values serve as a primary motive for volunteers in nonprofit organizations (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Building on the significance of values as motivators, another important factor in volunteerism is understanding. *Understanding* is defined as "the opportunity for volunteerism to permit new learning experiences and the chance to exercise knowledge, skills, and abilities that might otherwise go unpracticed" (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1518). In a study by Allison et al. (2002), understanding ranked second among episodic community volunteers. These findings highlighted learning and development as key motivators. Likewise, Gage and Thapa (2012) observed that the desire to learn and gain new experiences was a primary motive. These findings further linked understanding to the motivation to develop knowledge and skills through volunteer activities.

Bourdieu (1986) defined *social capital* as the collective resources linked to enduring networks of relationships. The central argument here is that volunteering and social capital have a mutually reinforcing relationship: volunteering builds social capital by fostering trust and cooperation, while existing social capital enables volunteerism to flourish. Social capital is conceptualized as resources embedded in social relationships, shaped by one's position within a network (Lin, 2000). Formed through networks of trust and shared values, social capital exists within both formal organizations and informal groups (Putnam, 2000, 2001). Communities with high social capital demonstrate successful volunteer initiatives that enhance overall well-being, and providing volunteer opportunities strengthens these networks. Research shows that a person's social capital influences their decision to volunteer (Mesch et al., 2006; Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2001) found that social connectedness better predicts altruistic behaviors, including volunteering, than human or physical capital, as webs of relationships facilitate collective action through coordination and communication. Individuals more embedded in community networks are therefore more likely to volunteer (Lee & Brudney, 2009). The effectiveness of volunteering

increases in proportion to the relationships individuals have, whether with friends or through memberships and citizenship (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001). Volunteering can also be an expression of identity, "a feeling of being linked to those who will benefit from one's labor" (Musick et al., 2000, p. 1540). Volunteering and the psychological sense of community demonstrate a reciprocal relationship: volunteering enhances community feeling, and a strong sense of community can prompt further volunteering (Okun & Michel, 2006).

Protective functions relate to "the need of people involved in voluntary work to alleviate personal negative feelings" (Pauline & Pauline, 2009, p. 174). The protective function is the ego-protective motivation for volunteering, in which a person uses volunteer work to protect their ego or escape from negative feelings. It provides a temporary psychological escape from a person's own troubles by keeping them mentally stimulated and engaged with something other than their personal life (Clary & Snyder, 1999). Volunteering in this capacity can help alleviate guilt over one's own relative fortune, take one's mind off personal problems, or aid in coping with the grief of a loss.

Becker (1962, 1993) and Mincer (1974) defined *human capital* as resources that yield income and other valuable outputs over time. Research has shown that higher levels of human capital are positively associated with volunteering (Freeman, 1997; McPherson & Rotolo, 1996). Individuals with more education or better health may be more inclined to volunteer in formal settings or take on roles requiring specialized skills. Clary et al. (1998) defined the career motivation for volunteers as being "concerned with career-related benefits that may be obtained from participation in volunteer work" (p. 1518). Eley and Kirk (2002) found that one's *career* was a motive for volunteering. Specifically, students were more often motivated by career considerations than older volunteers. Volunteers often learn new skills or refine existing ones,

bolstering their sense of competence and development (Khasanzyanova, 2017). Some also volunteer because their workplaces promote it as a corporate goal to advance careers and broaden networking opportunities (Phillips & Phillips, 2010; Stukas et al., 2008). Thus, volunteering increases employees' human capital.

Enhancement includes "the desire of volunteers to experience satisfactions related to personal growth and self-esteem" (Pauline & Pauline, 2009, p. 174). Allison et al. (2002) also found that volunteers in a local community were motivated by the desire to enhance the feeling of self-worth. Volunteering for a cause that matters to the volunteers provides a deep sense of purpose and meaning. Knowing that one's efforts are making a difference and contributing to something larger than oneself gives volunteers a powerful sense of fulfillment (Bang & Ross, 2009; Wilson & Musick, 1999).

Altruism

Altruism is defined as acting with genuine selfless concern for another person's well-being (Clary & Synder, 1999; Musick & Wilson, 2007). True altruism specifically describes helping others with the exclusive aim of benefiting them, even at personal cost and without expecting external or internal rewards (Batson, 1991). Altruism is a core behavioral factor for volunteers and involves a selfless desire to help others. It can lead to personal satisfaction while fostering empathy and a sense of community. Batson (1991) defined altruism as "a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare" (p. 6). While the ideal is selfless giving, research suggests that personal benefits and altruistic motivations often coexist and can reinforce each other, leading to increased volunteering and social benefits (Unger, 1991). Altruism in volunteering is the desire to improve others' lives, and it is often driven by empathy, or a feeling of sympathy that motivates helping behaviors (Smith, 1981). A volunteer with high

empathy feels a genuine desire to reduce others' suffering and is more likely to sustain helping behavior.

Purely altruistic motivation focuses exclusively on others' welfare without expectations of personal gain. Many volunteers act on core values or humanitarian concerns, such as making a positive social change or helping those less fortunate (Bierhoff, 2002; Haski-Leventhal, 2009). The desire to contribute to a larger cause is often the primary reason for involvement and is driven by empathy or deeply held values. Volunteering is described as the most organized and formal manner of altruism (Haski-Leventhal, 2009) and as doing good "works" (Unger, 1991). When altruistic tendencies are channeled into volunteer work, they create a mix of societal contribution and personal fulfillment. Other-oriented empathy, that is, the feeling of responsibility for others' welfare, is a key attribute of volunteer behavior (Penner, 2002; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). The joy and desire to help are major motivators.

The Sense of Service

The sense of service among volunteers leads to a combination of internal and external rewards that come from helping others and contributing to a community (Winniford et al., 1997). Volunteers often find that this engagement fuels a sense of purpose and a connection to something larger than oneself. As a result, they experience benefits such as improved mental and physical health, increased life satisfaction, and greater self-esteem (Anderson et al., 2014; Jenkinson et al., 2013; Nichol et al., 2023). Experiences that foster empathy, personal growth, and connection to the community cultivate this sense of purpose, often bringing increased happiness and reduced stress. Penner (2002) described volunteer behavior as a prosocial personality trait that serves as an antecedent to sustained help and service. In a similar way,

Sundeen et al. (2007) applied an Eastern philosophical lens, describing volunteering as *serva* or *seva* (selfless service), which involves willingly performing menial duties.

The Ethical/Moral/Spiritual Compass

Govekar and Govekar (2002) defined volunteering as a conscious good or activity. A more nuanced view suggests that the propensity to volunteer, or the *volunteerism-activism attitude*, is a blend of feelings that produces a feel-good factor and a sense of moral duty (Bales, 1996). For many volunteers, volunteering is a way to express religious or spiritual values and to feel closer to the divine through selfless service (Sundeen et al., 2007). The act of giving is seen as a way of repaying a higher power. Volunteering can provide a strong sense of meaning and purpose, especially for those who feel disconnected or in transition. It can serve as a spiritual anchor, bringing clarity and fulfillment.

Building on this understanding of volunteering, the voluntariness with which supererogate deeds are done is therefore of a special character (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2009). It is not only about the free will out of which they flow, but also about the quality of the free commitment. Supererogatory actions should not be the consequence of extreme pressure or the threat of sanctions, but rather the absence of pressure; they are rooted in a freedom lived in positive dedication. In this regard, supererogatory actions are performed out of a stronger sense of freedom than those done out of moral duty, even though the latter must be performed freely to possess intrinsic moral value (Burggraeve, 2015). The volunteer's ethical, moral, and spiritual compass stems from a blend of motivations that drives them to serve others, guided by principles such as humility, respect, and a sense of responsibility. It encompasses value-based and ethical frameworks.

The Passion to Drive Positive Change/Serve a Cause

Volunteers drive positive changes by aligning their passions with a cause, dedicating their time and skills to helping others, and improving their communities. Cuskelly et al. (1998) indicated that volunteers tend to commit themselves more thoroughly to organizations in a strong, positive manner as the services they undertake are more value-based and less tangible than those of paid employees. The purpose to serve a cause and the desire to improve things or help people are common motivators for volunteering. Volunteers are drawn to a cause because its mission and values align with their own, and they want to make a tangible difference. Bang and Ross (2009) and Finkelstein (2008) highlighted the importance of volunteerism as a benefit to organizations that extends beyond a simple service; it creates a powerful sense of purpose for the individual and provides invaluable, often unpaid, support to organizations working on social issues. Volunteers are agents of social change, contributing their time, talents, and passion to create a better world for all (Briggs et al., 2009).

The Influencer

Influencing skills for volunteers include communication, empathy, and leadership, which are developed through teamwork, problem-solving, and by adapting to new situations. Building on these foundations, key influencing skills are demonstrated through a strong work ethic, relationship-building, and the ability to motivate others to achieve actionable results (Da Silva Trajano et al., 2022). Volunteering requires working towards a common goal, managing groups, collaborating, and inspiring people. Importantly, volunteers “choose” to follow; they cannot be forced. Volunteers, therefore, rely on influence to motivate others and achieve goals (Camplin, 2009). Volunteers can support a cause in three main ways: by providing direct support, by acting as advocates, and by generating economic value (Briggs et al., 2009; Orr, 1982; Snyder &

Omoto, 2008; Wu, 2011). Their influence is strengthened by effective organization, social capital, and an authentic connection to the mission.

Leadership

Leadership has been a subject of study for centuries, extending from the early writings of Greek philosophers like Plato and Socrates (Bolden, 2004), Sun Tzu (Chow Hoi Hee & Gurd, 2010), and Chanakya (Pillai & Sivanandhan, 2014) to the modern-day insights of countless management and leadership experts. Leadership concepts, theories, and practices have been explored through extensive thinking, discussion, writing, teaching, and learning. In leadership research, Stogdill (1974) determined that there are "almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 259). Bolden (2004) argued that, in this changing global environment, leadership is key to the success of individuals, organizations, sectors, regions, and nations. Scholars have framed a range of theoretical approaches to explain the complexities of the leadership process (e.g., Bass, 1985; Bryman, 1992; Gardner, 1990; Hickman, 1998; Jaques, 1989; Mumford, 2006; Rost, 1991; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012) either as a trait or behavior or as an information processing perspective and relational standpoint. Broadly, leadership is considered either an expression of individual action (Bass, 1985) or a product of system and structure design (Jaques, 1989).

The key definitions of leadership examine the term from the perspectives of process, influence, social interaction, and common goals (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The *process* view of leadership sees leaders as individuals who influence groups to achieve a common goal (Brower et al., 2000). Defining leadership as a process emphasizes that it is not a fixed trait or characteristic within the leader but rather a dynamic interaction between the leader and followers; it is fundamentally about influence, without which leadership behavior is difficult to

manifest (Hollander & Julian, 1969). Leadership involves influencing a group of individuals who have a common purpose or goal.

Jago (1982) stated that the *trait* perspective of leadership holds that certain individuals possess innate or inborn characteristics that make them leaders, and that these qualities differentiate them from non-leaders. The trait viewpoint conceptualizes leadership as a set of properties possessed, such as physical attributes, personality attributes, or intelligence, in varying degrees by different people, with such traits then being used to influence followers.

The *assigned* form of leadership is based on formal position in an organization. Such leadership is based on occupying a position in an organization where leadership is assigned, with followers being specifically allocated to the leader (Sanders, 2014). The influence emanates from the position.

Ascribed leadership is conceptualized as a developmental and socially constructed process that emerges over time through demonstrated competence, reliability, and relational influence rather than through formal appointment or positional authority. As Eye (1975) suggests, ascribed leadership is earned through repeated performance in meaningful situations and hence is a function of time. Individuals gradually become recognized as leaders because they consistently solve problems, guide collective action, motivate peers, and contribute to organizational stability.

Winston and Patterson (2006) offered an integrative definition of leadership that conceptualizes a leader as an individual who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more followers. Each such leader possesses distinct talents, abilities, and skills to attain an organization's mission and goals. Central to their definition is the relational nature of leadership, in which influence motivates followers to commit their spiritual, emotional, and physical energy

willingly and passionately to a coordinated, collective effort. Similarly, Yukl (1994) conceptualized leadership as a process by which one individual influences group members to achieve shared group or organizational objectives. While Winston and Patterson's (2006) definition highlighted the moral and motivational dimensions of leadership, Yukl's (1994) process-oriented definition emphasized influence as a dynamic, situational phenomenon.

For the purposes of this study, I have adopted Yukl's (1994) definition of leadership, as it aligns closely with the context of volunteerism, where formal authority, designation-based power, and hierarchical control are often absent. In volunteer settings, leadership is less about positional status and more about influencing others to act collaboratively toward shared goals. Yukl's (1994) definition therefore provides a flexible and contextually appropriate lens for examining leadership as it emerges through interaction, cooperation, and collective commitment among adult volunteers.

Leadership Dichotomy

Leadership scholarship broadly distinguishes between formal and informal forms of leadership. Formal leadership means that leaders hold official designations within an organization or hierarchy, emphasizing top-down, leader-focused approaches. Informal leadership, however, arises without official authority and grows from relationships and shared actions. Traditional theories on formal leadership focus on authority, position, and traits, viewing leadership as the work of a designated person guiding others toward set goals (Burns, 1978; French & Raven, 1959; Janda, 1960). Newer perspectives see informal leadership as a process shaped by social interaction, shared influence, and group sense-making (Ciulla, 2004; Smart, 2010). Understanding this distinction is essential when examining contexts in which influence is

earned and leadership effectiveness depends more on trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose than on position and power.

Formal Leadership

Formal leadership refers to a situation where an individual holds an officially recognized position as the head of a group or organization. This role is tied to a specific job title, making it the leader's professional duty to inspire subordinates and oversee key elements that contribute to organizational success, such as decision-making and resource management (Bass & Bass, 2008). This research study aligns with this representation of formal leadership to express the contrast with regards to informal leadership.

Mintzberg (1973) extended the notion of formal leadership to *managership*, where the leader takes the role of a: (1) figurehead, (2) liaison, (3) monitor, (4) disseminator, (5) spokesman, (6) entrepreneur, (7) disturbance handler, (8) resource allocator, and (9) negotiator. Managerial leadership conceptualizes leadership from the perspective of a designated individual positioned within a defined organizational unit. It blends the qualities of a manager and a leader, focusing on both the operational tasks of management and the motivational aspects of leadership (Yukl, 1994). It involves guiding, motivating, and influencing team members to achieve organizational goals while ensuring efficient task completion and team development. Gardner (1990) outlined several tasks for a formal leader, including: (1) envisioning goals, (2) affirming shared values, (3) motivating others, (4) managing operations, (5) fostering a sense of unity, (6) providing clear explanations, (7) serving as a symbolic figure, (8) representing the group to external audiences, and (9) leading renewal and adaptation efforts.

In contrast to formal leadership's stress on hierarchy and authority, informal leadership emerges from personal influence and respect within a group. Informal leadership places stress on the ability to motivate others without formal authority.

Informal Leadership

Instead of relying on a title, informal leaders have the ability to influence through their actions, expertise, strong relationships, and positive reputation. They are often seen as trusted advisors and mentors who are respected for their knowledge and ability to help others. Smart (2010) described informal leadership as the ability to influence and guide others without holding a formal position of authority within an organization. Informal leaders gain influence by consistently demonstrating positive behaviors, building strong relationships, and earning the trust of their peers (Marion et al., 2016). They do not receive any special compensation or reward or hold the authority to hire or fire anyone within their informal leader roles (Smart, 2010).

Informal leadership is an individual's capacity to positively influence colleagues through personal credibility, professional competence, and the quality of workplace relationships (Pielstick, 2000). Unlike formal leaders, informal leaders do not have official designations or titles. Their influence emerges naturally through consistent behavior, expertise, and trust. As a result, informal leaders are respected and trusted by peers, who follow their guidance voluntarily (Smart, 2010). While they lack formal authority, informal leaders can significantly affect group functioning. They shape team attitudes by modeling constructive perspectives, guide behavioral norms through everyday actions, and can influence group decisions by offering insightful input and helping to reconcile differing viewpoints (Pitti et al., 2024). In many organizations, informal leadership complements or compensates for formal leadership by facilitating team coordination, strengthening cohesion, and supporting goal achievement through relational influence.

Free Space Leadership

Free space leadership refers to a leadership orientation that prioritizes the creation and protection of social, psychological, and organizational spaces in which individuals can engage beyond formal roles, hierarchical constraints, and routine procedures (Evans & Boyte, 1986; Wheatley, 2006). Rather than relying on positional authority or directive control, free space leadership emphasizes enabling conditions that foster dialogue, experimentation, shared meaning-making, and collective agency. The concepts of *invisible leadership*, *silent leadership*, *flat leadership*, and *distributed leadership* have been developed to describe a type of leadership that emerges within a *free space*, a setting where leadership arises organically rather than through formal structures or authority (Evans & Boyte, 1986). Within these "free spaces," leadership emerges relationally as individuals exercise initiative, and influence is grounded in trust and mutual recognition rather than in formal designation. *Invisible leadership* is a style focused on subtle influence, empowerment, and a compelling common purpose rather than formal authority or the spotlight (Hickman, 2004; Hickman & Sorenson, 2014). Invisible leadership enables teams to grow and take ownership by leading from behind, fostering trust, and making an impact through actions and shared vision rather than personal recognition. *Silent leadership*, also known as *quiet leadership*, is a leadership style that emphasizes action, thoughtful communication, and creating a positive environment through example rather than overt commands (Nurohman, 2025). In silent leadership, leaders lead by example, demonstrating desired behaviors and consistently embodying key values. *Flat leadership* is a leadership structure characterized by the absence of management layers, decentralized decision-making, and increased autonomy. This model, prevalent in innovative and collaborative environments, fosters engagement and innovation by empowering resources. Flat leadership refers to a less hierarchical

form of leadership where the structure and practice of leadership are more collaborative and relational than position-based (Beach & Rutledge, 2019). It is an approach to leadership that seeks to upend the traditional pyramidal leadership structures that generally define the leadership structure of most organizations. *Distributed leadership* is a leadership structure that emphasizes collaboration, shared decision-making, and the collective expertise of the team, rather than relying solely on a hierarchical structure. Gronn (2002) defined distributed leadership as a group of individuals with disparate skills and knowledge who come together to complete tasks and then disperse and maintain intuitive working relations.

Understanding distributed leadership is essential to studying informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers, as it provides a foundation for examining leadership as a relational, emergent, and shared practice rather than a function restricted to individuals in formal positions of authority. A distributed leadership perspective therefore shifts attention from identifying who holds a leadership position to understanding how leadership is enacted and how influence moves among participants.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership emphasizes collective expertise rather than locating leadership exclusively in formal positions or hierarchical domains. Gronn (2002) conceptualized distributed leadership as individuals with diverse skills, knowledge, and experience forming interdependent working relationships to complete the task at hand. Harris (2007) highlights the spontaneous alignment aspect of distributed leadership, in which leadership functions may emerge without formal planning or predetermined assignment. Distributed leadership counters the view that leadership must originate from a single formally designated individual by recognizing leadership as embedded in interactions and collective practice. Denis et al. (2012) further situated

leadership within collective processes, emphasizing how leadership can be shared across multiple individuals whose complementary knowledge, capabilities, and influence contribute toward common purposes.

Informal Distributed Leadership

Informal distributed leadership is a form of leadership that grows naturally from daily interactions, relationships, and practices rather than being held solely by people with official titles or positions (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Based on social and relationship-based views, this way of leading sees leadership as something shared and co-created, encompassing many people, tasks, and situations (Spillane et al., 2004). In informal distributed leadership, influence comes from many people, including volunteers, peers, and frontline members. It is these people who take on leadership roles because of their skills, trustworthiness, dedication, or because the situation calls for it, not because they have official power (Bolden, 2011).These informal leaders help with understanding problems, coordinating work, and solving issues, guiding the organization through quiet, relationship-based, and often hard-to-see ways. This type of leadership is especially important in nonprofit, community, and volunteer groups, where people are motivated from within and strict hierarchies are often neither useful nor desired (Benevene et al., 2024). Informal distributed leadership builds trust, joint ownership, and a sense of safety by supporting teamwork, conversations, and shared responsibility, allowing anyone to lead if needed (Harris, 2007, 2013).

Leadership Philosophy

A leadership philosophy contains values-based ideas of how a leader should be and act and about the sources of a leader's power (Lewis, 2012). Any philosophy is a way of thinking and behaving. It is a set of values and beliefs. Philosophy is a series of reference points or a

foundation upon which processes, decisions, actions, plans, etc. can be built, developed, and applied (Case et al., 2011). A leadership philosophy connects leadership with humanity, morality, and ethics (Lewis, 2012). This is influenced by a person's beliefs about human nature and society, their beliefs about religion or universal truths, and by a sense of fairness and natural justice.

Leadership philosophy refers to the coherent set of values, assumptions, ethical commitments, and beliefs that guide how leadership is understood, enacted, and evaluated across contexts (Lewis, 2012). Rather than focusing solely on techniques or traits, a leadership philosophy articulates why leaders act as they do and what moral or social purposes leadership serves. Examples of leadership philosophies can range from the use of an interpretive lens that shapes leadership behavior, decision-making, and relationships with followers, such as humanistic leadership philosophy (Gotsis & Grimani, 2023; Scholtz, 2024), to virtue- and ethics-based leadership philosophy (Case et al., 2011), to social power-based leadership philosophy (French & Raven, 1959; Kovach, 2020), to leadership philosophies built around an individual's behavior, cardinal traits, practice, knowledge, and ideology. Some examples of the latter include Confucian leadership philosophy (Kezar, 2004), Marxist leadership philosophy (Cawthon, 2017), and Gandhian leadership philosophy (Kool & Agrawal, 2018; Malik & Sahu, 2023),

In this study, I applied Gandhian leadership philosophy (Kool & Agrawal, 2018; Malik & Sahu, 2023) as the philosophical lens to study informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers in urban social organizations.

Gandhian Leadership Philosophy

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in October 1869 in Porbandar, India. He was the founding father of the modern Indian nation and a pivotal figure in the country's struggle for

independence from British colonial rule (Chakrabarty, 2007). In the present context, it is useful to examine his philosophy not so much from a political leadership perspective but from a service leadership perspective and a social change perspective. Gandhi was a political leader; he was a member of India's largest political party, the Indian National Congress, and also served as its president in 1924 (Dhawan, 1946). However, by the time India gained its independence in August 1947, his leadership philosophy had become more profound in the areas of social change and humanitarian upliftment.

The key tenets of Gandhian philosophy include *seva* (selfless service), *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *swaraj* (self-rule) and *sarvodaya* (upliftment of all: positive social change), as Datta (1953) stated in his seminal work on the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. *Seva* means serving others without seeking reward or recognition. Gandhi viewed leadership as service grounded in humility and responsibility (Biswas et al., 2025; Datta, 1953; Pandey, 2025). Through selfless service, people build community well-being and ethical authority instead of positional power. *Satya* is central to Gandhian thought. For Gandhi, truth went beyond mere factual accuracy; it was a moral pursuit that required integrity, honesty, and harmony in thought, speech, and action (Datta, 1953; Nikam, 1954; Tähtinen, 1979). Truth and ethics are inseparable, guiding personal conduct and social justice. *Ahimsa* means nonviolence in thought, word, and deed. Gandhi saw nonviolence as an active force rooted in courage, self-restraint, and respect for human dignity (Datta, 1953; Nikam, 1954; Tähtinen, 1979). *Ahimsa* is both a method and a goal, ensuring that social change does not cause harm. *Swaraj* is more than political independence or self-rule; it includes self-discipline, moral autonomy, and collective responsibility. Gandhi argued that real societal change requires personal self-rule; ethical growth is vital for transformation (Datta, 1953; Nikam, 1954). *Sarvodaya* was Gandhi's vision of inclusive, fair

progress. It focuses on the well-being of all, especially the marginalized. According to Gandhian philosophy social change is measured by its effect on the poorest and most vulnerable (Datta, 1953). A pictorial summary depiction of the key message of Gandhian philosophy is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Gandhian Philosophy

Note. Adapted from Datta, D. M. (1953). *The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Gandhi's philosophy on character stood as a cornerstone of his ethical teachings, influencing his vision for leadership and social change. For Gandhi, character was far more than a superficial trait; it was the essence of moral and ethical strength (Bilgrami, 2003; Kool & Agrawal, 2018; Nikam, 1954). Character, in his view, was an internal force shaped by self-discipline, moral integrity, and voluntary suffering (Gandhi, 1927). It was the force behind true success and leadership, and formed the foundation of one's actions and decisions.

Gandhi believed in the concept of voluntary suffering, which is the active choosing to endure suffering for a higher moral purpose that leads to self-realization and moral strength (Bhole, 2001). Building on this, Gandhi linked altruism to suffering, asserting that those who have experienced and overcome it gain greater compassion, which enables them to lead others with humility and integrity (Konch & Panda, 2015).

In terms of leadership, Gandhi's vision was fundamentally different from conventional approaches. He did not view leadership as stemming from a position of power or authority but as a responsibility that required the utmost ethical integrity (Nair, 1994). For Gandhi, a true leader was not someone who seeks power for personal gain or recognition but someone who uses their influence to selflessly serve others and inspire moral transformation in society. Gandhi's leadership was also marked by his emphasis on self-reflection and self-purification. He believed that true leadership requires a deep understanding of oneself and a commitment to personal growth and development (Nazareth, 2006). Gandhi's leadership style was not just about achieving political goals; it was about inspiring people to live with integrity and authenticity. Gandhi's leadership style emphasized leading from the front and embodying the change he wished to see in the world. According to Gandhian leadership philosophy, leadership development is not a destination but an ongoing journey that requires leaders to refine their skills, mindset, and emotional intelligence (Malik & Sahu, 2023). Gandhi demonstrated that leadership is not about power or control but about service, integrity, humility, and long-term impact. His leadership philosophy teaches that success is not measured by wealth or authority but by the ability to inspire and uplift others.

Gandhi was bestowed the title of *Mahatma*, translated as "the great soul," by the masses; it is a title bestowed, not inherited, or designated (Jordens, 1998). The title had no political,

monarchial, or military trappings; his leadership legacy was such that there could be no other *Mahatma*. In the words of Einstein (1950), "[g]enerations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth" (p. 240). Gandhi's leadership philosophy had a profound impact on leaders worldwide. His approach to leadership inspired figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, who adopted Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance in their struggles for civil rights, freedom, and social change (Morselli & Passini, 2010). Gandhi's leadership philosophy continues to serve as a source of inspiration for leaders seeking to create positive change in their communities and in the world.

Gandhi's leadership philosophy embodied servant leadership by emphasizing the importance of serving others and empowering them to achieve their full potential (Barnabas & Clifford, 2012). Azariah (1925) noted Gandhi as the "Servant of India" (p. 56). Gandhi's leadership style was not about wielding power or authority; it was about inspiring others to take action for the common good (Dhiman, 2023). Gandhi's philosophical influence on servant leadership is evident in the work of leaders and individuals seeking to create positive change in their communities and the world. His philosophy of selfless service, or *seva*, is almost a spiritual practice emphasizing humility, ethical behavior, and the leader's responsibility to foster the growth and well-being of those they serve (Biswas et al., 2025). Within Gandhi's philosophical element of *seva*, *shramdaan* (the voluntary donation of physical labor) occupied an important place, as it represented the willingness of individuals to contribute their time, effort, and physical abilities toward the well-being of others without expectation of personal reward (Nazareth, 2006). Through *shramdaan*, service moved beyond an abstract moral commitment and became a tangible expression of selflessness, dignity of labor, and commitment to the collective good.

Gandhi's leadership philosophy serves as a reminder of the power of servant leadership and the importance of leading by example. Gandhi's vision extended beyond political independence to encompass social justice and equality and to advocate for the rights of the marginalized and unfortunate (Morselli & Passini, 2010). His philosophy of *sarvodaya*, which is characterized by nonviolent resistance and transformative principles, demonstrated a commitment to social justice and positive change in society (Keeler, 1972; Prasad, 1960). From his philosophy, positive social change emerges organically from individual moral transformation and responsibility towards society. Gandhi's leadership and legacy continue to offer valuable lessons for leaders and individuals seeking to create positive change in the world. His leadership was not just about achieving political independence for India; it was about inspiring people to live with dignity and self-respect (Munshi, 2010). Gandhi's legacy is a testament to the power of servant leadership and the importance of leading by example (Dhiman, 2023). His leadership was characterized by humility, self-reflection, and a commitment to the common good, and this leadership style continues to serve as a model for leaders seeking to create positive change in their communities and the world (Nazareth, 2006). Gandhi's leadership philosophy embodies selfless service, social responsibility, moral clarity, ethics, and inclusivity.

Gandhian leadership philosophy was particularly well-suited for examining informal distributed leadership because it conceptualizes leadership as moral influence enacted through everyday practice rather than as formal authority or positional power. This alignment is especially strong in volunteer-based social organizations, where leadership often emerges relationally and contextually. Gandhi lived a simple life, embodying the values of selflessness and serving the most deprived people, as emphasized by the concept of volunteerism for social change and development. His acts of service and mobilization became powerful tools of

resistance against major social issues requiring change, such as the practice of untouchability (Biswas, 2018). His life exemplified his deep commitment to selfless service and upliftment for all, which are cornerstones of volunteerism; Gandhi could thus be identified as the "ultimate" volunteer.

Leadership Theories

Leadership theories provide frameworks for understanding how and why certain individuals become effective leaders. The theories examine the traits, behaviors, and contextual factors that define leadership behavior (Bass & Avolio, 1995). These theories offer diverse perspectives, suggesting that effective leadership can stem from inherent characteristics, acquired skills, or the ability to adapt to specific situations. Key theories that have emerged include: the great man theory (Carlyle et al., 2013), trait theory (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991), process leadership theory (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999), style and behavioral theory (Fiedler & House, 1994; Yukl, 1994), transformational theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994), leader–member exchange (LMX) theory (Dansereau et al., 1975), transactional theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994; House & Shamir, 1993), laissez faire leadership theory (Bass & Avolio, 1990), selfless leadership theory (Benkler, 2011; Sober & Wilson, 1998), steward leadership theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1991), and servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977). Many of these theories draw on manifestations of self-interest such as mentoring, networking, and personal initiatives that prevail in individualistic cultures; however, leaders in collectivist cultures prioritize the needs of the group, family, and overall community when engaging in leadership actions (Jogulu, 2010).

In this research study, I applied servant leadership theory to study informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers in urban social organizations.

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership was introduced into an organizational context through Greenleaf's three foundational essays, *The Servant as Leader* (1970), *The Institution as Servant* (1972a), and *Trustees as Servants* (1972b). Servant leaders are determined by both their motivation to serve and their self-construction; from the conscious choice of *serving* and *being*, they aspire to lead (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Greenleaf (1977) himself believed that servant leadership is an inward lifelong journey:

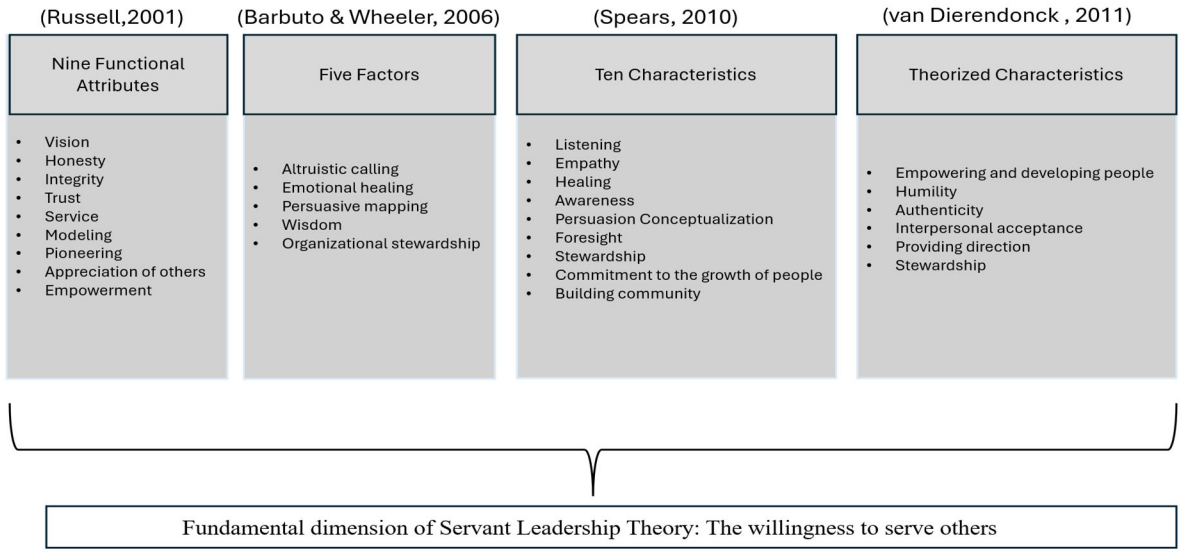
> It begins with the natural feeling one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first.… The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: 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? (p. 27)

Servant leadership theory centers on the idea that the primary role of a leader is to serve the needs of their influence group, fostering growth and development while prioritizing the well-being of the group itself. Russell's (2001) review of Greenleaf's ideas on servant leadership resulted in a theoretical framework characterized by nine functional attributes, or operative qualities and distinctive characteristics, of servant leaders: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) conducted a literature review and developed a servant leadership theory synthesizing the attributes of servant leadership into five factors: altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive

mapping, wisdom, and organizational stewardship. Through the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, Spears (2010) then offered a list of 10 characteristics of servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Another study by van Dierendonck (2011) theorized the key characteristics of servant leadership as: empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship. All of these scholars examined Greenleaf's writings to formulate the fundamental dimension of the theory, which is the willingness to serve others. The summarized depiction of the theory can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Servant Leadership Theory



Note. Pictorial adaptation from Russell, R. (2001). The role of values in servant leadership. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *22*(2), 76–83; Barbuto, J. E., & Wheeler, D. W. (2006). Scale development and construct clarification of servant leadership. *Group & Organization Management*, *31*(3), 300–326; Spears, L. C. (2010). Character and servant-

leadership: Ten characteristics of effective, caring leaders. *Journal of Virtues & Leadership*, *1*(1); van Dierendonck, D. (2011). Servant leadership: A review and syntheses. *Journal of Management*, *27*(4), 1228–1261.

Although the contemporary study of servant leadership evolved largely from Greenleaf (1970, 1977), the practice of servant leadership is not new. The roots of servant leadership stem from ancient teachings of the world's great thinkers and philosophers (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The concept of servant leadership resonates with the messages of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Moses, Harriet Tubman, Confucius, and many other religious, historical, and contemporary leaders (Keith, 2008).

As a leadership theory, servant leadership can support the ethical grounding and leadership framework needed to help address current societal challenges, including technological advancements, economic globalization, environmental degradation, geopolitical conflicts, disease and starvation, the threat of global warming, economic gaps, and other issues impacting humanity (Parris & Peachey, 2012). Servant leadership contrasts with traditional leader-first paradigms, which applaud Darwinistic, individualistic, and capitalist approaches to life, implying that only the strong will survive (Keith, 2008). Servant leaders believe the world can continuously improve for the better, and work actively to effect positive changes in society.

Servant leadership theory was a suitable lens for examining informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers because its principles aligned closely with the values and motivations of volunteers, emphasizing service, collaboration, and community rather than hierarchical power (Eva et al., 2018). The theory offered a framework for understanding how volunteers, as leaders, can effectively support and inspire others when their commitment is driven by purpose and meaning rather than by a system of rewards. By focusing on serving the

greater good, servant leadership reinforces the altruistic motives that inspire volunteers to volunteer. Volunteers are primarily motivated by intrinsic rewards, such as feelings of appreciation and fulfillment (Kim et al., 2019). Servant leadership thus reinforces these rewards by valuing and respecting volunteers' contributions.

Servant leadership works well in the flat, community-based structure of many volunteer organizations because it focuses on empowering followers, rather than controlling them, by building trust and fostering collaboration (Chaudhuri & Pradhan, 2021). Trust is a cornerstone of effective teamwork, especially among volunteers. Servant leadership fosters collaboration, enabling volunteers from diverse backgrounds to work together effectively. This cohesive environment strengthens the volunteer base. Applying the theory of servant leadership, volunteers are not simply followers but leaders themselves (Breslin, 2017). Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) defined servant leadership in terms of five factors that affect volunteer behavior, namely altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and, lastly, organizational stewardship. For volunteers, servant leadership is an empowering, supportive, and human-centered approach that enhances engagement, satisfaction, and personal growth.

Leadership Models

Leadership models encompass various theories, styles, and approaches that guide leaders in their process of directing, motivating, and managing teams (Grint et al., 2016). Leadership models provide structures to define the guidance and influence methods that fit a particular style or personality. A leadership model contains either processes, logic, or an architecture, which can be used or applied as a tool in performing, understanding, and teaching leadership. A model is often shown in a diagram format and may also be viewed in a sense of mechanics or engineering,

with interrelated or linked moving parts; in some cases, a model may contain measurable elements, sometimes entailing complex relative factors (Avolio et al., 2003).

Multiple leadership models have been developed over time to suit various organizations and individuals, and these incorporate different leadership theories and styles. Some key leadership models include authentic leadership (George, 2010), connectional leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2010), crisis leadership competency (Prabhakar & Yaseen, 2016), digital leadership (de Araujo et al., 2021), emotional intelligence leadership (Greenockle, 2010), and the social change model of leadership (Wagner, 1996). In this research study, I used the social change model of leadership to study informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers in urban social organizations.

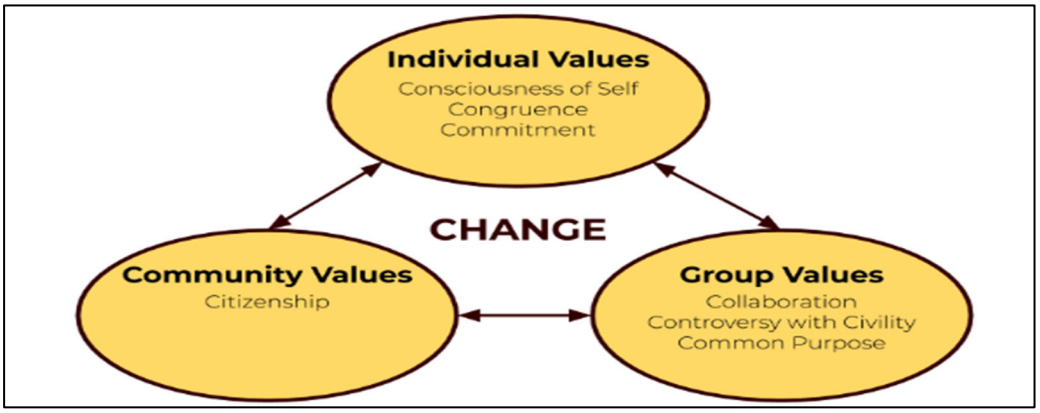
Social Change Model of Leadership

The social change model of leadership views leadership as a collaborative, values-based process aimed at creating positive social change. It emphasizes that leadership is not just a position of power but a process accessible to everyone, with a focus on self-awareness, collaboration, and commitment to a shared purpose (Astin et al., 1996). The model is built on the following key assumptions: (1) leadership is socially responsible, as it creates change on the behalf of others; (2) leadership is collaborative; (3) leadership is a process, not a position; (4) leadership is inclusive and accessible to all people; (5) leadership is value-based; and (6) community involvement/service is a powerful vehicle for leadership (Komives & Wagner, 2016). The model describes leadership as a purposeful, collaborative, and values-driven process, rather than as stemming from a title or position. Leaders improve the groups or communities they are part of, and in this approach to leadership, a *leader* is anyone who wants to work with others to make a difference. This kind of collaborative process means that groups must have trust,

which requires that group members act in ways that are consistent with their own beliefs and values as well as with the group's goals. A diagrammatic depiction of the model can be seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Social Change Model of Leadership



Note. Adapted from Higher Education Research Institute. (1996). *A social change model of leadership development: Guidebook* (Version III, pp. 20–22). UCLA.

The social change model of leadership focuses on seven values spread across three components of leadership: individual, group, and community. These values encompass the "7C's" of the model: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship (Astin et al., 1996).

Individual values focus on the individual's self-awareness, values, and commitment to positive change. This component aims to foster and develop personal qualities that support effective group functioning and promote positive social change. This component contains three of the 7C values: consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment. *Consciousness of self* refers to the self-awareness of one's values, attitudes, and beliefs that drive actions and decisions, and it serves as a foundation for developing an understanding of others. Intricately connected to this is *congruence*, which involves aligning one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors

in a consistent, authentic, and honest manner both internally and in interactions with others. *Commitment* further builds on this foundation, representing the individual's motivation to serve and contribute to collective efforts with passion, intensity, and sustained dedication.

Group values emphasize the importance of collaboration and shared purpose in achieving social change. They focus on how collaborative leadership can be intentionally designed to cultivate individual desired qualities while simultaneously driving positive social change. This component contains another three of the 7C values: collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility. *Collaboration* serves as a cornerstone of group leadership, as it empowers both self and others through trust, emphasizing leadership as a collective process that encourages the group to rise above individual goals, interests, and behaviors. Central to this process is a *common purpose*, which enables the group to engage in collective analysis and action. This is most effective when all members share a unified vision and actively contribute to defining the group's purpose and objectives. Additionally, *controversy with civility* acknowledges that differing viewpoints are inevitable in any group setting. It emphasizes the importance of expressing these differences openly and respectfully, promoting an environment where diverse perspectives are heard and valued, and where criticism is exercised with restraint and mutual respect.

Community values highlight the importance of citizenship and of contributing to the broader community. It is the group's ability to match the personal qualities of an individual. It includes *citizenship*, which is the process of taking responsibility for the well-being of the community and actively participating in its improvement. Leadership development activities should be directed toward meaningful social goals, with service activities that both energize the group and effectively cultivate the desired personal qualities in individuals.

The 7C's lead to the main goal of the social change model of leadership, which is to effect positive change. Change is the value "hub" that gives meaning to the 7C's and is the ultimate goal of the creative process of leadership: to make a better world and better society for self and others (Skendall et al., 2017). The courage involved in social change is great, and the willingness to take a leap of faith towards an idea or action requiring to accepting challenges, discovering one's own power, and sometimes passing through discomfort. The key aspects of the social change model of leadership involve individuals understanding their values, talents, and interests relating to the capacity to provide effective leadership and their capacity to mobilize themselves and work collaboratively to drive positive social change in the community.

The model was appropriate for this study of leadership behavior among volunteers in social organizations because it is inclusive and can enhance the development of leadership qualities in all participants. It includes both those who hold formal leadership positions and those who do not, thereby promoting a process that actively engages all who wish to contribute or "volunteer." The model promotes the values of equity, social justice, self-knowledge, personal empowerment, collaboration, citizenship, and support to the marginalized. The social change model of leadership, hence, emphasizes *change* as the ultimate goal of the creative process of leadership, to make a better world and better society for us and for others (Higher Education Research Institute, 1994).

In the social change model of leadership, leadership is viewed as a process rather than as a position, and the values of equity, social justice, self-knowledge, personal empowerment, collaboration, citizenship, and service are explicitly pursued (Dugan, 2006; Watt, 2009). As local and global social issues continue to emerge, there is a clear need for leaders of social change. The purpose is to mold the concept of leadership to signal an inclusive process by which change

is effected for the betterment of others. The social change model of leadership is a values-based model of leadership development that revolves around a core of service as the vehicle for social change (Komives & Wagner, 2016). It emphasizes the need to understand self and others to create community change, and this aligns the model with the attributes of the volunteer and the volunteer setting.

The social change model of leadership is appropriate for studying leadership behavior because it centers the core values and collaborative processes that define volunteer work (Benevene et al., 2020). Unlike traditional leadership models that focus on positional authority, the social change model of leadership emphasizes that anyone can be a leader by working with others to create positive social change, which mirrors the nature of volunteerism. Volunteerism and the social change model of leadership are built on similar fundamental principles, as they are value-driven, inclusive, have fluid leadership based on need and context rather than on fixed titles, and are collaborative to achieve a specific purpose (Komives & Wagner, 2016). There is alignment with the 7C's framework, too. At the individual level, the development of leadership among volunteers promotes consciousness of self through introspection and congruence with one's personal values, hence promoting authenticity in leadership and a commitment to positive change. The group values of collaboration are a core component of volunteer work, as creative solutions are generated by leveraging the diverse talents of all group members, aiming towards a common purpose while navigating differences. At the community level, volunteerism is an act of responsible citizenship, with individuals working actively to improve their communities.

The Selfless Service Leadership for Positive Social Change Lens

The selfless service leadership for positive social change lens was derived from the combined conceptual framework of Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the

social change model of leadership. I intentionally selected this framework to align with the epistemological assumptions of qualitative inquiry, which view leadership as a socially constructed, relational, and context-dependent phenomenon rather than as a fixed set of traits.

I activated two key aspects of Gandhian philosophy within the overarching paradigm to study informal leadership behavior among adult volunteers in urban social organizations. One is *seva* (selfless service), and the other is *sarvodaya* (upliftment of all: positive social change). Selfless service refers to an orientation toward action in which individuals place the well-being, growth, and dignity of others above their own personal gain, status, or recognition (Varghese et al., 2017). Gandhi (1927) himself wrote in his autobiography that "[s]ervice without humility is selfishness and egotism" (p. 315). Gandhi understood service not as a charitable action motivated by obligation or benevolence, but as a moral duty arising from recognition of the inherent dignity and interconnectedness of all individuals. For Gandhi, selfless service required subordinating personal ego, power, and privilege in favor of collective well-being, positioning service as both a personal discipline and a social responsibility (Biswas et al., 2025; Datta, 1953; Pandey, 2025).

Scholars have also studied Gandhi as a model of servant leadership who espoused the six characteristics of servant leadership: building community, developing people, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, sharing leadership, and valuing people (Barnabas & Clifford, 2012). This provides an overlap between Gandhian philosophy and servant leadership theory. Central to this framing is the willingness to serve (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 1970; Russell, 2001; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011), which functions as the primary motivational orientation through which leadership influence emerges. This orientation is particularly relevant in volunteer-driven contexts, where authority is informal, participation is

discretionary, and leadership is sustained through trust, credibility, and moral agency rather than positional power.

The other leadership construct applicable to the study was the social change model of leadership. The social change model of leadership situates leadership within collective action and civic engagement, emphasizing change as a shared and collaborative process oriented toward the common good (Astin et al., 1996). This is also reflected in and overlaps with the Gandhian philosophy of *sarvodaya*. In August of 1947 Gandhi gives us his famous talisman:

> I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to control over his own life and destiny? (p. 125)

Gandhi's concept of *sarvodaya* thus frames any individual action as an action for positive social change: for the inclusive upliftment of all, particularly the most marginalized, which is achieved through ethical action, collective responsibility, and sustained commitment to the common good (Keeler, 1972; Kumar & Saini, 2024; Prasad, 1960). Stephan et al. (2016) defined positive social change as the process of transforming patterns of thought, behavior, social relationships, institutions, and social structure to generate beneficial outcomes for individuals, communities, organizations, society, and/or the environment beyond the benefits for the instigators of such transformations. Positive social change involves transforming individuals and groups as targets of positive change initiatives and as outcomes of a collective nature. It may entail different types of transformational outcomes, depending on how the community's psychological, health, and social needs are affected (Maslow, 1943).

This lens was particularly well-suited to the present qualitative study because it positioned selfless service as the central mechanism connecting leadership practice to social outcomes. This approach allowed the present study to examine how leadership behaviors emerged, were enacted, and sustained among urban volunteers engaged in social change. As a result, the lens shaped the data collection and analysis process by focusing on values, meaning-making, and relational influence as key to understanding informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in urban social organizations.

Volunteer Leadership Behavior

Drawing on Yukl's (1994) definition of leadership as a process by which one individual influences other members to attain defined group or organizational goals, in this section I examine the literature on leadership behavior among volunteers in social organizations. In this context, volunteers influence and motivate others not through formal authority or hierarchical power but through ethical practices, moral commitment, shared values, and demonstrated competence. Kajer (1996) stated that volunteer leaders emphasize honesty and integrity, a theme also highlighted in Schneider and George's (2011) study, which underscored the importance of integrity and morality in volunteer leadership behavior. Leadership among volunteers in a social organization setting is a social interaction process distinct from a role-holder's formal authority (Kay, 1996). It needs to be understood more as groups involved in the process of sense-making and in influencing one another's behavior in pursuit of the task at hand.

Building on these foundations, Catano et al. (2001) stated that transformational leadership provides a useful lens for studying leadership behavior among volunteers because this form of leadership influences commitment and participation without resorting to rewards or punishments. Because volunteer leaders have limited authority, their behaviors must account for

the fact that using rewards or punishments is not always possible or desired. Notably, transformational leadership was identified as a factor in effective leadership among women volunteers in philanthropic organizations. Banducci (2005) argued that women's volunteer leadership is fundamentally inclusive and transformational. The inclusive aspect acknowledges differences between leaders and followers, promotes an understanding of those differences, and encourages both leaders and followers to adapt to one another.

Camplin (2009) defined volunteer leadership behavior through the lens of leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, specifically focusing on the actions volunteer leaders use to promote trust, respect, and obligation among their volunteer followers, which foster high-quality exchanges. Camplin (2009) highlighted that volunteer followers actively choose to follow, making it essential for volunteer leaders to acknowledge this dynamic to lead effectively. Volunteer leaders build trust by demonstrating character and competency, and they cultivate obligation by casting vision and clearly communicating the organization's message (Camplin, 2009). Hoye (2006) also addressed LMX theory, emphasizing its application to both paid and volunteer leaders, reaffirming that high-quality LMX relationships in volunteer contexts depend on mutual respect and trust. In volunteer leadership, respect is closely linked to perceptions of an individual's skills, knowledge, and experience, and these relationships develop over time through negotiation and role-making. This pattern supports Camplin's (2009) argument that certain leader behaviors, specifically those that build high-quality volunteer LMX relationships, are critical for volunteer leaders, and that fostering these relationships is primarily the volunteer leader's responsibility. Trust stands out as the most important component, especially in volunteer situations where leaders have little positional power and where any influence they have is granted by volunteer followers (Banducci, 2005; Camplin, 2009; Hoye, 2006).

Complementing the above perspectives, studies grounded in self-determination theory have highlighted specifically how servant leadership enhances volunteers' motivation and satisfaction (Deci et al., 2001; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In volunteer settings, where participation is inherently non-coercive and intrinsically motivated, servant leadership behaviors such as empathy, empowerment, and individualized support reinforce volunteers' sense of choice and personal agency, further centering the volunteer experience. When volunteers' psychological needs are met, they are more likely to experience greater satisfaction, commitment, and well-being, leading to more sustained participation and deeper personal alignment with organizational goals.

Bennis (2009) and DePree (1998) stated that volunteer leaders must first understand the mission, the organization's reality, and the unique context of their volunteers before marshalling resources to attain the organization's objectives. Building on this, Oostlander et al. (2013) specifically examined volunteer leadership through a framework focused on "understanding and acknowledging subordinates' perspectives, giving opportunities for choice, supporting individuals' competencies, and encouraging personal initiative" (p. 4). This requires empathetic engagement with volunteers' motivations, constraints, and personal values.

Volunteer Leadership Behavior: Gandhian Philosophical Lens

Gandhian philosophy is grounded in the ethical principles of *seva* (selfless service), *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *swaraj,* (self-rule) and *sarvodaya* (upliftment of all: positive social change), which together conceptualize leadership as moral action in the service of collective well-being (Bhole, 2001; Dhiman, 2023; Konch & Panda, 2015). Gandhian philosophy frames volunteerism and as a moral commitment to serve others without attachment to personal gain, advancing collective well-being through humility and social responsibility. From this

perspective, informal distributed volunteer leadership stems from ethical consistency, self-discipline, and the capacity to inspire trust through personal example rather than formal power (Bansal & Bajpai, 2011; Kool & Agrawal, 2020). Gandhi's approach reframed leadership as an act of selfless service, where leaders voluntarily subordinate personal interests to the needs of the community and model the values they seek to advance (Biswas et al., 2025). The existing literature identifies Gandhi as an exemplar of servant leadership, highlighting his selfless service, self-restraint, ethical transparency, and commitment to social upliftment (Barnabas & Clifford, 2012).

Volunteer Leadership Behavior: Servant Leadership Theoretical Lens

According to Wilson (2012a), the volunteer leader is "acting for the benefit of others or doing something for someone else" (p. 5). The primary orientation or disposition of character that is driven to take action that will benefit others is the foundational basis of a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1998; Mannino et al., 2011; Spears, 2010). Volunteer leaders first serve as volunteers, and servant leadership actions occur when a need is identified and a volunteer assumes the mantle of leadership to meet that need. Various factors, such as society, culture, and modernization, influence volunteer leaders' levels of engagement and commitment to connecting with others (Warburton & Winterton, 2010; Wilson, 2012a).

Fundamentally, leadership behavior among volunteers incorporates an orientation towards stewardship. This stewardship is the responsible management of resources, trust (holding a position of trust), accountability (being responsible for the organization and good citizenship), modeling integrity, and possessing a concern for others (Coetzer et al., 2017; Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Grönlund, 2011; Russell & Stone, 2002; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2014; Wilson, 2012a; Wong & Davey, 2007).

In a study by Fuller and Friedel (2017), the opportunity to serve and help others was the most frequently mentioned advantage of leadership development among volunteers, and the process of developing one's leadership skills by expanding self-awareness increased the participants' self-confidence, enhanced their ability to appreciate others' points of view, and increased their responsibility for their actions. Volunteers mentioned empowerment, motivation, maturity, accountability, independence, challenge, and self-efficacy in the context of self-development as part of their volunteering activities.

Volunteer Leadership Behavior: Social Change Model of Leadership Application Lens

The social change model of leadership sees leadership as a collaborative and relational process. It is based on values at three levels, which include: consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment for individuals; collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility for groups,; and citizenship at the societal level (Astin et al., 1996). In volunteer-based social organizations, leaders show these values through reflective self-awareness, ethical consistency, shared decision-making, and respectful engagement with diverse views. When used as an analytical lens, Skendall et al. (2017) stated that social change leadership frames volunteer leader behavior as more than just task coordination. It becomes a developmental and ethical process that connects personal values, collective responsibility, and community engagement to achieve positive social change.

Leadership among volunteers has a moral and relational dimension that amplifies its societal impact. Unlike purely transactional leadership in formal institutions, volunteer leadership often emphasizes shared purpose, meaning, and the empowerment of others (Benevene et al., 2018; Benevene et al., 2020; Posner, 2015). Studies have shown that volunteer leaders apply ethical leadership styles to enhance trust, build belonging, and align individual

motivations with collective goals. These goals include promoting social upliftment, community health, and civic engagement (Erdurmazlı, 2019; Schneider & George, 2011; Trastek et al., 2014). This alignment is vital for positive change because it ensures that actions are not only effective but that they are also grounded in community values and sustained over time.

Volunteer Leadership Behavior: Selfless Service Leadership for Positive Social Change Lens

Much of the volunteer leadership literature focuses on outcomes like satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Hustinx et al., 2010) without sufficiently theorizing the moral processes through which leadership influence is ethically enacted. Volunteer leadership behavior, when examined through the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens, is understood as a morally grounded and relational process through which individuals influence others by prioritizing collective well-being over personal gain. Unlike leadership models centered on authority or positional power, this lens conceptualizes leadership as service-oriented action rooted in ethical commitment, altruism, and responsibility to the community (Greenleaf, 1977). In volunteer-based social organizations, where participation is intrinsically motivated and often unpaid, leadership influence is most effectively exercised through authenticity, trustworthiness, and demonstrated care for others rather than through formal control mechanisms (Hustinx et al., 2010; Wilson, 2000).

Selfless service leadership for positive social change emphasizes *why* leadership is enacted just as much as it considers *how* it is enacted, positioning social good and communal upliftment as central leadership outcomes. This orientation aligns with theories of prosocial behavior and servant leadership, which argue that leaders who place the needs of others first foster higher levels of commitment, moral engagement, and collective efficacy among followers

(Eva et al., 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2008). In volunteer contexts, such behaviors manifest through mentoring peers, sharing responsibility, supporting others' growth, and sustaining motivation during periods of organizational strain. These practices enable leadership to emerge informally and be distributed across members, reinforcing the collective ownership of social missions.

Moreover, a selfless service leadership lens explicitly links leadership behavior to positive social change by framing leadership as a catalyst for civic engagement and community transformation. Leadership influence in this view extends beyond organizational functioning to encompass ethical action, inclusion, and advocacy for marginalized communities (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Volunteers enact leadership not only to achieve immediate organizational goals but also to advance broader social values such as equity, dignity, and justice. By centering service, moral purpose, and collective responsibility, this lens extends leadership scholarship beyond effectiveness-oriented models and offers a robust framework for understanding how informal distributed leadership behaviors among adult volunteers contribute to sustained social change.

Informal Distributed Leadership Behavior Among Urban Volunteers

Leadership among urban volunteers often emerges from a group's collective realization. It is not about a single individual's directives but about the members' shared intentions, values, and goals that bring the group together or that evolve organically. Volunteer leadership relies on a heightened consciousness of others, and members must know each other's perspectives, strengths, and weaknesses (Nielsen, 2022).

Informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers in urban social organizations reflects a non-hierarchical, relational process through which leadership influence emerges organically from interactions, shared responsibilities, and collective action rather than through formally designated positions. Urban social organizations, which often operate in complex,

resource-constrained, and socially diverse environments, rely heavily on volunteers who exercise leadership through initiative-taking, collaboration, and mutual accountability (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002). In such contexts, leadership is "distributed" across multiple actors and situations, allowing volunteers to lead based on expertise, commitment, or situational need rather than positional authority (Spillane, 2006). Informal leaders frequently shape group norms, coordinate activities, mentor peers, and mediate relationships, thereby sustaining organizational functioning and adaptability without explicit recognition or titles (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Research suggests that these behaviors are particularly salient in volunteer settings, where motivation is primarily intrinsic and sustained by autonomy, competence, and meaningful social connection (Oostlander et al., 2013). In urban environments characterized by rapid change and diverse stakeholder demands, informal distributed leadership enables responsiveness and resilience by mobilizing local knowledge and shared purpose (Raelin, 2016). Moreover, such leadership practices align with the democratic and participatory values central to urban social organizations, reinforcing inclusion, empowerment, and the collective ownership of social change efforts (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Studying informal distributed leadership among urban volunteers therefore offered critical insight into how leadership develops beyond formal hierarchies as flat social constructs, highlighting volunteer leadership as an invisible, silent, and distributed process that emerges through prosocial behavior and shared commitment to community goals.

Selfless service in leadership is especially consequential in volunteer-based social organizations because it serves as a primary mechanism for earning influence in the absence of formal authority or hierarchical enforcement. It becomes an organizational asset that sustains participation, strengthens commitment, and stabilizes collaboration in contexts where urban social issues need to be addressed (Chambré, 2020). These dynamics directly justified the need

to study informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations, given the current limitations and gaps in the literature on this phenomenon. A selfless service leadership for positive social change lens helped illuminate *how* this influence emerges, is recognized, and is sustained across members when leadership is shared, episodic, and relational.

Informal distributed leadership ensures the notions of equity and sharing. It also empowers people to get involved in decision-making, in this way shaping their own lives and communities. It reflects the ethical belief that humans have a mutual, equal, and reciprocal obligation to speak and listen to each other. Volunteers at social organizations are leaderless in certain situations and context due to a reliance on democratic participation and the lack of power structures. Jørgensen and Ingman (2022) used the metaphor of "public library or *agora* in Greek for public library" (p. 125) to denote a space of generosity, which is necessary to preserve a common space among people. A social organization with volunteers is that *agora*. Considering this idea from a Gandhian philosophy and servant leadership lens, a leader exists to serve others rather than to be served; only when this is realized will a leader serve with integrity (Del Housaye & Brewer, 2004). The social change leadership aspect is brought forth by the outcome and direction of leadership in order to effect positive change.

Studying informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations through a lens of selfless service for positive social change broadened leadership research in important ways. Traditionally, leadership studies have focused on formal designations, hierarchy, and the leader–follower divide. By seeing leadership as informal, distributed, and rooted in service, the approach in the present study challenges those assumptions. It frames leadership as a relational and moral process that any group member can enact. This perspective extends leadership scholarship to settings where influence occurs without

titles, incentives, or formal authority. Focusing on selfless service for social change highlights altruism, responsibility, and a commitment to the common good. Studying informal leadership among adult volunteers also showed that leadership thrives in resource-limited urban organizations, relying on trust, reciprocity, and shared values rather than hierarchy. This research was significant to undertake because it views leadership as informal, distributed, selfless, and as directed toward the good of the urban community.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature on volunteering, urban social organizations, volunteer behavior, and leadership development. The chapter also discussed the broad definition of leadership and the dichotomy of formal versus informal leadership. I explored forms of free space leadership, such as invisible, silent, flat, and distributed, to highlight nontraditional decision-making structures. After reviewing informal distributed leadership, I examined Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership, and the social change model of leadership. These elements form the combined conceptual framework. Building on this framework, I examined the applicability of selfless service leadership for positive social change lens to study informal distributed leadership behavior among adult urban volunteers. The overall review indicated a paucity of research in this area. Hence, applying the lens of selfless service leadership for positive social change provided an opportunity to contribute to leadership scholarship. It helped explain informal distributed leadership behavior among urban adult volunteers by drawing on Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership, and the social change model of leadership.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region. The study investigated three cases in depth, with each case capturing the phenomenon of informal distributed leadership development among adult volunteers in urban social organizations. The qualitative multiple-case study applied the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens derived from the overlap of Gandhian leadership philosophy (Malik & Sahu, 2023), servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1970), and the social change model of leadership (Astin et al., 1996), as detailed in the conceptual framework of the study, to examine informal distributed leadership development among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region. This chapter elucidates and explains the selected research design, methodology, and methods. Specifically, it delves into the data collection, analysis, and presentation techniques while also highlighting the ethical considerations and the process followed to establish the academic rigor and trustworthiness of the study. Overall, this chapter presents a comprehensive blueprint of the research informed by the study's conceptual framework and the integrated lens to analyze the data.

Research Questions

The study explored the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region by addressing the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are adult volunteers' understandings of the nature of informal distributed leadership?

RQ2: How do urban adult volunteers demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors?

Qualitative Research Inquiry

I applied qualitative research methods in this study to understand the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban social organizations. The qualitative research paradigm involves studying phenomena within the real-life contexts in which they occur by collecting rich, meaningful data (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative researchers study reality in context because they assume that individuals construct their reality and associate different meanings and interpretations with their experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to make comparisons between groups or establish a relationship between variables (asking *why*), qualitative methods focus on *how*, *what*, and *in what ways*, seeking exploration and description (Creswell, 1998). In qualitative study, researchers document what they can understand, gather, interpret, and analyze in the moments of time they share with a participant and are invested in reporting the results of the inquiry (Bhattacharya, 2017). As Bhattacharya (2017) further argued, qualitative researchers apply multiple interpretive methods and nonlinear processes to investigate how subjects experience and interact with their world. Relatedly, examining the development of informal distributed leadership behavior among urban adult volunteers fit well in the qualitative research paradigm because volunteer behavior in social organizations is complex, nuanced, and context-based, and is influenced by factors that cannot be controlled for study using hypotheses and quantifiable methods. Rich and Ginsburg (1999) and Burney et al. (2023) supported the use of qualitative methods to study human behavior, as humans act based on accumulated experiences, values, identities, and reflective judgments that cannot be fully understood through standardized

measures alone. Qualitative inquiry is more suited for studying informal distributed leadership behavior among urban volunteers because the phenomenon is socially constructed, contextually embedded, and relationally enacted, making it difficult to capture through predefined variables or standardized measures.

An Interpretive Naturalistic Approach

In this study I applied an interpretative approach to the investigation, based on the experience and insight of the respondents, using their responses and behavioral observation to develop interpretations as outcomes (Denscombe, 2003). The interpretive approach focuses on participants' meanings and understandings, patterns of behavior, and feelings, which are part of the qualitative research methodology (Capper, 2018). As Dilthey (1989) asserted, "[a]ll science, all philosophy is experiential. All experience derives its coherence and its corresponding validity from the context of human consciousness" (p. 7). Social researchers should, therefore, focus on individual and group experiences and seek to understand how people make sense of their experiences and interactions.

Using an interpretive approach to qualitative research allowed me to examine the experiences and actions of urban adult volunteers to understand the phenomenon of informal distributed leadership development. Consistent with the interpretivist tradition of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), this study examined adult volunteers' experiences and actions in their natural work setting (urban social organizations in this study). To operationalize this approach, the study involved having in-depth interactions with adult volunteers, including semi-structured interviews and observational engagement, to capture both articulated experiences and enacted behaviors. By engaging participants within their natural settings and eliciting rich, descriptive accounts, the study generated authentic experiential data that is grounded in practice.

Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity Statement

If asked about my definition of leadership, my response would be that it is *the ability to make someone happy or to make them smile.* Creating even a small positive change in another person's life makes someone a leader. As a researcher, my lived experiences, mentor conversations, and involvement with volunteer groups have driven and inspired this study. I see selfless service-driven leadership for positive social change as a lifelong commitment and the true measure of an individual's legacy. A true leader builds positive relationships and blends into the herd so well that no symbols set them apart—unlike the stars on a military general's lapel, a high-backed chair, or the central seat of a head of state or CEO. Leadership is not limited to a discourse about power, authority, or control, but is increasingly about being an empathetic advisor and sounding board. It is about offering support to achieve positive outcomes. It is about having someone in your corner who provides feedback, encouragement, and support as your personal hero and leader.

Volunteerism

For the past 5 years, I have volunteered with organizations like Manna Kitchen, where we prepare meals for the severely ill. This involvement became especially meaningful after COVID-19, as prolonged remote work lessened community bonds. Volunteering renewed my sense of connection and provided a real-world context to observe interpersonal dynamics, collaboration, and collective action. The experience was therapeutic. I observed informal distributed leadership, unlike the traditional model in which one leader directs a command chain. Through volunteering, I saw this leadership style arise naturally when people unite for a common good. Watching people step into or out of leadership based on expertise, initiative, and needs shaped my interest in exploring this phenomenon further. Here, it is pertinent to note that I have no formal or

informal ties to the three urban social organizations in this study. This position lets me approach the research with both informed sensitivity and needed analytical distance.

Eastern Philosophical Thought

Leadership has been extensively examined through predominantly Western philosophical frameworks, often emphasizing individual agency, authority, and formal structures. However, this study takes a deliberate look at leadership through an Eastern philosophical lens to better understand informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers. I was raised in India and belong to an Eastern pantheon of religious orders, and I view leadership through an Eastern philosophical lens as a firm believer that any act of kindness by an individual, however small, can transform a person's life and may be a path to attaining *nirvana*. I believe in *karma*, the notion that if I do well for others, even in the smallest ways possible, good things will happen to me. I approach leadership as a relational, ethical, and collective practice grounded in values such as selflessness, interconnectedness, and moral responsibility. The focus is on the philosophy of life, the righteousness of human existence, and the desire to leave a positive impact, however minute. In Eastern philosophical thought, the community takes precedence over the individual. This kind of leadership promotes the art of motivating a group to act in consensus to achieve a common goal. Within this framework, leadership is understood as the capacity to foster shared purpose, encourage mutual responsibility, and guide collective action toward the common good. By integrating this philosophical stance, this study was pursued to illuminate how informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers is enacted through values-driven behavior, relational engagement, and a commitment to positive social impact, offering an alternative lens to traditional hierarchy-based leadership paradigms.

The Leadership Spectrum

From a clearly defined positionality, this study conceptualized leadership not as a fixed trait residing within an individual or a bounded group, but as a dynamic and situationally responsive process. Leadership, in this view, emerges in relation to the demands of the task, the urgency of the context, and the configuration of relationships among participants. The form that leadership takes is therefore contingent rather than predetermined. For instance, leadership in high-stakes environments such as military conflicts, large-scale humanitarian crises like COVID-19, or time-sensitive medical procedures in an operating theater often requires rapid decision-making, clear authority, and coordinated execution. In contrast, leadership within contexts such as equitable food distribution during natural disasters, poverty alleviation initiatives, or long-term sustainable development programs tends to be more collaborative, participatory, and relational and hence emphasizing: coordination, trust-building, and shared responsibility.

This variability underscores the notion of a leadership spectrum, wherein leadership is not static but continually fluctuates in response to situational needs. Individuals and groups can shift along this spectrum, enacting different forms of leadership ranging from directive to facilitative, from centralized to distributed, depending on the context. Importantly, multiple forms of leadership can coexist or be applied to the same situation. For example, historical struggles against oppression, including resistance to colonialism, slavery, and segregation, illustrate how leadership has been exercised through either nonviolent collective mobilization or more forceful, confrontational approaches, each shaped by context, ideology, and probable necessity. Within this framing, the purpose of my study was not to privilege or evaluate one form of leadership over another. Rather, the intention was to academically understand how leadership

evolved, was enacted, and distributed in practice among adult volunteers in urban social organizations.

Multiple Case Study

Yin (1994) defined a case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Merriam (2001) described a qualitative case study as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit, which may involve studying a person, program, policy, or phenomenon bounded by the researcher's interest.

A multiple case study, or collective case study, examines several cases to better understand a central phenomenon (Yin, 2006, 2014). Unlike single-case studies, which focus on a single case, multiple-case studies enable researchers to compare and analyze data within and across cases (Yin, 2006). Creswell (1998) defined case studies as "an exploration of a bounded system of a case or multiple cases over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (p. 61).

Key elements of a case study are case context, definition, boundary, and unit of analysis (Yin, 2018). In this design, *context* refers to the real-life conditions and environments that shape the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The case is a bounded entity of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world *context*. Each case is a stand-alone study, but the multiple-case design's strength is in analyzing patterns across cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The *case boundary* is how the researcher defines what is included or excluded, distinguishing the case from its context. The *unit of analysis* is the primary entity studied (Yin, 2018), i.e., the *what* or *who* the case study seeks to understand as a single, coherent unit. Case study research enables the collection of

diverse data from various sources to examine research cases (Priya, 2021; Yin, 2018). This approach facilitates the acquisition of authentic data from unit of analysis across cases and allow the investigation of *how*, *what*, and *why* questions in the context of volunteer leadership behavior in urban social organizations.

I selected a multiple case study methodology for this study because it provided structured guidelines for systematically planning and investigating several cases concurrently, rather than a single case, thus enabling the development of a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Yin (2014) asserted that multiple case studies can be used to replicate and predict similar or contrasting findings. As a result, researchers may select cases to ensure alignment with the study's purpose and framework. Multiple case study research is regarded as more compelling and robust, as it offers a stronger likelihood of minimizing data collection errors and biases, and yields a more credible end result (Yin, 2014).

With the above argument, multiple case studies was a suitable methodology for this study, as it allowed me to triangulate data sources and gather rich data across three urban social organizations to produce a detailed description of adult volunteers' informal distributed leadership behavior.

Multiple Case Study Design

Urban social organizations differ widely in mission, scale, demographic composition, resource availability, and institutional constraints. A multiple case study design thus allowed me, as the researcher, to examine how informal distributed leadership emerges across diverse organizational contexts, rather than to treat leadership as a uniform or decontextualized phenomenon. As Yin (2018) stated, multiple cases serve as analytical replications, enabling

researchers to test whether similar informal distributed leadership patterns occur under varying circumstances.

In this study I purposefully selected three urban social organizations with adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region as the cases. Exploring three cases granted me access to data that supported both within- and cross-case analyses, with "some emphasis on the binding concept or idea" (Stake, 2017, p. 8), yielding persuasive responses to the research questions.

Context(s) of the Study

Urban environments are characterized by high population density, social and cultural diversity, resource constraints, and complex, often interconnected community challenges. Social organizations operating in these contexts frequently rely on volunteer labor to deliver services, sustain programs, and respond adaptively to evolving urban needs. Within this overarching construct of urban social organizations that utilize volunteer labor and services, the study's contexts were shaped by the participating organizations' mission statements and the specific urban issues they seek to address. These issues included, but were not be limited to, health and wellness, food insecurity, environmental sustainability, and support services for vulnerable populations. These mission-driven contexts created conditions in which adult volunteers exhibit leadership behavior.

Cases

Each case was a social organization physically located in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region that utilized the time and labor of adult volunteers who supported the organization's mission to help individuals and families meet their healthcare, nutritional, and logistical needs.

Case A: The Philadelphia chapter of a social organization where volunteers and staff work with a mission to deliver vital services, from providing relief and support to those in crisis, to helping the community in disaster relief, offering blood donation and supply to medical facilities, providing health and safety training and certification, or offering international aid services and support to military families.

Case B: The Philadelphia chapter of a social organization where volunteers and staff work as agile connectors that keep perfectly good food moving while it is still fresh. This organization partners with food businesses and food banks alike to collect meals and meal preparation items and redistribute them to the needy in the community. The mission of the organization is to cut costs, track impact, and reduce waste, making it a win for people, the planet, the donation partners, and the communities in need of nutritional services.

Case C: Volunteers and staff at the Southern New Jersey chapter of the social organization provide a "home-away-from-home" service for families of critically ill children receiving medical treatment at local hospitals within the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region. The organizational mission includes providing accommodation along with other amenities such as meals, emotional support services, and transportation services.

Table 1 summarizes details about each case. It provides the case locations, social organizations' mission statements, and key services offered by adult volunteers. The organization's mission and the services volunteers provide based on their skills define the context of each case. The three sites were selected for contextual and functional diversity while still aligning with the core phenomenon of informal distributed leadership among volunteers. First, the sites represent distinct but complementary domains—humanitarian crisis response, food rescue and redistribution, and family-centered healthcare support. This variation lets the study

examine how informal distributed leadership appears across organizational missions, task structures, and volunteer skill contexts. Second, all three organizations rely heavily on adult volunteers, making them ideal for observing leadership outside formal hierarchies. Third, the sites were in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region, ensuring environmental consistency (e.g., urban challenges, community needs, and socio-economic dynamics) while enabling cross-case comparison.

Table 1

Cases Detail

Case	Location	Social Organization Mission	Key Services Provided by Adult Volunteers
Case A: Major humanitarian crisis support and blood donation supplier	Philadelphia, PA	Prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.	Excellent driving and navigating skills on urban roadways. Knowledge of blood collection centers and blood banks in hospitals. Handling of time sensitive bio-medical tissue.
Case B: Sustainable and equitable food and nutrition provider	Philadelphia, PA	Reduce food waste through scalable and sustainable solutions that bridge the gap between excess and access.	Sorting, lifting, packing, and moving food quickly, often in warehouse or outdoor settings while recognizing quality, safety, and usability issues.
Case C: Provider of shelter and nutrition support to families whose children are hospitalized or are in treatment	South Jersey, NJ	Create, find, and support programs that directly improve the health and well-being of children and their families.	Providing family-centered, hospitality-based support: greeting families, preparing meals, room preparation and ensuring comfort.

Bounding of the Case

Each social organization site bound the case for this study, along with the adult volunteers providing their time and labor to these organizations during the study period.

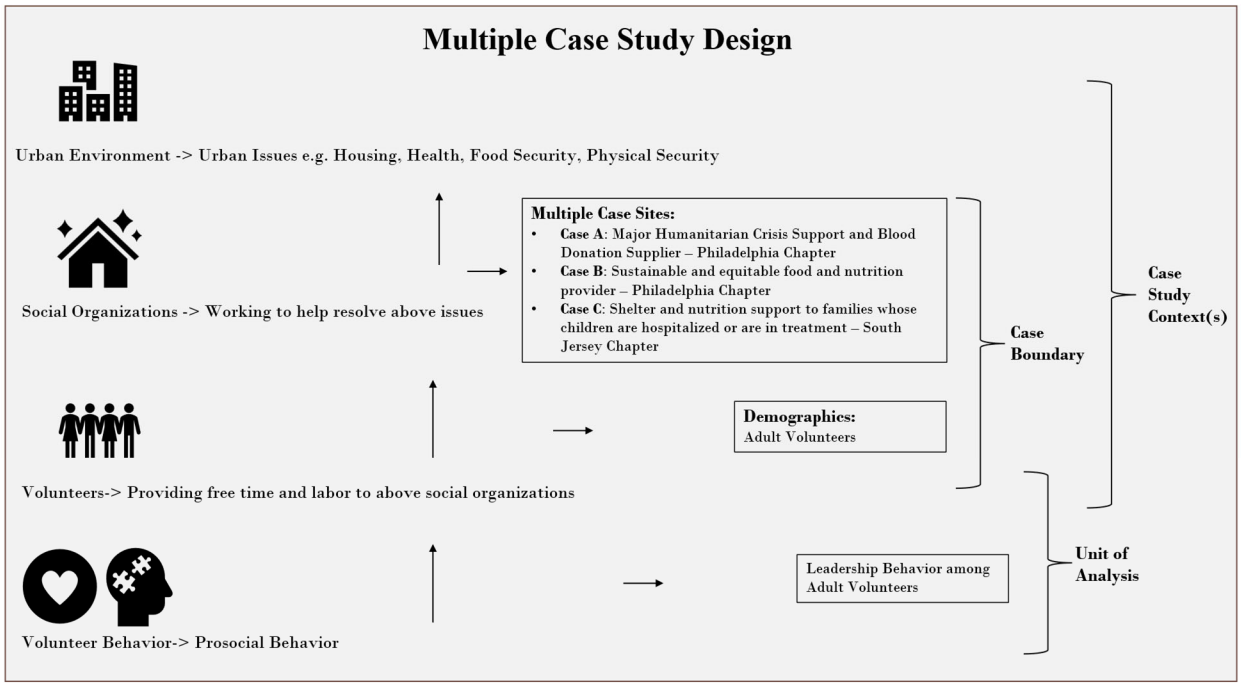
Unit of Analysis

The informal distributed leadership behavior of adult volunteers in urban social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region was the unit of analysis for this study.

As a summary of the multiple case study design, Figure 7 revisits the study context from Chapter 1 but has been updated to reflect the multiple case study design: case context(s), case boundary, multiple cases, and unit of analysis.

Figure 7

Multiple Case Study Design



Pilot Study

In anticipation of this dissertation research, I undertook a pilot study in the fall of 2024. The execution and outcomes of the pilot study provided invaluable insights that have shaped this study's design and methodology. The pilot study was conducted at an urban farm in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region. The urban farm was supported by a group of adults who volunteered at the farm on weekends or in between their professional commitments. This urban

farm community reclaimed available space in a large, urbanized city in Southeast Pennsylvania to grow organic produce, which was then sold to local marginalized communities at subsidized rates; excess produce was donated to local food banks.

I applied the qualitative case study methodology to study the phenomenon, with the case site being the urban farm, and the volunteers' informal distributed leadership behavior being the unit of analysis. The boundary of the case was adult volunteers supporting the farm.

The insights I gained from my pilot study enabled me to make several improvements to this dissertation research proposal. It further strengthened the identification and definition for the case study contexts, the multiple cases, the case boundary definition, and the unit of analysis for this study. I have used the pilot study experience to assess and refine several interview questions and observation protocol procedures in preparation for this study. The pilot study also enabled me to apply the integrated lens (selfless service leadership for positive social change) derived from the combined conceptual framework of Gandhian leadership philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership to study informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in a single case context. In doing so the pilot study allowed me to pressure test the suitability of the conceptual framework and ascertain its strength to study informal distributed leadership behavior among urban adult volunteers. The learnings from the pilot study in designing and performing a single-case analysis and writing a case report allowed me to design a multiple-case study, using the urban farm-based single-case study as a stepping-stone for the final dissertation. The pilot study also allowed me to practice academic rigor and trustworthiness through triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity, and to understand the importance of prolonged field engagement in establishing the study's credibility.

Protection of Human Subjects

I took preventive actions and followed ethical guidelines to protect the study participants. I submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application form to Kansas State University's IRB. In the IRB application I described the study implementation and included the protocols and forms used for data collection and analysis. The study commenced after I received approval from the IRB (Appendix A). I reviewed the *informed consent form* with each participant to ensure that I answered their questions and addressed their concerns, and also let them know that they could withdraw from the study activities at any time without any negative consequences. Additionally, I used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities and to avoid revealing the name of the case sites. The final report also included no identifiable information that could lead to the identification of the participants or their social organizations.

Participant Identification and Finalization Strategy

I used purposive sampling to identify research participants based on my access, geographical proximity, participants' willingness to be part of the study, and the requirement that participants fall within the case boundary definition. Purposive sampling strategies are non-random ways of ensuring that a particular category within a sampling universe is represented in the final sample of a project (Robinson, 2013). The rationale for using a purposive strategy is that the researcher assumes, based on the theoretical understanding of the topic of study, that specific categories of individuals may have a unique, different, or important perspective on the phenomenon in question and that their presence in the sample should be ensured for the study (Mason, 2002; Trost, 1986). In this study, I purposely selected participants who meet the following criteria: are adults, provide volunteer services at the respective social organizations, and have been associated with the organization for more than a year.

Once I obtained IRB approval, I sent a flyer for each case site to volunteers via the digital monthly volunteer newsletter, in coordination with the respective site volunteer coordinator. The digital flyer solicited the volunteers' interest in participating in the study. It provided basic information on the study background and the required volunteer profile. A copy of the flyer is shown in Appendix B. After receiving responses to the flyer from the volunteer coordinator, I contacted volunteers who expressed interest and assessed their proximity and scheduling options for interviews and in-person observations. This process helped build the participant pool for each case. In building the participant pool, preference was given to participants available for in-person interviews from a feasibility perspective to support prolonged field engagement as part of the study. Prolonged field engagement is a key method (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1986) to establish study credibility and trustworthiness.

The participant pool for each case was limited to between three to five respondents, with additional participants beyond that classified as *backup*. I limited the participant pool to between three and five per case site as part of the design to prioritize depth, contextual richness, and analytical insight. Limiting the number of viable participants yielded a thick, contextualized understanding when combined with in-person observations, leading to prolonged field engagement. As emphasized by Yin (2018), case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence, rather than large numbers of participants, to build analytical rigor. By integrating diverse perspectives and different forms of data, case study research relies on the systematic convergence of data to illuminate complex phenomena within real-life contexts. Volunteers in this pool then received an email with the study background and a request for consent to confirm their willingness to participate. A copy of the study participant confirmation e-mail is provided in Appendix C. The copy of the informed consent form that was attached along with the e-mail is

provided in Appendix D. Four participants from Case A, three participants from Case B and four participants from Case C confirmed to participate in the study and signed the consent form. Table 2 provides a summary of the participant profiles who were part of the study.

Table 2

Summary of Participant Profiles

Participant	Case Site	Gender	Age Group	Years at Case Site
A1	A	Male	65+	33
A2	A	Male	70+	16
A3	A	Female	70+	6
A4	A	Male	40+	1
B1	B	Female	30+	3
B2	B	Female	25+	2
B3	B	Female	60+	1
C1	C	Male	70+	16
C2	C	Male	60+	5
C3	C	Female	65+	8
C4	C	Male	60+	11

Data Collection

This study explored the contemporary bounded system of adult volunteers working at urban social organizations through multiple data collection methods, a key characteristic of a case study-based qualitative study that also establishes data credibility (Patton, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The data sources identified for this study included semistructured interviews and in-person observations. Data from these multiple sources were converged in the analysis

rather than being handled individually. Each data source was considered a piece of the puzzle that contributed to understanding the phenomenon as supported by Baxter and Jack, (2008), in considering holistic data in understanding a phenomenon under study.

Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured interviews are a common methodological tool in qualitative research and are central to social research (Creswell, 1998; Blee & Taylor, 2002; DeMarrais, 2004). Bhattacharya (2017) defined semistructured interviews as in-depth interviews where respondents have to answer pre-set open-ended questions for the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the respondents' beliefs on specific topics. The open-ended questions can have unscripted follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. For this study, I collected the data by interviewing individuals identified for each case as part of the participant identification process. A copy of the interview protocol for the study can be found in Appendix E. I conducted the interviews in person or via Zoom depending upon the proximity and availability of each participant. Each participant was offered an in-person interview option prior to using Zoom as the next option. Preference was given to conducting in-person interviews as this allowed for prolonged field engagement as part of the study. Follow-up interviews were also scheduled in case of queries arising from the data analysis process requiring further clarification from the participants. Each interview session was planned to last 45 minutes to an hour to maintain participant engagement. Multiple interview sessions with each participant were scheduled to allow sufficient time to cover all interview questions defined in the interview protocol and also to address follow-up questions arising from participants' responses.

The interview questions were designed to elicit the participants' subjective understandings of informal distributed leadership, including how volunteers define leadership in

the absence of formal titles. Drawing upon the combined conceptual framework of Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership, the questions probed the participants' meaning-making of leadership, relational dynamics, understanding of power and influence, motivation, and emotional experience through the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens.

All interviews for the study were performed in person, expect for one (Participant A2), with each interview lasting approximately an hour. With four participants follow-up interviews were required which were also conducted in person.

In-Person Observations

Case study research often involves observation as a technique to help the researcher gain deeper insight, and these observations serve as an auxiliary or confirmatory tool (Gray, 2009; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). As Merriam (2001) suggested, I recorded details about volunteers' contexts, nonverbal signals, activities, interactions, conversations, subtleties, and behavior. The study's observation protocol is in Appendix F.

I conducted in-person observations at the case sites in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region for this study. In-person observations are a critical data source for studying informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in social organizations because they capture leadership behavior *in practice*. Since informal distributed leadership is often invisible, silent, flat, and enacted through everyday interactions (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006), in-person observation allowed me to document the behavior as it emerges, circulates, and is negotiated in real time within the participant's context. In-person observations also allowed for prolonged field engagement as part of the study. The participants were observed throughout a volunteer-supported event to capture a comprehensive, real-time account of their behaviors, interactions,

and decision-making processes as they unfold. Each event usually lasted for more than three hours and ended only after the task identified for the event was fully completed. Observing the full duration of the event allowed me, as the researcher, to examine how informal distributed leadership emerged across the phases of preparation, active engagement, and closure. If a participant performed multiple roles as a volunteer on separate occasions, each such role was observed separately. Schematic diagrams of participant's positioning in the environment and interactions were also created during the observation, an example of which is provided in Appendix G. This approach enabled attention to be paid not only to discrete actions, but also to patterns of interaction, shifts in roles, movements and the ways in which influence was enacted, shared, or negotiated over time.

In-person observations captured the participants' informal distributed leadership behavioral data through the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens derived from the combined framework of Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership. Table 3 summarizes the data types, timeline, and data collection modalities.

Table 3

Summary of Data Type and Modality

Type of data	Who/What	Where	Modality
Semistructured interviews	Individual interviews with volunteers	Philadelphia, PA South Jersey, NJ	In-person/Zoom
Observations	Researcher's in-person observation	Philadelphia, PA South Jersey, NJ	In-person

Data Management Procedures

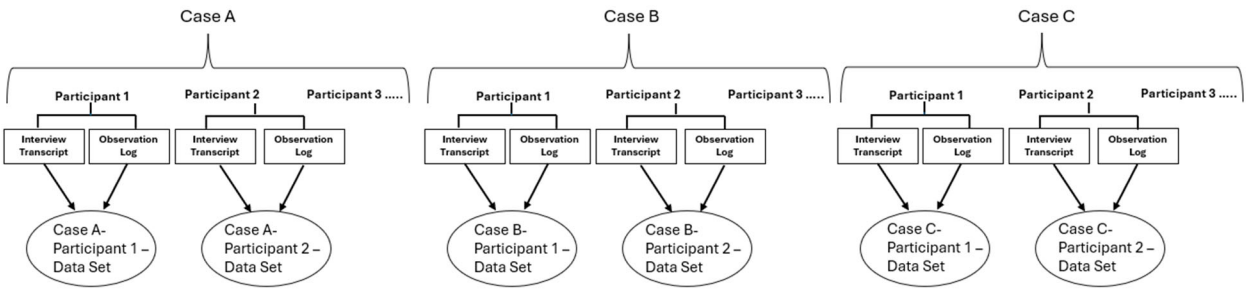
Case study methodologists emphasize the need for a well-organized data management system (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). As multiple-case study research requires

multiple types of data and a significant volume, data management is key to supporting the researcher's analysis. Therefore, qualitative data management software is a useful tool for storing, analyzing, and managing data.

I conducted semistructured interviews in person or virtually via Zoom. I used a digital recording device for in-person interviews and the Zoom application's recording function for virtual interviews. I only stored the audio files for transcription. I conducted observations during volunteering events and took observation notes on my digital device and schematic observational diagrams on paper. I stored the initial raw data (interview transcripts and observation log) in password-protected folders on a computing device and then deleted the source files from the recording device. The schematic observational diagrams on paper were filed in a folder and kept in a cabinet under lock and key. For each case, the combination of each participant's interview transcript and observation log formed the sources for the respective data set for the participant. Multiple data sets were thus developed for each case, and each data set was labelled with the case, and the participant pseudonym for identification and data set management. I managed all the data using Nvivo data management software. Figure 8 gives a pictorial depiction of the data set creation for the study. Appendix H provides a snapshot of management of data in Nvivo.

Figure 8

Data Sets for the Study



Upon completion of the dissertation, I deleted all raw data, including interview audio files, transcripts, and observation logs. The deletion was done in accordance with Kansas State University's data retention policy. Any related academic publications arising from the study will also exclude participants' personal information and organizational affiliations.

Data Analysis

In this multiple-case study, I conducted data analysis using a two-part approach: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. The data analysis process was iterative and guided by the study's combined conceptual framework of Gandhian leadership philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership, facilitating the interpretation and comprehension of the amassed data through the lens of selfless service leadership for positive social change.

Thematic Analysis

The steps of thematic analysis best describes the procedure used for analyzing the data in this study. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide step-by-step guidelines for thematic analysis for behavioral studies, which are: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) reading each transcript and becoming immersed in the data, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. For this study, I performed Steps 1–3 during the coding process and Steps 4 and 5 during the development of the analytical memo for each case. I completed Step 6 with the writing of the individual case report and the cross-case report. Thematic analysis is also inherently iterative, allowing the researcher to move between data, codes, and themes to produce nuanced and credible interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Iterative analysis was important for studying leadership behavior among adult volunteers

because leadership is a dynamic, context-dependent, and socially constructed process requiring multiple rounds of data analysis for thematic development.

Coding Process: Data Familiarization and Deductive Approach

To familiarize myself with the data during the first reading, I conducted in vivo coding for each dataset. In-vivo coding enables researchers to use participants' own words to preserve meaning, voice, and context during early-stage data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). The first round of coding established my initial engagement with the data and was exploratory, focusing on immersion in the data and on identifying the participants' voice. Following this, a second round of coding was done employing the descriptive coding method. Descriptive coding is the process of assigning short labels and phrases to summarize sections of the content (Saldaña, 2021). Together, in-vivo and descriptive coding constituted Step 1 of the thematic analysis process, i.e., data familiarization, serving as the initial and foundational phase of data analysis in which I immersed myself deeply in the collected data to develop a thorough understanding of its content, context, and nuance before commencing formal coding.

After familiarizing myself with the data, I conducted deductive coding (formal coding process for this study) to identify and categorize initial codes (Step 2 of the thematic analysis process). Saldaña (2021) defined deductive coding as the use of pre-established codes derived from theory, concepts, research questions, or prior studies to organize and analyze qualitative data, while remaining open to refinement as analysis progresses. Deductive coding is compatible with interpretive naturalistic inquiry when it is employed with a conceptual framework as an informed analytic strategy that supports meaning-making rather than hypothesis testing (Fife & Gossner, 2024). Within an interpretivist paradigm, deductive codes function as sensitizing concepts that guide analysis while remaining open to revision, ensuring that participants' lived

experiences and contextual meanings remain central to the findings (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Azungah, 2018). Researchers using deductive analysis establish a conceptual framework to structure the analysis (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Pearse, 2019). Researchers then operate deductively and apply this conceptual framework either as a preliminary analysis (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) or as the main analysis of the study (Pearse, 2019) to summarize evidence supporting or not supporting their initial conceptual framework. Deductive coding allowed me to identify and classify the codes under three categories, aligning with the study's combined conceptual framework. The first category were attributes that highlighted the selfless service aspect of volunteer behavior (*seva*: evidence of Gandhian philosophy and the fundamental dimension of servant leadership theory, i.e., the willingness to serve others). The second category were attributes that demonstrated leadership behavior aligned with the key tenets of the Gandhian leadership philosophy, the functional attributes, factors, and characteristics of servant leadership theory, and the individual, community, and group values of the social change model of leadership. Finally, the third category were attributes that provided evidence of driving positive change in the community and efforts to help and support those in need (*sarvodaya*: evidence of Gandhian philosophy and the central theme of social change model of leadership, i.e., change). The codebook for this study, presented in Appendix I, provides details on the deductive coding process, progressing from codes to subcategories to categories. Appendix J provides an example of the coding in Nvivo for this study.

I then thoroughly analyzed the categories of data through the lens of selfless service leadership for positive social change to examine the unit of analysis: informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in urban social organizations (Step 3 of the thematic

analysis). I also highlighted direct quotations from participant responses that provided for testimonial support for the research questions during the data analysis. This provided for a rich, authentic voice, allowing the reader to directly experience the participants' perspectives, opinions, experiences, and ideas about informal distributed leadership development among volunteers at the case study sites. This approach allowed me to distinguish between "framework fit" and "findings of significance". Framework fit referred specifically to whether a segment of data demonstrated sufficient conceptual alignment with one or more predetermined codes derived from Gandhian philosophy, Servant Leadership Theory, and the Social Change Model of Leadership. In contrast, I determined significance by how much the data contributed to answering the research questions or provided meaningful insight into participants' perceptions and manifestations of informal distributed leadership. During coding, I used a two-stage decision process. First, I asked, "Does this data fit one of the deductive codes?" If yes, I then asked, "Is this data significant for answering one of my research questions?" For example, Participant C1's response to the interview question "Do you think you are a leader or follower at the organization?" was "No, I'm not a leader. I'm not even a follower." This response was coded to the servant leadership theorized characteristic of "Humility", but the nuance of the participant's rejection of the leader or the follower identity in the data was equally important to capture as being analytically valuable when looked from the level of significance in response to the research question RQ1.

After completing the coding cycle for all datasets, I prepared a detailed analytical memo for each case, beginning the consolidation of data into cohesive, narrative-style segments. These memos provided an intermediate level of synthesized data derived from a copious amount of raw data while preserving their connection to the original evidence.

Detailed Analytical Memos

In cross-case qualitative research, a detailed analytical memo is a rigorous interpretive writing tool used to advance analytical thinking across cases by moving beyond description toward explanation, theme-building, and pattern recognition. Saldaña (2021) elucidated that, "a pattern is repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of actions/data that appear more than twice" (p. 9). I carried out Steps 4 and 5 of the thematic analysis process during the detailed analytical memo development. A copy of the detailed analytical memo protocol is in Appendix K. I completed the analytical memo development by exporting and elaborating the coded data from NVivo into three master MS Word documents, one for each case. The analytical memo development was iterative in nature. I revisited the coding process and codes developed to see if further clarification and interpretation of the data was required, and then updated the analytical memo accordingly. The iterations in data analysis allowed me to continuously refine the emerging patterns and themes as new insights surface and to re-examine existing interpretations in relation to the research questions and conceptual framework.

The detailed analytical memos also served as the primary tool for identifying and organizing themes. According to Saldaña (2021), analytical memos capture the researcher's reflective thinking about codes, categories, and theoretical connections and are essential for moving analysis beyond description toward interpretation. The analytical memo development enabled me to amalgamate categories of the coded data. The coded data were analyzed through the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens and organized within the broad conceptual categories of *seva*, leadership, and *sarvodaya*. Within these categories, individual codes were examined in relation to participants' volunteer roles, the contextual characteristics of each case environment, and the mission of the respective social organization to identify recurring

patterns and relationships. These patterns were then systematically clustered and synthesized into overarching themes that captured how informal distributed leadership was perceived and manifested within each case. I then detailed these themes in the case reports to describe the informal distributed leadership behavior of adult volunteers in urban social organizations.

Development of Themes

Post deductive coding, the data were subcategorized according to the key tenets of Gandhian philosophy; the functional attributes, characteristics, factors, and theorized characteristics of servant leadership theory; and the individual, group, and community values of the social change model of leadership. The subcategories form the basis of the study's conceptual framework. The subcategories were subsequently organized under the three broad categories: *seva* (selfless service), leadership, and positive social change/*sarvodaya* (upliftment of all: positive social change), which form the study's lens. Deductive coding allowed predetermined concepts to organize the coding while still developing themes through interpretation of patterns across the coded data. For the within-case analysis, the data was examined in conjunction with their associated codes, theoretical subcategories, and broad conceptual categories, while remaining attentive to the contextual characteristics, volunteer roles and mission of each social organization. This process facilitated the identification and synthesis of patterns into case-level themes. For the cross-case analysis, the data were examined holistically across the cases in relation to the associated codes, subcategories, and categories to identify recurring patterns, convergences, and extensions that informed the development of overarching cross-case themes. Both levels of analysis were carried out through multiple iterations, with the research questions serving as a consistent guide for theme development.

Case Reports

As part of Step 6 of thematic analysis, I arranged and formalized the identified themes with rich explanations as I developed the case reports for each case. A single case report provided a detailed, context-rich account of how informal distributed leadership emerges, is enacted, and is sustained within a specific urban social organization setting as a response to the research questions. I also generated a cross-case report to enable cross-case comparison by examining leadership behaviors across the three urban social organizations, thereby identifying patterns, variations, and contextual influences that extend beyond a single site.

Two-Part Data Analysis (Within and Cross)

A two-part data analysis was conducted as part of this research study: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. Within-case analysis examined each case independently, allowing me to develop a contextualized understanding of participants' experiences, behaviors, and emerging themes in each case's unique setting. Following completion of individual case analyses, cross-case analysis was conducted to examine patterns across cases and identify areas of convergence, divergence, and variation. During both within-case and cross-case analyses, the unit of analysis, "informal distributed leadership behavior of adult volunteers" was kept in focus.

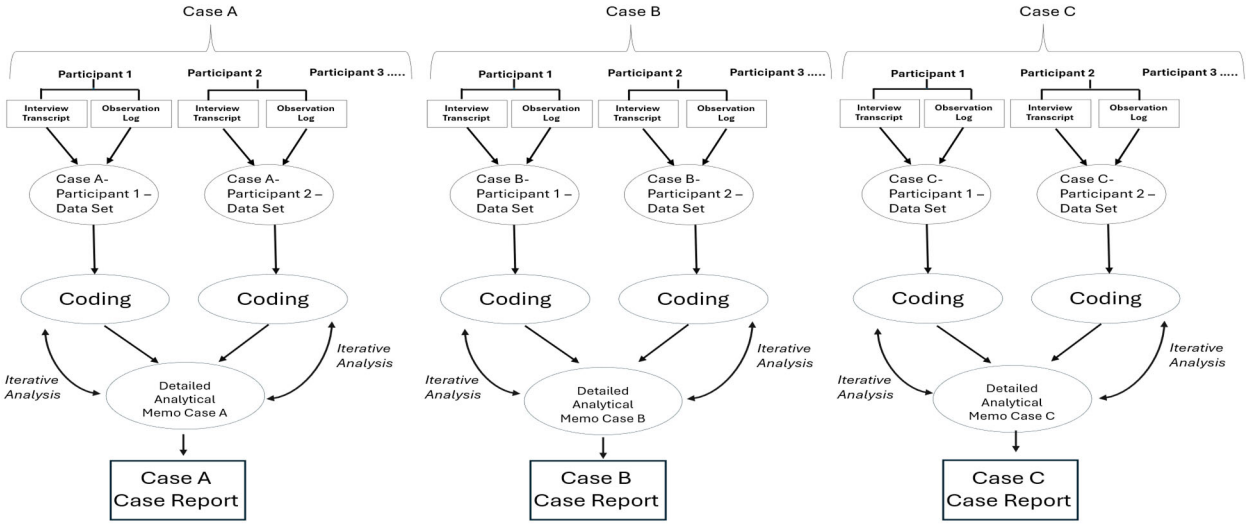
Within-Case Analysis

The within-case analysis followed the six steps of thematic analysis. After uploading the data sets for each participant in each case into NVivo data management software, I performed in-vivo and description coding for data familiarization. I then performed deductive coding to identify and categorize initial codes. From the codes, I developed a detailed analytical memo for each case, analyzing data through the lens of selfless service leadership for positive social change. The detailed analytical memo development process was iterative, with the coding

process and codes revisited for further clarification and interpretation of the data. As the last step of thematic analysis, I generated a case report to provide a detailed account of the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the particular case. Figure 9 provide an overview of the within case data analysis process illustrating the coding and the iterative analysis in developing the detailed analytical memos and the generation of the case report.

Figure 9

Within-Case Analysis Process



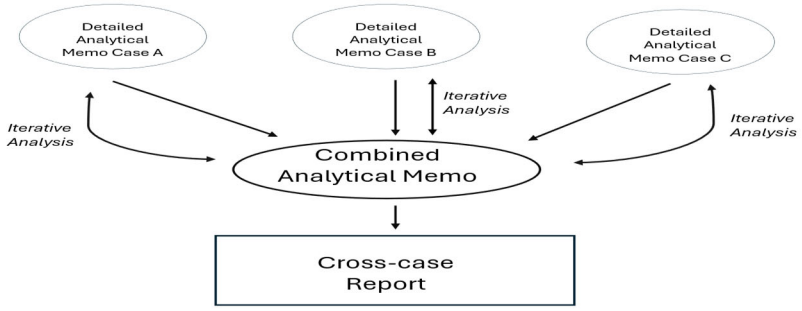
Cross-Case Analysis

The next stage of data analysis was the cross-case analysis. First, I uploaded the three analytical memos, one for each case, into Nvivo. The analytical memos were derived from the raw data itself with the key participant quotations and observational data maintained to serve as evidentiary foundations from which the cross-case themes were developed. I then followed the thematic analysis steps to uncover overarching patterns and themes across the cases. Conducting the cross-case analysis from the three detailed analytical memos was a practical and systematic approach because the raw dataset consisted of extensive interview transcripts, and observational

logs generated across the three organizational cases. Returning to the entirety of the raw data for every cross-case comparison would have made it difficult to simultaneously identify patterns across cases while retaining attention to the contextual meaning of the individual participant experiences. The analytical memos provided an intermediate level of data reduction by synthesizing relevant evidence from the raw data while preserving important participant statements and observations. This created a more manageable dataset through which patterns of convergence, divergence, and variation could be examined across the three cases. Appendix L provides an example of the cross-case coding in Nvivo for this study. Subsequently, I developed a combined analytical memo that identified and summarized similarities, differences, and contradictory evidence. After that, I systematically categorized these findings into new themes and aligned the results with the study's conceptual framework. By applying the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens across all cases, I reflected on overlooked or overemphasized aspects of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers as the unit of analysis. Finally, I presented the findings holistically across the three cases in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region as the cross-case report. Figure 10 provides an overview of the cross-case data analysis process.

Figure 10

Cross-Case Analysis Process



Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

The key challenge to data collection was participants electing to refrain from participating in the study, either before or after the interviews. To mitigate this, I identified backup participants. I also identified buffer days to observe the activities at the case sites in case of weather-related challenges or personal commitments of the study participants. To mitigate loss of data, I kept a copy of the raw data folders in a password-protected storage device secured in a cabinet under lock and key.

Academic Rigor and Trustworthiness

This study followed qualitative research guidelines and high-quality criteria to ensure a rigorous, credible, and trustworthy investigation. I utilized Guba and Lincoln's (1982) four dimensions criteria of *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* to establish the trustworthiness of interpretive naturalistic inquiry for this study. This was supplemented by ethical and academic rigor considerations for qualitative case study research. As proposed by Stake (1995), I gave careful attention to data to ensure credible and contextually grounded interpretations, and followed Yin's (2018) recommendations in the systematic use of multiple sources of evidence and the maintenance of a clear chain of evidence and contextual conditions.

Credibility

The first of four criteria Guba and Lincoln (1982) presented to establish trustworthiness is *credibility*, which answers the question, "do the data sources (most often humans) find the inquirer's analysis, formulation, and interpretations to be credible (believable)?" (p. 246). I employed three practices in this study to ensure credibility: (1) triangulation, (2) member checking, and (3) prolonged engagement in the field. The first practice was *triangulation*, which entails cross-checking the findings through multiple sources of data (Guba & Lincoln, 1982;

Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I collected and analyzed data from semistructured interviews and in-person observations from each case to achieve data triangulation. Second, I utilized *member checking* to establish trustworthiness. Member checking allows participants to offer feedback on the case report through questions, critique, and affirmation (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I engaged in member checking as a key strategy to enhance the study's credibility and confirmability by providing each case participant with a copy of the initial case report and relevant sections from the cross-case report and invited their feedback on the accuracy, completeness, and resonance of the findings. Participants were encouraged to review the report for factual correctness, clarity of representation, and the extent to which the interpretations reflect their lived experiences and perspectives. Based on the responses, I incorporated the feedback into revised case reports for each site, ensuring that participant voices were accurately and ethically represented. Any discrepancies between participant feedback and my interpretations were carefully examined, identified, and addressed within the analysis. All four participants from Case A, all three participants from Case B and two out of the four participants from Case C responded with feedback that the reports were in line with their expectations. One participant from Case A (Participant A3) requested a minor modification in using her quote to buttress a theme which was duly incorporated.

Finally, prolonged engagement in the field was a central strategy for establishing credibility within the trustworthiness framework (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). It refers to the researcher’s extended, sustained involvement in the research setting for the purpose of developing an in-depth understanding of the context, participants, and phenomenon under study. The cumulative in-person interviews and observations conducted during the field

study totaled nearly 60 hours. During the study, I had purposeful and iterative interactions with the research participants, with extended in-person observation of the volunteer informal distributed leadership behavior and returned to the case site if required to clarify meanings and test emerging interpretations.

Transferability

The second criteria for trustworthiness that was employed for the study is *transferability*. Transferability refers to the extent to which study findings can be meaningfully applied to contexts beyond the immediate research setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Within a multiple case study design, transferability is strengthened through the deliberate selection of theoretically comparable cases and the systematic documentation of contextual conditions across cases (Yin, 2018). The selection of cases, thick description and cross-case analysis were the tools I used to establish transferability. The cross-case analysis allowed me to discover patterns of convergence and divergence across case sites and to show evidence of transferability.

Dependability

Guba and Lincoln (1982) defined *dependability* as "stability after discounting such conscious and unpredictable (but rational and logical) changes" (p. 247). I ensured dependability in the research design through the consistency and stability of the research process through each of the cases. Yin (2018) described the technique as *replication logic* in the qualitative multi-case study methodology. I maintained an audit trail documenting all research decisions, data collection methods, analysis steps, and procedures, allowing for the replication of the study under the same context(s) to meet the criteria of dependability.

Confirmability

The final criterion for trustworthiness was *confirmability*. Guba and Lincoln (1982) defined confirmability as the extent to which research findings are shaped by participants' experiences rather than by researcher bias, motivation, or interest. I ensured confirmability through triangulation and member checking, as well as through practices of researcher reflexivity. Guba and Lincoln (1982) identified the researcher journaling process as a method to document "underlying epistemological assumptions, reasons for formulating the study in a particular way, and implicit assumptions, biases, or prejudices about the context or problem" (p. 248). My reflexivity also acknowledged my positionality as researcher, while demonstrating that the study findings are data-driven.

Addressing the researcher bias was an important consideration in the deductive coding process because the use of an established conceptual framework created the possibility that the I as the researcher could privilege data that supported predetermined theoretical concepts while overlooking data that challenged or complicated those concepts. To mitigate this risk, the deductive codes and their operational meanings were established from the literature and conceptual framework prior to their systematic application to the data. Data was assigned to a deductive code only when sufficient evidence supported connection, rather than being forced into the closest available code.

Table 4 summarizes the academic rigor and trustworthiness strategy applied for this study. The table also lists the corresponding sources of evidence used to demonstrate how these strategies were applied throughout the research and data analysis process. Collectively, they provided a systematic approach for demonstrating the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Table 4

Summary of Academic Rigor and Trustworthiness

Criterion	Rigor and trustworthiness test	Source of evidence
Credibility	Are the findings believable?	Multiple data sources Member checking Prolonged field engagement
Transferability	Can the findings apply elsewhere?	Multiple case study design Cross-case analysis report
Dependability	Is the process consistent and transparent?	Audit trail of the research process
Confirmability	Are the findings grounded in data?	Researcher reflexive journal Multiple data sources Member checking

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the qualitative multiple-case study approach I used to explore the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. The study participants were adult volunteers at three distinct social organizations. The chapter also discussed a precursor pilot study, detail methodological choices, participant identification and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis procedures. It also covered the development of case and cross-case reports through the lens of selfless service leadership for positive change, using a conceptual framework based on Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership. In the chapter I also addressed my positionality as a researcher and the significance of this research study. Finally, the chapter addressed the study challenges, mitigation strategies, and the plan to ensure academic rigor and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study examines informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. It draws on a combined conceptual framework of Gandhian philosophy (Datta, 1953; Gandhi, 1927, 1947; Nikam, 1954; Tähtinen, 1979); servant leadership theory (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 1970, 1972a, 1972b; Russell, 2001; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011); and the social change model of leadership (Astin et al., 1996; Skendall et al., 2017). This framework offers an integrated lens through which selfless service leadership for positive social change can be examined.

The multiple-case field study explored how informal distributed leadership behaviors emerged among adult volunteers working in urban social organizations, and how such behaviors were perceived, enacted, and sustained within the organizational contexts. Three organizational cases located in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region were examined in depth, with each case consisting of approximately three to five adult volunteer participants. To ensure confidentiality and protect participant identities, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and the urban social organizations are identified only as Case A, Case B, and Case C.

Overview

Employing the selfless service leadership for positive social change lens, this qualitative multiple-case study investigated the informal distributed leadership behavior of adult volunteers at three social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. This investigation addressed the following questions:

RQ1: What are adult volunteers' understandings of the nature of informal distributed leadership?

RQ2: How do urban adult volunteers demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors?

Case Reports

This section presents individual case reports of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in three urban social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. These case reports provide an in-depth understanding of how leadership behavior emerges, is perceived, and enacted among urban volunteers who hold no formal leadership authority yet contribute to organizational functioning and mission achievement. The three participating social organizations represented distinct forms of volunteer-based service work: health support, food security, and shelter and food support for families in need. Although the organizations differed in mission and operational structure, all relied heavily on volunteers to carry out their community-focused objectives. Each case report is organized to provide (a) a comprehensive account of the organizational context, (b) participant demographics, and (c) a case analysis that describes the emergent themes that are evident and unique to the context of the particular social organization.

The case analysis, wherever applicable, emphasizes participants' voices through direct quotations and detailed descriptions of volunteer interactions and observed acts and nuances. Analysis of each case was guided by the conceptual framework of selfless service leadership for positive social change, which integrates Gandhian philosophy, servant leadership theory, and the social change model of leadership. Following the completion of the individual case analyses, a cross-case report examines commonalities, differences, and variations in volunteer leadership behaviors across the three case sites. This comparative analysis considers how informal distributed leadership emerged within distinct organizational contexts while identifying patterns

that transcended individual cases. By examining areas of convergence and divergence across the cases, the cross-case analysis provides a broader and more integrated understanding of how urban adult volunteers perceived and manifested informal distributed leadership through their everyday service, interactions, and shared commitment to organizational and community goals.

Case A Report

Case Site A is a humanitarian social organization that provides disaster relief, emergency assistance, health and safety training, and blood collection services throughout the United States. In the Southeastern Pennsylvania Metro Region, one of the organization's most visible community-based functions is collecting, processing, and distributing blood products to hospitals and medical facilities throughout the region.

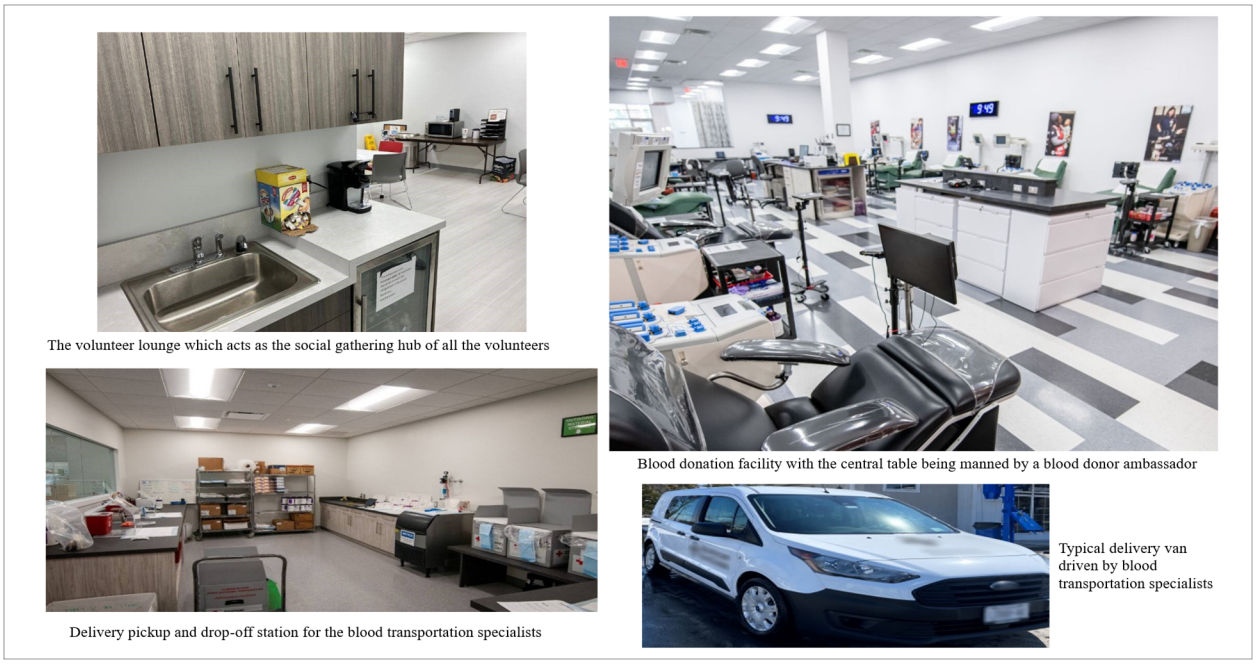
Participant Volunteer Roles and Case A Observational Setting

The social organization's blood services operation utilizes volunteer services who support the collection and delivery of lifesaving blood products. The volunteers from the Case Site A who participated in the study served as Blood Donor Ambassadors and Blood Transportation Specialists. Blood Donor Ambassadors constitute the primary volunteer representatives at blood donation drives. They welcome donors, assist with registration and appointment verification, provide information about the donation process, and help create a positive and supportive donor experience. Blood Transportation Specialists serve as a critical logistical link among blood donors; the social organization's collection, testing, and dispatch facilities; and hospitals. These volunteers transport blood and blood products from collection sites to laboratories for processing, and from distribution centers to hospitals for patient use. Responsibilities include routine deliveries; urgent ("stat") deliveries; transportation of blood products (blood, plasma, and platelets) between facilities; completion of required documentation; and communication with

both the social organization's personnel and healthcare professionals. Figure 11 is a photo collage that illustrates the observational setting for the study.

Figure 11

Collage - Case A Observational Setting



Note. Collage images sourced from the social organization's public website.

Four participants from Case Site A participated in the study. All participants except Participant A2 were interviewed in-person. Participant A2 was interviewed via Zoom. All participants were observed in-person. Participant A1 was observed in the roles of Blood Donor Ambassador and Blood Transportation Specialist. The remaining three participants (A2, A3, A4) were observed in the role of Blood Transportation Specialist.

Case Analysis and Findings

With respect to Case A, four key themes emerged from the within-case analysis. These collectively illuminate how informal distributed leadership was perceived and manifested among adult volunteers. These themes—esprit de corps, navigating the urban sprawl, precious cargo,

and the family and self as factors in altruistic calling—capture the shared experiences, interpersonal dynamics, and values that shaped volunteers' leadership behaviors in this organizational context.

Esprit de corps. Esprit de corps is a French phrase translating to "spirit of the body," referring to the common spirit of camaraderie, enthusiasm, and devotion to a shared cause that unites members of a group. Within Case A, esprit de corps emerged as a defining theme that captures the collective identity, mutual trust, and shared commitment experienced by adult volunteers. Indeed, the theme was formulated from a response given by Volunteer A3 when she was asked a question about the nature of coordination among fellow volunteers. Rather than functioning as isolated individuals, the participants consistently described volunteering at the Case Site A as a collaborative endeavor in which members worked together toward the common mission of ensuring the safe delivery of blood and plasma to hospitals.

From the volunteers' perspective, *esprit de corps* at the Case Site A was rooted in a strong commitment to serve. They understood the gravity of the service they performed and were dedicated to it. Many of the delivery runs started very early in the morning, and involved lifting and moving multiple boxes carrying blood and plasma, being mentally alert while scanning and entering data correctly, and driving hundreds of miles to complete the delivery. As Participant A4 stated, "It takes effort, but it needs to be done." The participants emphasized that their motivation extended beyond the completion of assigned duties; they viewed themselves as part of a larger humanitarian network united by compassion, service, and responsibility. This sense of belonging encouraged volunteers to move beyond narrowly defined roles and become attentive to the needs of the group and respond to situations in the absence of formal hierarchy (RQ2).

Importantly, participants perceived that the organization's humanitarian mission served as the unifying force behind this collective spirit. The responses from the volunteers consistently expressed that they were working not much for personal recognition but for the benefit of individuals and communities experiencing vulnerability. Participant A4 noted:

> I do not see the blood going into the operating room but [I understand] that this is a step in the process to get it there, and I helped in some way, and it's been really meaningful in that way, that it's like, oh yeah, this is a critical need.

This mission-oriented focus encouraged cooperation and reinforced altruistic behaviors. Participants also described relying on one another's knowledge, experience, and judgment, and this trust enabled individuals to take initiative. Examples from the responses gave insights into the volunteers' supportive dynamic: by making sure the delivery vehicles were kept pristine for the next volunteer in line, or noting the maintenance requirements to ensure operational continuity, volunteer anecdotes showcased the collaborative effort within the volunteer group. Participant A2 explained, "There are four of us who share this van for deliveries. It is a courtesy for all to keep it clean and also drop the empty boxes prior to a particular day's delivery run."

This was also concurred by other participants who expressed confidence that fellow team members would willingly assume additional responsibilities if necessary. This mutual trust created an environment in which taking initiative and supporting others become normalized behaviors rather than exceptional acts of leadership (RQ2).

Another important aspect of *esprit de corps* at the Case Site A involved the willingness of experienced volunteers to mentor newer volunteers. In addition to formal orientation and supervisory instruction, seasoned volunteers guided new volunteers via shadowing and co-delivery runs, helping them learn organizational procedures and operational tasks. Participants

viewed this mentoring not as an obligation, imposition or exercise of authority but as an integral component of belonging to the volunteer community (RQ1). Participants A1 and A3 both mentioned how knowledge sharing occurred through observation, conversation, and collaborative work amongst volunteers. The willingness of experienced volunteers to invest time and effort in helping others reflected the collective spirit of the group, who acted together toward a shared commitment and common purpose. Leadership therefore developed and was distributed through everyday interpersonal exchanges in which experience became a shared resource (RQ2).

The responses and actions of both volunteer Blood Donor Ambassadors and Blood Transportation Specialists exemplified *esprit de corps* as creating a welcoming, supportive, and mission-focused environment for blood donors—evident in the team's commitment to completing deliveries, demonstrating proper handling, helping blood donors and ensuring chain-of-custody procedures.

Precious Cargo. Within Case A, precious cargo emerged as a prominent theme that reflected how adult volunteers perceived the immense responsibility associated with transporting blood and plasma to hospitals throughout the Southeast Pennsylvania metropolitan region. Participants consistently described the blood products they delivered not as ordinary medical supplies but as irreplaceable resources that represented hope, survival, and the possibility of life for patients they would likely never meet. This understanding profoundly shaped how volunteers approached their responsibilities, influencing their decision-making, interactions, and leadership behaviors throughout the delivery process. Participant A1 described

when his delivery car was involved in an incident due to the misjudgment of a driver following him:

> I think it was in my third year of driving. I was bringing blood down to a hospital in the northeast part of the city, and it was summertime, it was the middle of summer, very hot. And I stopped at a traffic light and unfortunately the car behind me did not stop. So he, you know, rear-ended my car. And in the trunk were two cases of blood and that's what I most worried about. What would happen? That blood. Way before we had cell phones or anything like that, so, you know, what do you do? So when the police showed up, I took one of the officers side and I said, I don't know whether the trunk is going to even open because it was crushed—but in the trunk, there is blood and it's hot. It's like, we need to get somebody, so could you call this number and then have them be in touch with somebody that could come out and get this out of the trunk before we even open it. Fortunately, there was no damage to the cases. The only damage was just car damage, so that was easy to take care of, but the blood did make it, you know, with that without a problem. The police were very cooperative about jumping in right away, and getting a vehicle for delivery arranged. In the end it all worked out!

The awareness that each unit of blood could directly affect patient outcomes transformed what might otherwise be viewed as a transportation task into a deeply meaningful act of humanitarian service. Participant A3 mentioned a similar anecdote supporting the theme *precious cargo*.

> It was on a Thursday night and not one of my normal delivery days. I was coming off a ramp getting into the city, there was a response of a fire engine at the very top of the ramp, and the traffic was stopped. When I got through the traffic, I saw a van with our

logo was stopped on the side of the road and missing a wheel. So I pulled ahead of the van, and I walked back to the van. The driver knew me from blood drive pickups. I asked him if he was okay, and he responded yes, but said that the van was compromised, and he didn't know how long he will be there before a tow truck arrived. I asked, "Do you want the blood to go in?" To which he responded yes. "How many boxes?" I asked. "Six," came the response. "Ok, I can pack them in my car"—and did so. He called ahead, but the message didn't reach the right person; but somehow I made it to the facility and delivered the six boxes. I got a high five for noticing him in distress and stopping and helping him out, but I was like, which volunteer wouldn't do that, right?

From the volunteers' perspective, every delivery carried significant emotional and ethical weight. Participants frequently reflected that the cases they transported contained more than blood and plasma; they carried opportunities for surgeries to proceed, trauma victims to survive, transfusion-seeking patients to continue treatment, and families to retain hope during medical crises. Participant A4 remembered, "Once, I delivered 16 boxes to a single hospital; I made it fit in the van and I'll tell you that was my favorite day because I felt like, I felt like I'm making a difference for someone." Similarly, Participant A2 described doing more stat runs: "If I see a stat run request, I often volunteer to do it. It's just the right thing to do." Although volunteers rarely learned the identities or medical circumstances of the recipients, they remained constantly aware that delays, mishandling, or transportation errors could have undesirable impacts. This invisible connection between volunteer actions and patient well-being fostered an elevated sense of personal accountability and commitment to excellence. They found satisfaction in knowing that successful deliveries quietly enabled physicians, nurses, and hospital staff to save lives. This willingness to serve without expectation reflected a deeply internalized commitment to

humanitarian values and demonstrated leadership through quiet competence and reliability (RQ2).

Participants also described how the responsibility encouraged meticulous attention to detail throughout every stage of the delivery process. Volunteers carefully verified documentation, monitored transportation procedures, ensured containers remained secure, confirmed delivery locations, and followed established safety protocols with precision. It was evident during the observations that rather than perceiving these procedures as administrative requirements, participants viewed them as safeguards protecting the lives of individuals depending on those blood products. The sense of responsibility by holding themselves accountable for the quality and reliability of their work without supervision showed how the volunteer's understanding of leadership through responsible action and situational awareness (RQ1).

Another important dimension of *precious cargo* involved the profound sense of trust placed in volunteers by both the social organization and the healthcare institutions they served. Participants recognized that hospitals depended upon the timely and secure arrival of blood products to provide uninterrupted patient care, and this was evident from the observations. The hospital staff identified the volunteers based on social organization logos on their clothing and hats, and the delivery van, and were thankful for their service. At the same time the volunteers interpreted this trust as an honor, motivating them to consistently perform their duties with professionalism and integrity as symbols of the common purpose of Social Organization A. They carried the logo with pride and a profound sense of responsibility. The participants were aware that the healthcare professionals counted upon them and relied upon their dependability, thus

reinforcing their identities as essential contributors to the broader healthcare system despite serving in unpaid volunteer roles (RQ1).

Navigating the Urban Sprawl. Within Case A, navigating the urban sprawl emerged as a significant theme that reflected how adult volunteers perceived and responded to the dynamic, unpredictable, and often challenging realities of delivering humanitarian services in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. Participants described the urban environment as one characterized by constant movement, logistical complexities, and rapidly changing traffic patterns that required stewardship, foresight, and awareness. Rather than viewing these complexities as barriers to service, volunteers perceived them as integral aspects of their humanitarian mission that demanded initiative and intuitive decision-making.

Participants emphasized that transporting blood and plasma required balancing efficiency with caution. Navigating the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region's busy streets, traffic congestion, road closures, and unpredictable weather demanded sound judgment and adaptability. The volunteers shared that they often made real-time decisions regarding alternate routes or scheduling adjustments while remaining focused on preserving the safety and integrity of the blood products. As Participant A2 explained, "I have grown up here, I know the side streets. Based on the hour of the day, I know the Expressway would be a mess. I know several different ways to get around that traffic. So that doesn't bother me." Similarly, Participant A3 spoke of navigating to a particular hospital in the city: "The fellow drivers always advise, any time of day just go up I-95, get off Cotman Avenue, and go straight across. That's the most efficient way." These decisions required situational awareness, calmness under pressure, and confidence developed through experience and peer advice.

Participants acknowledged that working in densely populated communities uncovered unique challenges. Finding adequate and appropriate parking to be able to unload cases safely, and deliver them appropriately—sometimes walking up multiple flight of stairs, and then getting empty cases back to the vehicle required heighted situational awareness and copious amount of patience. Participant A3 mentioned, "There are times when I have parked the equivalent of two blocks away, or at a meter two blocks away and fed the meter myself. I mean, you have to be prepared for that." Participant A2's anecdote echoed challenges of parking: "I can proudly say I've gotten one parking ticket in all the years I have volunteered here." Volunteers understood leadership as situational, adaptive, action-oriented, and grounded in practical judgment (RQ1).

The theme *navigating the urban sprawl* further reflects the volunteers' appreciation for the importance of local spatial and route knowledge. Participants explained that as experienced volunteers they often possessed practical understandings of neighborhoods, transportation routes, community resources, and organizational procedures that proved valuable during service activities—be they either fixing, or making minor repairs on, the delivery vehicles (as done by Participant A3, when his van door came off while he was unloading for a delivery) or driving through optimal routes (as mentioned by Participant A2: "If I could take free interstates to get to the same place, I do that. It saves the organization in tolls and gas for approximately the same driving time.") These examples demonstrate how volunteers leveraged their accumulated local knowledge and practical experiences to make autonomous decisions that enhanced operational efficiency, conserved organizational resources, and maintained continuity of service (RQ2).

The Family and Self as Factors in Altruistic Calling. Responses from participants at Case Site A illustrated how family relationships, values, and lived experiences inspired their call to provide services and volunteer at the social organization. They viewed their

commitment as deeply connected to lessons learned from family members, personal experiences with illness, or medical emergencies.

Participants often spoke of their near and dear ones, describing relatives who had either undergone surgery or medical treatment needing blood transfusions. Participant A1 spoke of his inspiration as a family legacy: “My father donated blood, it was a part of his legacy, so I started donating blood regularly and from there moved to Donor Ambassador and Transportation Specialist volunteer roles.” Similarly, Participant A3 mentioned how her brother’s medical condition motivated her toward her altruistic calling at Case Site A: “My brother was receiving cancer therapy and he was immunocompromised; I wanted volunteer opportunities where I was respectful of his situation.” For Participant A4, the motivation came from his grandfather; “My grandfather was type 1 diabetic, so throughout my life, I was in and out of hospitals visiting him,” he explained. “I saw and understood what this organization did and how vitally important blood can be in a hospital situation.”

Participant A2, on the other hand, had a very personal reason to volunteer at Case Site A:

> I had a blood clot in my brain. I was on blood thinner medications and went through multiple transfusions for an extended period of time to stabilize my condition. And then it really hit me, I had been taking advantage of what this organization does. It was time for me to give back. And the only way I thought I could help was by volunteering for the same organization.

The participant responses indicate that family and personal experiences served not only as sources of motivation but also as moral compasses that shaped volunteers’ perceptions of service, responsibility, and giving back. The awareness that they or someone they cared for depended on donated blood profoundly influenced how they perceived their volunteer

responsibilities. In their responses, Case Site A volunteers emphasized that their services represented an opportunity to reduce suffering for someone else. Their leadership behavior was developed through the internalization of service-oriented values driven by personal experiences and influenced by family members (RQ2).

Case Summary

Analysis of the interview responses and observations from Case A provide evidence of leadership behavior amongst adult volunteers, reflecting elements of collaboration and mutual trust, and a profound sense of dedication to the humanitarian mission of Social Organization A. Four key themes emerged around how volunteers perceived and enacted leadership in their everyday service: *esprit de corps*, *precious cargo*, *navigating the urban sprawl*, and *the family and self as factors in altruistic calling*. *Esprit de corps*, theme one, reflects the strong sense of unity, camaraderie, and collective identity that permeated the volunteer community. Handling *precious cargo* underscores the profound responsibility volunteers associated with transporting lifesaving blood and blood products. The third theme, *navigating the urban sprawl*, highlights volunteers' abilities to adapt to the complex realities of operating within the Southeast Pennsylvania metropolitan region. And, finally, the theme *the family and self as factors in altruistic calling* reveals the deep personal motivations that sustained volunteers' long-term commitment to service.

Case B Report

Case Site B is a social organization dedicated to addressing food insecurity and reducing food waste by rescuing surplus food from wholesalers, retailers, farms and distributors and redistributing it to communities experiencing food insecurity. This relatively young organization, founded in 2018, operates throughout the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region and has

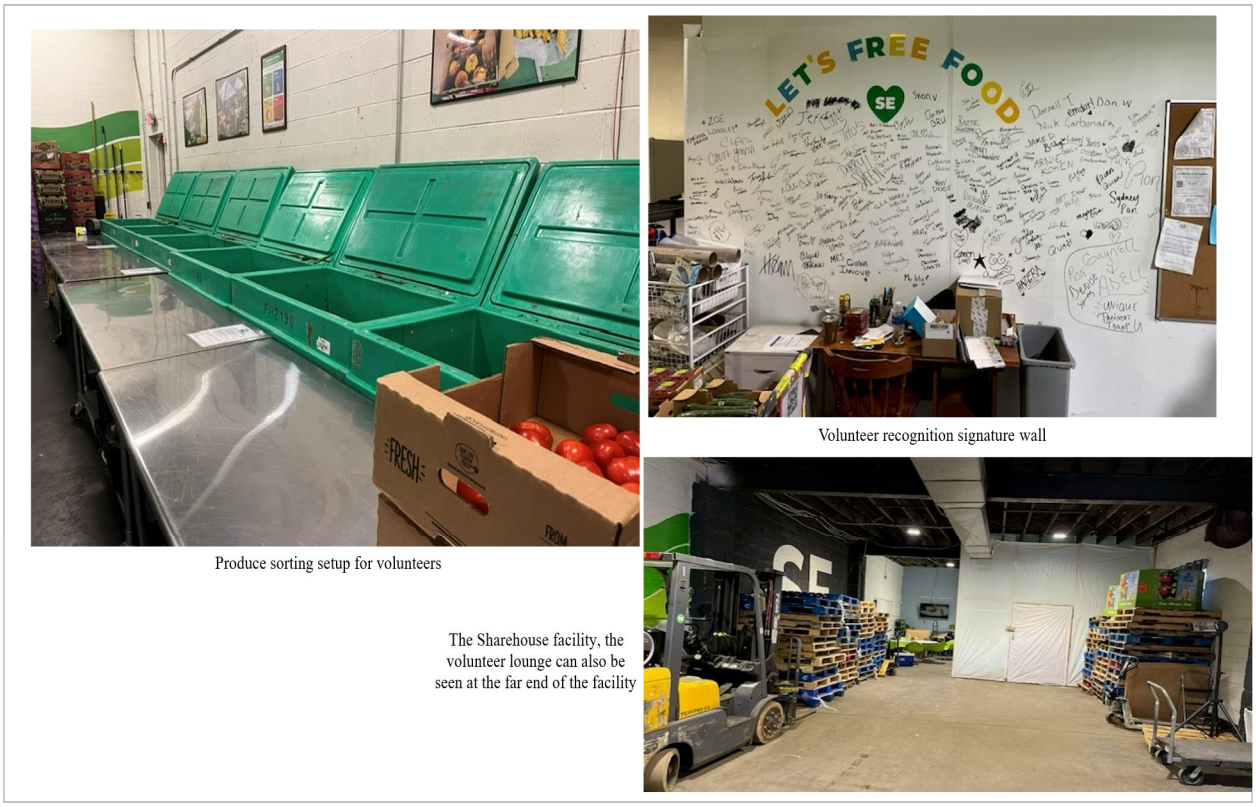
developed a network of food recovery and distribution programs that connect excess food with local hunger-relief organizations, community groups, and individuals in need.

Participant Volunteer Roles and Case B Observational Setting

The study focused on two volunteer roles that are central to the organization's daily operations: Produce Sorters and Sharehouse Volunteers. Produce Sorters volunteer at a large wholesale produce market in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region where large quantities of rescued fruits and vegetables are received from wholesalers and food suppliers: this location is known as the sorting house. Their primary responsibilities include inspecting, sorting, organizing, and preparing produce for distribution for Social Organization B. Volunteers evaluate the quality and usability of food items, and sort the produce items accordingly. All the sorted rescued food from the wholesale market sorting house is then sent to the Sharehouse facility (500 square feet warehouse) for distribution and delivery to community partners and food access programs. Sharehouse Volunteers support operations at the organization's Sharehouse facility, which serves as a central hub for receiving, organizing, and distributing the rescued food. Volunteers assist with a variety of activities, including unloading deliveries, organizing inventory, packing food for distribution, preparing orders for the community partners, maintaining storage areas, and supporting logistical operations. In addition to produce management, volunteers also support social media outreach and digital engagement efforts, helping the organization communicate its mission, increase community awareness and communicate with donation partners and food access programs. Figure 12 is a collage that illustrates the observational setting for the study through photographs. The images provide visual context for the physical environment and organizational spaces in which volunteer activities and interactions were observed.

Figure 12

Collage - Case B Observational Setting



Note. Collage sourced from digital images taken by the researcher, with consent from the social organization's management.

Three participants from Case Site B participated in the study. All participants were interviewed and observed in-person. Participant B1 was observed in the roles of Produce Sorter and Sharehouse Volunteer, Participant B2 was observed in the role of Sharehouse Volunteer, and Participant B3 was observed in the role of Produce Sorter.

Case Analysis and Findings

The analysis of Case B revealed four themes that characterized participants' experiences and observations. These illustrate the ways informal distributed leadership emerged through volunteer behavioral practice at Case Site B. The themes—*the social reason for volunteering*,

physicality, *please don't stop the music*, and *food security as a fundamental humanitarian right* reflect the motivations and actions that underpin leadership behavior among the adult volunteers at the site.

The Social Reason for Volunteering. Within Case B, the social aspect of volunteering emerged as a central theme that shaped how adult volunteers experienced their service at Social Organization B. Participants described volunteering as an opportunity to develop friendships and build a strong sense of community. The social interactions that occurred while sorting, packing, and distributing food became an important source of motivation, contributing significantly to volunteers' continued engagement and reinforcing the collective nature of their service.

In response to the need and nature of their association with the social organization, the volunteers mentioned that either working at the sorting facility or the Sharehouse created opportunities for meaningful interpersonal connections that extended beyond the completion of operational tasks. Participant B1 described the Sharehouse as her "Social Zone" and stated, "When I moved to the city, I was looking for ways to get involved because I wanted to get to know my community and two, thought I might be able to find some friends and connections through it." Similarly, Participant B3 remarked, "I have been going to the Sharehouse regularly, and know the people now and so it makes it more enjoyable. When there is a bit of lull in between loadings, we kind of like hangout a little."

Participants explained that returning volunteers often recognized familiar faces, resumed previous conversations, and looked forward to working together again. Over time, volunteering became not only an opportunity to contribute to the community but also a place where individuals experienced companionship and social connection. The participants described that

volunteering at Social Organization B became part of their regular social routine. It provided them opportunities to interact with like-minded individuals who shared similar values regarding food security and community responsibility.

During observations it was evident that working side by side while sorting produce or loading naturally encouraged conversation, allowing individuals who might never have met otherwise to establish genuine relationships. Participants frequently remarked that the organization fostered an atmosphere in which strangers quickly became fellow volunteers and, over time, friends. The participant responses and observations showed that informal distributed leadership behaviour developed through the social environment that created relationships through which volunteers become comfortable collaborating and relying on one another (RQ2).

Participants also described Social Organization B as a welcoming environment where new volunteers were readily accepted into the group. Experienced volunteers routinely introduced themselves, explained procedures, answered questions, and encouraged newcomers throughout their first volunteer shifts, sometimes in subtle ways. An example of the same could be seen in Participant B1's elaboration on the dynamics between old and new volunteers:

> I try to introduce myself to people that are new to volunteering and just, even if it's just my name, and I'll just say, hey, I'm a volunteer here. My intention is not to set up any hierarchy, or appear intimidating. My intention is that it's like, oh, I've been here if you need to ask questions or like, here's the rundown, and people just pop into roles and activities they are most comfortable with. Sometimes they would work alongside someone they have formed camaraderie with.

Participants viewed these informal acts of inclusion as fundamental to the organization's success and reflective of the supportive culture that characterized Social Organization B (RQ1).

The collaborative nature of sorting operations and the Sharehouse activities further strengthened social bonds. Participants explained that sorting and moving produce required constant communication, cooperation, and coordination among volunteers. Tasks were completed collectively rather than individually, creating numerous opportunities for volunteers to assist one another, exchange ideas, and celebrate accomplishments together. Whether lifting heavy boxes, organizing pallets, or preparing food for distribution, participants viewed teamwork as both a practical necessity and an enjoyable aspect of the volunteer experience. The shared accomplishment of completing physically demanding tasks fostered mutual respect and strengthened interpersonal relationships across the volunteers.

Importantly, participants viewed these social relationships as strengthening the organization's humanitarian mission. The sense of friendship fostered greater cooperation, improved communication, and encouraged volunteers to return consistently. Volunteers explained that the enjoyment derived from working alongside supportive individuals enhanced both productivity and organizational effectiveness. The social aspect for volunteering therefore became a key driver toward the act of volunteering itself.

Physicality. The amount of physical activity associated with the act of volunteering at Social Organization B was considered a testament to the act of service by the volunteers. Participants described the physically demanding nature of sorting, lifting, packing, and moving produce as an important source of personal satisfaction and motivation. Rather than viewing physical labor as simply completing manual tasks, volunteers perceived it as a tangible expression of their commitment to addressing food insecurity and reducing food waste. The physical effort invested each shift provided visible evidence that they were making a meaningful contribution to the organization's humanitarian mission. Leadership behaviour therefore became

embedded within the physical work itself (RQ1,RQ2). From the volunteers' perspective, the physical nature of the work created an immediate connection between effort and impact. Participants described unloading pallets of donated produce, carrying of heavy boxes, sorting fruits and vegetables, assembling food distributions orders, and loading for food service programs throughout the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region as a service necessity to support their communities. Every box lifted and every pallet organized represented food that would otherwise have been discarded—but was instead redirected to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. In their responses, volunteers expressed satisfaction in seeing the direct results of their labor, recognizing that their physical efforts translated into thousands of pounds of rescued food reaching local communities. Stacks of sorted produce prepared for community partners reinforced the significance of their collective efforts.

The physical work also fostered resilience and perseverance. Participants acknowledged that warehouse volunteering required standing for prolonged periods of time, doing repetitive tasks, pushing carts, and maintaining overall sensory alertness, and was a very physical marker of their volunteering. Another important aspect of the theme *physicality* involved the collaborative nature of the labor. Participants emphasized that warehouse tasks rarely involved working independently. Volunteers routinely lifted heavy boxes together, formed sorting lines, organized pallets as teams, and rotated responsibilities to maintain efficiency or let fellow volunteers and themselves settle in roles they are comfortable with (RQ2). Through these shared physical activities, relationships developed naturally, and volunteers learned to depend upon one another's strengths. As Participant B3 noted, "People do that more in groups so that they're kind of like doing it together." Participants explained that teamwork became essential not only for

completing the work safely but also for maintaining morale throughout physically demanding shifts.

Please Don't Stop the Music. The phrase "Please don't stop the music" is metaphorical, referring to the energetic tempo and upbeat music in the environment where volunteers provided their services at Social Organization B. Popular music was played, highlighting how the working environment played a crucial role in the act of volunteering at the sorting house and the Sharehouse. Participants consistently described the environment as more than a physical location where food was sorted and redistributed; instead, they perceived it as an atmosphere that energized volunteers and encouraged active participation in the organization's mission of reducing food waste while addressing food insecurity. The combination of a fast-paced operational rhythm and the music playing throughout the facility created a distinctive culture that inspired volunteers to remain engaged, motivated, and connected.

Participants frequently identified the upbeat music playing as an important contributor to this positive atmosphere. Rather than serving merely as background entertainment, the music became part of the volunteer experience, creating an environment that felt welcoming, enjoyable, and emotionally uplifting. Participant B3 mentioned, "there's just like a warm vibe at the sorting house." Similarly, Participant B1 said, "I am incredibly happy when I am here; it's my Happy Place." During the observation it was noticeable that Participant B2 enjoyed the music too. The sorting tables were cleaned after every sorting run, and after each run Participant B2 would pick up the sanitizing spray and a hand cloth and clean not only her own sorting spot but those of her fellow volunteers and other produce sorters. While doing so, she would break into an impromptu dance routine, each time roughly choreographed to the music being played. No one asked her to

clean all the tables; she just did so. There were additional sanitizers, spray bottles, and hand cloths available for the other volunteers, but Participant B2 just cleaned for all.

The work at Social Organization B required constant movement and collective responsiveness. The music generated smiles, casual conversations, dance movements and moments of shared enjoyment, even while volunteers performed physically demanding tasks such as lifting boxes, sorting produce, or preparing boxes for distribution. The music helped transform the physical work into an experience characterized by enthusiasm and collective energy, making volunteers more likely to remain engaged throughout their shifts. The collective optimism strengthened relationships among volunteers while reinforcing their commitment to the organization's mission.

Another important dimension of this theme involved the relationship between the physical environment and volunteer motivation. Participants explained that the warehouse atmosphere generated a sense of excitement that reinforced the meaningfulness of their work. Seeing pallets of rescued produce rapidly transformed into food destined for community organizations, while simultaneously working within a lively and energetic setting, created immediate visual evidence that collective effort produced tangible social impact.

Participants also stated that the fast-paced tempo encouraged them to remain attentive to the flow of work. During the observations in the Sharehouse, as each order to be loaded was announced, volunteers would fan out to collect the produce boxes. No volunteer was tasked to pick a specific box. The group were continuously aware of who was picking what variety of produce, each constantly doing mental math to calculate what remained to be picked; all products were then placed on carts. Following a final check, the carts were pushed to the front of the Sharehouse, where they were loaded onto backed-up pickup trucks or vans. The loading was

also done by the volunteers to achieve maximum space optimization. All this spontaneous movement occurred while the music was playing, while orders and numbers were being shouted out for confirmations. As produce volumes fluctuated throughout the day, volunteers frequently identified additional areas requiring assistance and moved independently to support fellow team members with other tasks at the Sharehouse, such as general cleanup and housekeeping activities. Volunteers learned to read one another, anticipate needs, coordinate without formal task allocation, and shift responsibilities according to changing conditions (RQ2). From a distance, the environment resembled a small block party.

Food Security as a Fundamental Humanitarian Right. One of the salient themes that emerged from the experiences of adult volunteers at Social Organization B was the belief that food security was a fundamental human right rather than a privilege. Rather than perceiving themselves as simply sorting produce or distributing donated food, volunteers described their work as participating in a broader social mission that challenged food waste while simultaneously addressing hunger. This perspective transformed routine operational tasks into meaningful acts of social justice and social change, where every crate of produce sorted, every pallet organized, and every food delivery prepared represented an opportunity to serve the community (RQ1).

Participants consistently framed their volunteer service as an effort to restore dignity and equity by ensuring that nutritious food reached individuals and families who might otherwise experience food insecurity especially in the urban environment. Participant B1 stated:

> In the urban environment, you see the need for, or the food insecurity is higher, but the community response to that food insecurity is also higher. During deliveries you see a

> very high appreciation for the food, You see a lot of people who are very thankful. The need is a little bit more in your face.

Participant B1 further spoke in support of food security for all:

> The reason I volunteer here, is the idea of it's going to anyone or if they say that they need food, that's fine. There's no sort of like proof that you have to provide, which is one of the things I like the most because it's like non-judgmental. It's truly just like serving the community.

Participant B3 similarly mentioned finding her common purpose with the mission of Social Organization B: "I mean I do what I do, because I believe in the mission—distributing the food, ensuring people can eat, saving the waste, saving what would be waste from becoming waste." Participant B2 looked at her volunteering services as a small step toward resolving a bigger problem:

> A teacher in the community was noticing that a lot of the kids couldn't concentrate. And it all came back to the fact of food insecurity. And sadly, food insecurity is such a big problem in this country, which is really sad. So I do that, like, I come here like twice a month to help out.

The theme *food security as a fundamental humanitarian right* also reflects the participants' growing awareness of the paradox of food insecurity existing alongside widespread food waste. Many volunteers expressed surprise at the enormous quantities of edible food that would otherwise be discarded despite significant levels of hunger within surrounding communities. Hence, they described how they saw their volunteering service as not just a kind of labor assistance but a step toward a more equitable food system, in which excess resources are

intentionally redirected to meet essential human needs (RQ1). They were helping bridge a gap by rescuing surplus food and redirecting it to community organizations, shelters, and food pantries.

Volunteers also mentioned about the dignity of food being "due" to those receiving it. During the observations it was noticed how they exercised considerable care when inspecting, sorting, and packaging fruits and vegetables, recognizing that the quality of the food reflected the dignity afforded to those receiving it. Participants emphasized that recipients deserved fresh, nutritious produce, equal to what anyone would expect for themselves or their own families. As Participant B2 stated, "If I cannot eat it, then it's going to the compost bin and not for donation." This attention to quality demonstrated that volunteers viewed food distribution as more than logistical efficiency; for volunteers at Social Organization B, it is an ethical responsibility grounded in respect for human dignity.

Case Summary

The data analysis from Case B demonstrates how volunteering as a service, the act of helping the community, and leadership behavior amongst adult volunteers emerged through the need for social relationships, collective physical effort, the energizing influence of the volunteering environment, and a shared belief in the organization's mission that access to nutritious food should be treated as a fundamental human right. Volunteers developed meaningful connections with one another through repeated participation, while the physical nature of the work provided a tangible means of contributing to the collective purpose. Four themes emerged: *the social reason for volunteering*, *physicality*, *please don't stop the music*, *and food security as a fundamental humanitarian right*. The first theme, *the social reason for volunteering*, illustrates the importance of interpersonal connection in attracting volunteers to the organization and sustaining their continued participation in acts of service. The second theme,

physicality, captures the central role of physical effort in the volunteer experience. The third theme, *please don't stop the music*, represents how the upbeat environment played a positive role in the behaviors of the volunteers. Finally, the fourth theme, *food security as a fundamental humanitarian right*, reflects the conviction that access to nutritious food should not depend on a person's income or social position. Collectively, these elements created an environment where informal distributed leadership behavior among volunteers became closely intertwined with the organization's mission of fighting food insecurity in the community.

Case C Report

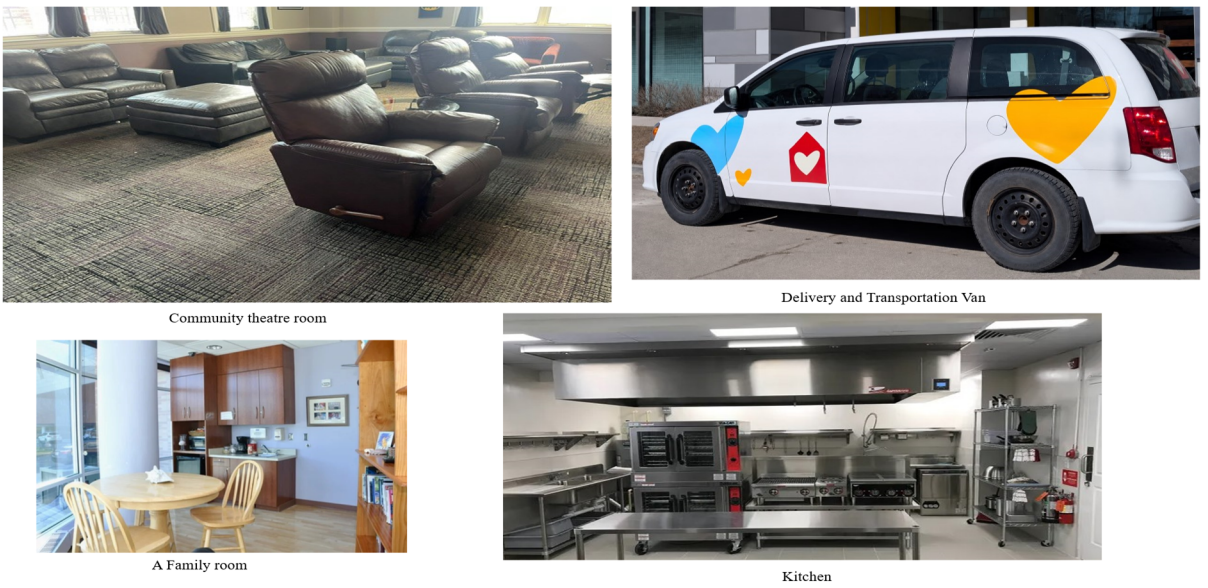
Social Organization C is dedicated to supporting families of seriously ill or injured children who are receiving medical treatment. Through lodging, transportation, and hospitality services, the organization seeks to reduce the emotional, financial, and logistical burdens that families experience during a child's hospitalization. The site, located in proximity to major pediatric healthcare facilities in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region, provides temporary lodging, meals, transportation assistance, and supportive services that enable families to remain close to their children during medical treatment.

Participant Volunteer Roles and Case C Observational Setting. The key roles performed by volunteers who were participants in this study were operational support, kitchen support, and transport specialists. Operational support volunteers helped prepare guest rooms, organized common areas, monitored supplies, and supported special events or family activities. Kitchen support volunteers provided meals, snacks, and hospitality services to families staying at the site. They also organized donated food items, maintained kitchen cleanliness and sanitation, and stocked supplies. Transport specialists supported the social organization's logistical operations by transporting donated goods, supplies, and other resources among community partners,

healthcare facilities, and the site. They provided pick-up and drop-off services to families traveling from the site to healthcare facilities and the airport. Figure 13 is a collage that provides photos of the observational setting for the Case C study.

Figure 13

Collage - Case C Observational Setting



Note. Collage images sourced from the social organization's public website and digital images taken by the researcher, with consent from the social organization's management.

Four participants from Case Site C participated in the study. All participants were interviewed and observed in-person. Participant C1 was observed in the role of Operational Support, Participant C2 was observed in the roles of Operational Support and Transportation Specialist, Participant C3 was observed in the role of Kitchen Support, and finally Participant C4 was observed in the role of Transportation Specialist.

Case Analysis and Findings

The analysis of Case C identified five salient themes that provide insight into participants' perceptions and enactments of informal distributed leadership within the volunteer

setting. These themes are *I am an Umbrella*, *the offering of labor*, *the spiritual state of mind, implicit coordination*, and *empathy.*

I am an Umbrella. The theme "I Am an Umbrella" captures how adult volunteers at Social Organization C perceived themselves as a protective and supportive presence for families experiencing the uncertainty and emotional strain of a child's hospitalization. Like an umbrella that provides shelter, volunteers described their role as helping shield families from some of the practical burdens associated with prolonged medical treatment. Although the volunteers recognized that they did not directly influence medical outcomes, they knew that they made each family's experience more manageable by preparing meals, maintaining welcoming communal spaces, transporting supplies, organizing donations, and responding to everyday household needs. Their service created a layer of stability around families for whom facilitating medical support for the child remained the core concern.

The umbrella metaphor also reflects the volunteers' willingness to remain attentive to all the kinds of help that Social Organization C needed to run and support its residents. Participant C1 said, "So now I'm a jack of all trades and a master of none. I do it all. You know what I mean? I can do, I do what I can is all, you know. And they appreciate everything I, you know, that I can do." Similarly, Participant C4 stated, "If they need me for something, I'll stay." Participant C2 echoed the same principle: "My role is to step up and do what needs to be done."

Participant volunteers frequently noticed what required attention on-site and acted without hesitation. It was observed that volunteers would replenish supplies, clean a shared area, assist with unloading a delivery, prepare food, or offer transportation services to a family. These actions appeared routine on the surface, yet collectively they sustained an environment in which families could concentrate more fully on the care of their children. Participants consistently

emphasized that no responsibility was beneath them because every completed task removed one small burden from families already carrying extraordinary emotional weight. They reflected a form of leadership grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, and service (RQ2). The behavior further represented the collective nature of volunteering within the social organization. According to the volunteers, they created a shared canopy of support for the families through their combined efforts, with kitchen volunteers, operations support volunteers, transportation volunteers, and staff members all working together. According to the participants, each person contributed a particular form of time, labor, knowledge, or care—and these contributions overlapped to create a dependable support system (RQ1).

Participant C1 noted that his previous work experience as a pipe fitter helped him handle many of the operational fixes required at the site. Participant C3 mentioned that her past work as a pediatric nurse naturally inclined her to support the children in their nutritional needs. Participant C4's past work at the local port authority helped him to be adept at logistical work. However, whenever required, participants went beyond their comfort zone to complete various activities. One such instance, mentioned by multiple participants, was an occasion when they all got together over a weekend, to collect and transport a large donation of furniture from a local community college to Social Organization C. In this sense, the umbrella was both individual and collective: each volunteer offered protection through personal service according to their skills, while the overall group together created a wider structure of care.

The Offering of Labor. One of the most meaningful themes that emerged from the responses and observations of volunteers at Social Organization C was the belief that their service represented the pursuit of something good. Participant C2 put it succinctly: "It's not a vocation; it's like an avocation" —avocation, here, being the propensity and passion to help. As

Participant C2 further stated, “Somebody always needs a hand. So why shouldn’t I be able to help them? It just makes sense.” The participants consistently distinguished volunteering from paid employment, emphasizing that their motivation was not rooted in financial compensation, career advancement, or professional obligation.

When asked how his behavior would change if he was compensated for his work at Social Organization C, Participant C4 said, “If you are paid, it makes you think if this is my job or not.” He further explained that “being a volunteer makes you more open to go above and beyond if need be, because you choose to.” As a whole, the participants described volunteering at the site as a deeply personal calling. They pursued volunteering at Case Site C out of a genuine desire to support families experiencing one of the most difficult periods of their lives, arriving in a big metropolitan city seeking medical help for their children. They viewed their volunteer service as an extension of their personal values and identity rather than as another form of work (RQ1). The theme the offering of labor also reflects the participants’ understanding that volunteering was a chosen commitment rather than a required responsibility.

The participants further described volunteering as an opportunity to reconnect with aspects of themselves that had become secondary prior to retirement. (All four participants for Case C had retired from professional careers.) They noted that after years of focusing on occupational and familial responsibilities, volunteering allowed them to prioritize compassion, service, and community engagement. They further explained that retirement had created a desire in them to remain active and productive while contributing meaningfully to society. Rather than viewing retirement as withdrawal from purposeful activity, by volunteering the participants brought accumulated knowledge, skills, and life experiences into the environment and

repurposed them in response to the social organization's service contexts. (RQ2). All the participants were grateful that Social Organization C provided them with the opportunity.

The avocational nature of volunteering was also evident in the flexibility with which participants approached their responsibilities. Volunteers willingly accepted tasks that might otherwise appear routine or mundane, including but not limited to cleaning common areas, organizing gift bags, stocking supplies, and transporting goods between locations. Instead, every task was viewed as contributing to the comfort and well-being of families whose primary concern remained the health of their hospitalized child. Participants consistently emphasized that they were open to any kind of labor support they could physically provide to help the families staying at Social Organization C. As Participant C1 explained, "I make sure of everything so that they don't need to come in here and have another problem. They already got a problem. That's why they are here. Right? So, they don't need another problem."

Participants consistently explained that while they could not alter a child's medical diagnosis, shorten a hospital stay, or eliminate the emotional pain experienced by families, they could intentionally reduce smaller burdens from an already overwhelming situation. Volunteers viewed every completed task as one less problem that parents and caregivers had to worry about. This perspective fundamentally shaped how participants understood their role within the organization. Volunteers routinely observed their surroundings and responded proactively. If supplies were running low, they replenished them. If common areas required cleaning, they addressed the issue immediately. If meals needed preparation, they organized the necessary ingredients without waiting for formal instruction. This anticipatory approach reflected an understanding that reducing stress for families at Case Site C often depended upon solving problems before they became visible to others.

Another important aspect of the theme *the offering of labor* involves the collective nature of problem solving within the volunteer community. Participants acknowledged that no individual volunteer could complete all the tasks. Instead, each volunteer addressed different needs that collectively produced a comprehensive support system (RQ1). The kitchen volunteer ensured meals were available; operations volunteers maintained comfortable living and communal spaces; transportation volunteers secured supplies and deliveries, and performed pickups and dropoffs. In addition, participants frequently assisted one another across functional roles whenever demands increased, demonstrating flexibility and collaboration rather than rigid adherence to assigned responsibilities. The volunteers recognized the overall organizational needs of Social Organization C and collectively responded to ensure the smooth operation of the site, each basing their contributions on their abilities and skills.

Ultimately, as a theme, *the offering of labor* illustrates that volunteering at Social Organization C was perceived as far more than an alternative form of work by the participants. It represented a deeply meaningful expression of identity, purpose, and compassion that enriched the volunteers themselves. Participants demonstrated that the absence of financial compensation did not diminish commitment; rather, it strengthened the authenticity of their contributions. Their willingness to devote time, energy, and skills reflects a profound understanding that the greatest rewards of volunteering are not economic but human.

Spiritual State of Mind. A third profound theme that emerged from the experiences of adult volunteers at Social Organization C was their spiritual state of mind with regards to their act of volunteering. Participants described volunteering as requiring more than physical labor or task completion; it demanded an inner sense of purpose. Although individual beliefs varied, participants at the site described volunteering as something that nourished their

inner calling. Some associated their service with faith-based values, believing they were "called" to help others who are in need. Participant C2 explained: "I was raised Catholic, so you give, you give back. And that's where I can probably say, that's where the aspect of giving comes from." For Participant C3, the spiritual dimension of volunteering extended beyond religion and reflected a broader commitment to humanity, compassion, and service:

> You could be spiritual in whichever religion you want to do. Volunteerism also has an aspect of spirituality associated with it. And then that's why I think those two things sometimes will run parallel. I don't know, you just, again, because of that, it's just my nature to try and help people wherever I can.

The participants viewed volunteering as an opportunity to express deeply held moral values through action. As Participant C4 stated, "It sort of gives you a purpose. These families, they need—well, they need help." Volunteering at Case Site C became an expression of participants' internal beliefs about compassion, dignity, and the importance of caring for others without expectation of extrinsic rewards. The spiritual aspect of the theme reflected in participants' understanding of service as an act of humility.

The theme *spiritual state of mind* summarized the participants' view that effective volunteering required them to cultivate an inner disposition characterized by compassion, humility, and purposeful service (RQ1). Volunteering was like a divine calling within a purely humanist dimension. Participants viewed this mindset as fundamental to their ability to support families in need with authenticity and consistency.

Implicit Coordination. A distinctive theme that emerged from analyzing the interview responses of Case Site C participants and observing them work alongside fellow volunteers was implicit coordination. Specifically, this theme highlights the ability of volunteers to work

together seamlessly with minimal verbal cues. Participants consistently described an environment in which they intuitively recognized what needed to be done and acted accordingly. Volunteers continuously observed their surroundings and had a great sense of awareness and of anticipated organizational needs; they adjusted their own activities to complement the efforts of others. This silent synchronization enabled Social Organization C to function smoothly despite the diverse responsibilities performed by volunteers.

Volunteers gravitated toward unfinished tasks while remaining aware of what others were doing. A highlight of my observations at Case Site C was watching Participants C1 and C2 work in tandem, complementing each other's skill sets as they collaborated to replace the damaged carpet in the community theater room. This *implicit coordination* was also shown when they went to check that the light bulbs in each of the family rooms worked. Participant C1 climbed up a ladder, handing down a damaged light bulb; Participant C2 handed him a new bulb to affix at the same time. The pair replicated this set of activities from room to room. Another example of strong volunteer coordination occurred when Participant C3 noticed the arrival of Participant C4 with the delivery van, then walked out to the front door to help him unload. Both of them worked together to arrange the food items in the pantry. These actions were rarely preceded by any assignment of tasks because participants had developed a shared understanding of the organization's daily rhythm and collective expectations (RQ2). As Participant C1 remarked, "We been here long enough to know what to do, you know" illustrating how coordination had become embedded within the volunteer behavior at the organization.

Participants consistently emphasized that successful coordination depended upon situational awareness. Operational support volunteers cleaning common spaces paused to assist transportation volunteers when necessary, moving between roles as required. Rather than

perceiving responsibilities as confined within rigid role boundaries, participants viewed Case Site C as a shared environment where priorities shifted according to immediate needs. Participant C2 gave an example of this while discussing his relationship with Participant C2:

> I am more into transportation, but if C2 needs a hand that's the biggest thing I can do. He's the more mechanical. He's been here 10 years longer than I have. He knows things around here much better and I am here to assist him whenever required.

According to volunteers, this flexibility allowed them to respond rapidly without disrupting overall operations. Participants also described *implicit coordination* as requiring humility and the absence of territorial behavior. Volunteers did not claim ownership over particular responsibilities or hesitate to assist outside their roles. The kitchen volunteer willingly helped organize gift bags if necessary, while transportation volunteers occasionally assisted with housekeeping tasks after completing deliveries. Participants explained that the needs of families consistently took precedence over personal preferences or role definitions. This willingness to prioritize collective success over individual responsibility fostered an environment where volunteers naturally supported one another without concern for recognition or status.

Another important characteristic of *implicit coordination* involved the ability to adapt to unexpected situations. The site operated within a dynamic environment influenced by changing operational priorities. Participants described numerous occasions when plans changed unexpectedly, requiring volunteers to reorganize responsibilities almost immediately. On one of the days of the observation, it was noted how the volunteers at the site responded to a hygiene emergency by changing the carpets in the common areas. It was an unplanned activity demanding much physical strength in ripping apart and disposing off of the old carpets; however, Participants C1 and C2 responded to the need with alacrity, working around and reprioritizing

other tasks at hand. This adaptive coordination demonstrated the volunteers' collective capacity to resolve problems at the site, even unexpected ones (RQ2).

The theme *implicit coordination* demonstrates how volunteers learned to anticipate needs, complement one another's efforts, and adapt continuously to changing circumstances while maintaining an environment of calm support for families experiencing hardship. According to the participants, and based on their behavior volunteering at Social Organization C, *implicit coordination* is embedded within collective action, sustained through trust, and expressed through countless soft interactions.

Empathy. Participants at Social Organization C consistently described empathy not simply as feeling compassion for the families with children undergoing complicated medical treatment but as an active process of understanding, responding to, and sharing in the emotional realities of others while providing practical support. Volunteers recognized that every family accommodated at the site was experiencing a uniquely difficult chapter in their lives, each characterized by uncertainty, fear, exhaustion, and hope. The volunteers believed they could at least influence how families experienced those circumstances by creating an environment of warmth, acceptance, and understanding.

Participants explained that *empathy* began with recognizing the unseen burdens carried by every family. As Participant C2 described, "Here, these kids don't deserve their situation, The kids, the families, the friends of the families have to live with it. And I keep thinking, what more can I help with?" In a similar vein, Participant C1 stated, "We have to keep trying to make it as easy as you can for these families." Participant C4 also provided an anecdote that also impacted his thoughts on service and helping:

> One time there was a family, and they'd come every once in a while, and he had to go back to, they live in Peru, and I'd take him to the airport, and they had a hard time, just, because they had different things, they had to get sent over, and there was a restriction, and I remember staying at the airport for a while, while they got checked in, and then there was issues with the language, and you just think like, wow I mean, besides the problems being, you know, medical and physical, they had to deal with this, and it just gets to you sometimes. Like, you know, like say if I have, think I have problems, and then you think of them, I have no problems. She was going through with her bags and they were too heavy. And they wanted to charge her and [she] didn't have the money. And she's throwing stuff out to get the weight down. And I'm seeing some of the stuff, like baby stuff. And you just, you know, another way you feel bad. I don't want to sound like I'm great, but I wanted to, I should have paid for it. I didn't at the time. I should have just given my credit card. But if that ever happened again, I will. I certainly will.

Participants described *empathy* as being fully present in the environment. Volunteers recognized that meaningful support does not always require lengthy conversations or dramatic gestures. Instead, *empathy* can be shown through attentive listening, gentle conversation, respectful silence, or the simple reassurance that someone cares. As Participant C2 explained:

> I have a lot more empathy for the people that are disadvantaged, special needs. Many who have stayed here during their treatment. One of them had an ocular implant. I'm much more empathetic and curious and intend to converse because not that I'm scared by it, not that I'm deterred by it, but I'm more inclined to get them to interact. I feel comfortable talking with somebody that doesn't give a damn or is just oblivious to it. So I'm more, I guess the biggest thing in being a volunteer is empathy.

The participants acknowledged that though they could never completely feel another family's experience, this reflective process deepened their compassion and strengthened their commitment to service. *Empathy* also shaped how volunteers approached the practical aspects of their responsibilities. Participants consistently emphasized that tasks such as organizing donated supplies, help preparing meals, transporting deliveries, or cleaning common areas were never viewed as merely operational duties; instead, each activity was understood through the perspective of the families who would ultimately benefit from those efforts. According to the participants, *empathy* also fostered anticipatory service. Rather than waiting for families to request assistance, volunteers anticipated needs before they became visible. This proactive approach reflected their *empathy* translated into action (RQ1).

Empathetic behavior also elicited emotional responses amongst the volunteers. Participant C1 was very emotional while describing an incident that he said impacted him more than any other in his years of volunteering:

> This one will stick with me for the rest of my life. We had a family here. It was a grandmother, daughter, and a granddaughter. They were here for seven or eight months. And I used to drop them over to the hospital all the time. And I got, you know, friendly with them. We always joked around, the kid around and everything. Then one day I got the news. A truck ran a red light and hit their car and killed all three of them. And I still can't believe it to this day. And all three of them, you know were such nice people. Any maybe it was fate, they all died because I don't think one could have lived without the other. That's how close they were. And I think about them every day. That in part lets me to continue volunteering.

Similarly, Participant C2 said:

> I learn from the families when they open up to me. And then when you see some of these kids, when you first see them before they have their surgery, and then you watch them, they're getting better. And it almost brings tears to your eyes when you see some of these kids. Or when they return, they come back a couple of years later. And they've grown. They've matured. And they're back for more surgery, but they've got such a positive attitude. They're so—they know what they want. But it's still hard. You see some of these kids with parents with a child that's blind in one eye, you try and be as supportive as you can. But when you see the kids come back, I'm telling you, like you want to cry. Like, why, like I ask, you know, why does God do that? Why does, why do people suffer? You know, I ask that question all the time. Like, why? And we'll never know if there's a reason. But at least I could do something very small to help.

The emotional responses experienced by the volunteers served as important sources of motivation and resilience throughout their service. According to the participants, witnessing the challenges faced by others often reinforced the significance of their contributions, fostering a stronger sense of purpose and responsibility toward the organization's mission. Positive emotional experiences, including seeing a child's smile, receiving a family's appreciation, or observing the collective impact of the volunteer team, generated feelings of fulfillment that encouraged continued engagement. Participant C2 mentioned:

> There was this girl, she had problems with her leg, she couldn't walk with the one leg. And she was talking to me and her dad, and she said, I want my leg amputated off. I don't want to go on [like this]. She was going on for like 10 years with the leg. It wasn't working. She was miserable all the time because she had pain and she couldn't walk. Her dad said, well, you know, it's up to you. The day she had her leg amputated, her life

> changed 100%. She got a new leg now, playing sports in school with the one leg. And that was really unbelievable. I mean, I gave that girl all the credit in the world to actually sit down and think about having a limb taken off. But I think she knew that once she did, it was going to free her. And it did. Last I saw her smiling, and told me she planned to go to university and study to be a nurse and help kids just like her.

These emotional encounters experienced by the volunteers strengthened their dedication to service, enhanced their interpersonal relationships with fellow volunteers and beneficiaries, and sustained their willingness to contribute their time and effort, despite the demands of the role.

Ultimately, the theme *empathy* demonstrates how adult volunteers at Social Organization C saw *empathy* as a factor that extended beyond just emotional concern. *Empathy* became a guiding principle that shaped their volunteering behavior and strengthened their support of the mission statement of Social Organization C. According to the volunteers, *empathy* informed volunteers' day-to-day behaviors, interpersonal interactions, and commitment to service (RQ2). The deeply held value served as a catalyst for purposeful action rather than simply an emotional response mechanism.

Case Summary

At Social Organization C, the data collected and analyzed from semi-structured interviews with participants and from observations coalesced into five interrelated themes. The themes *I am an Umbrella*, *the offering of labor*, *the spiritual state of mind*, *implicit coordination*, and *empathy* best represent the participants' responses and behaviors with regards to their volunteering experience. The first theme, *I am an Umbrella*, echoes the ways in which volunteers were open to any tasks that would be steps toward alleviating the families' hardships, letting families focus on the health and recovery of the children. The second theme, *the offering*

of labor, reflects volunteers' understanding that physical work represented one of the most meaningful ways they could contribute to the organization's mission. The third theme, *the spiritual state of mind*, highlights the internal disposition that participants believed was essential for effective volunteer service. The fourth theme, *implicit coordination*, illustrates how volunteers worked together seamlessly through shared understanding. The final theme, *empathy*, represents the emotional foundation that, according to the volunteers, was a key aspect of their volunteer service at Social Organization C.

Cross-Case Analysis

The cross-case analysis applies findings from Cases A, B, and C to identify patterns, similarities, and distinctions in the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers across diverse urban social organizations. The detailed analytical memos for the respective cases were analyzed holistically. Four key themes emerged: *the enormity of commitment to service*, *the understanding of leadership*, *hierarchy* and *agents of social change.* These themes are essential to analyze and consider across the three cases, to answer the study's research questions investigating (a) adult volunteers' understandings of the nature of informal distributed leadership, and (b) how urban adult volunteers demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors.

The Enormity of Commitment to Service

The theme *enormity of commitment to service* emerged as a representation of the amount of effort and the depth of dedication required on the part of participants providing their services. The participants' volunteering schedules, and participants' responses to the questions "If not volunteering here, then what will you be doing?" and "How long do you think you will be volunteering?" as noted in Table 5. Table 5 details participants' volunteering schedules and their

responses to the questions “If not volunteering here, then what will you be doing?” and “How long do you think you will be volunteering?” The table provides insight into the participants’ willingness to invest their time, effort, and skills in advancing the missions of their respective organizations.

Table 5

Participants Commitment to Volunteering

Participant	Participant Volunteering Schedule	Response to “If not volunteering here, then what will you be doing?”	“How long do you think you will be volunteering?”
A1	Blood Donor Ambassador – four to five hours once a month. Blood Transportation Specialist – four to five hours once every two weeks.	“Volunteer somewhere else.”	“As long as I can.”
A2	Blood Transportation Specialist – four to five hours every week.	“Spending more time with the grandkids.”	“Till I am physically able to do so.”
A3	Blood Transportation Specialist – four to five hours every week. Additional communication support – one to two hours every week.	“Volunteering somewhere else.”	“For sure some more years!”
A4	Blood Transportation Specialist – four to five hours every week.	“Volunteering somewhere else.”	“As long as I’m able to drive, I can do this and help out.”
B1	Produce Sorter – three hours every month. Sharehouse Volunteer – three hours every week. Additional social media outreach – two to three hours a month.	“Probably similar to what I do here, maybe somewhere else.”	“As long as I physically can.”
B2	Sharehouse Volunteer –	“Doing hobbies.”	“As long as I can.”

	three hours every week. Additional social media outreach – one hour every week.		
B3	Produce Sorter – three hours every week.	"I also volunteer at another place—so would volunteer more often there at the pet shelter."	"I hope as long as I can physically do it."
C1	Operational Support – eight hours every week spread over two days.	"I mean, really, I mean, I don't know."	"As long as I can do something, I'll do it."
C2	Operational Support – four hours every week. Transportation Specialist – four hours every week.	"Going crazy! Well some other volunteer opportunity. This is the time to better yourself."	"Well, I'm not going to live to be 100, but as long as I physically can."
C3	Kitchen support – four hours every week.	"I wouldn't be doing anything else. No, I have to volunteer."	"Till I can lift five pounds!"
C4	Transportation Specialist – four hours every week.	"Volunteer somewhere else."	"As long as I can, I guess."

According to the participants across the three cases, the enormity of commitment originated as an orientation toward service. It was an inherently internal calling, something they had to do as long as they could, something as basic as existence itself . At Social Organization A, the commitment was evidenced through long driving hours, being able to fill delivery slots at short notice, maintaining reliability on delivery documentation, logistical competence, and sometimes spending an entire day in support of a blood donation drive or event. At Social Organization B, the commitment was reflected through the labor contribution expended by the participants—much of which happened over the weekends, when they could be pursuing other leisure activities. However, the volunteers chose teamwork, showing willingness to support the

collective operation wherever needed. At Social Organization C, the commitment was expressed through multiple hours of service over multiple days, responding to and proving labor services during planned time, and also aiding when unplanned operational emergencies occurred. The emotional presence and compassionate support for families constituted an additional form of service. The variations in the type and level of commitment reflect the distinct missions and operational environments of the organizations, yet they simultaneously reveal a shared understanding among volunteers that meaningful service means an authentic submission of their labor (RQ1).

Within their enormous commitment to service, the participants demonstrated a strong appreciation for a structured organizational environment. Although their participation was voluntary, they remained acutely aware that they were contributing a valuable and finite personal resource—their time. Structure, according to the volunteers, was not perceived as unnecessarily restricting volunteer autonomy; it meant that their service best served its intended beneficiaries. The decision to volunteer, and whether to volunteer with a particular social organization, depended on how clearly participants could see and understand where their contribution fit in the larger operational process and who, ultimately, could benefit from their efforts. According to participant responses, an organization with a clearly articulated mission, established processes, and identifiable social impact gave volunteers greater confidence that their contributions were worthwhile.

Across the cases, this relationship among time, structure, and mission alignment provided important insight into the nature of the participants' commitment. Because participants were freely contributing their time rather than participating through employment obligations, their

continued engagement depended partly upon their understanding that the organization respected and appropriately utilized their contribution.

From observing participants and listening to their responses about the nature of their volunteer service, it became clear that contributions made by adult volunteers extended beyond just the provision of time and physical labor: volunteers held an element of specialized skill and professional competency. These skills and competencies had been developed through past work experiences and reflected familiarity with the urban landscape of the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region and ongoing knowledge sharing with fellow volunteers (RQ2). Among the participants and across the three social organizations, this specialized knowledge was demonstrated in various ways.

At Social Organization A, volunteers involved in transportation activities demonstrated practical knowledge related to driving, navigation, route selection, vehicle operation, time management, and problem solving. Familiarity with the surrounding metropolitan area became particularly valuable when volunteers were responsible for transporting blood and plasma between locations. Volunteers' knowledge of highways, neighborhoods, traffic patterns, and toll routes allowed them to make situational decisions that could improve efficiency. Practical mechanical experience similarly become valuable when unexpected vehicle-related problems occurred. Such expertise was not necessarily required within the formal volunteer role description, yet it became an important organizational resource when circumstances required it.

At Social Organization B, the participants' skills included social media marketing, supporting the organization's outreach in ending food insecurity. The required digital skills reflected the manner in which volunteer contributions extended beyond the physical activities performed within the organization. Participants B1 and B2 mentioned how they applied digital

graphics, storytelling, and content creation across social media platforms, to increase visibility of Social Organization's B mission. These specialized skills, developed through volunteers' professional experience, personal interests, and prior community involvement, became additional organizational resources during their involvement.

At Social Organization C, Participant C3 had been a pediatric nurse prior to retiring. She could thus use her medical knowledge to help families track down the best doctors to meet their children's healthcare needs, and also advise on children's nutritional requirements during recuperation. Participant C1 had been a pipe fitter in his professional life; in his operational support volunteer role, he could handle as stated in his own words "anything beyond electrics!" Participant C2 mentioned that he, too, had learned plumbing skills from volunteering alongside Participant C1. Similarly, Participant C4 not only did delivery runs for Social Organization C but also conducted basic fleet maintenance. Importantly, overall, the application of such volunteer expertise occurred organically: When volunteers recognized an opportunity to connect their existing capabilities and apply their strengths with the needs and mission of the organization, they did so (RQ2).

The Understanding of Leadership

Determining the nature of participants' understanding of organizational leadership in the context of their volunteering was specifically important to comprehend the response to RQ1. The participants' responses to the questions "What does the word leadership mean to you?" and the more pointed question "Do you think you are a leader or follower at the organization?" provide insights into their perception of organizational leadership, as did their leadership behavioral cues documented during the observational period. The responses and observational findings are noted in Table 6.

Table 6

Participant Response to Meaning of Leadership and Observational Leadership Cues

Participant	Response to Meaning of Leadership	"Do you think you are a leader or follower at the organization?"	Key Observational Leadership Cues
A1	"Well, when you say the word leadership, I think about somebody who's going to take situations and make decisions about what needs to be done. There's another part of leadership that you could look at and say, you know, you're an example to other people, what you do. I just want to be seen doing right things."	"More as a follower— because I just make myself available."	Awareness—always aware of the needs of the people around him.
A2	"I think a leader looks for ways to motivate the people around them on the mission or the job at hand and help them if they're having any kind of issues, and support them. We all make mistakes. But show the people that you're leading, make them be a better person."	"Both—as a follower, I'll go and they'll say, where do you want to go today? And then once that's decided, to me as a leader is, okay, now it's my responsibility."	Integrity—meticulous in execution.
A3	"Well, I believe in servant leadership. So I've looked for opportunities where I can give a little more and where I feel I'm a good match for what can be done."	"I would say both, but my orientation is towards leadership."	Calmness—composure during unforeseen circumstances.
A4	"I think leadership is a trait or characteristic of someone who is willing to take ownership and take it upon themselves to do something, and they don't need to be told every step of the process."	"It's funny, I don't necessarily think of myself as a leader. I just think of myself as, I think, a part in the greater machine here, but not a leader. But once I go out and I'm in the hospitals I	Efficiency—decision-making in arriving at the most optimal solution. Covered three hospitals in a

		feel I have a responsibility."	single delivery run.
B1	"The word leader is like someone who leads by action."	"Mostly a follower although now since I've been doing it for a while so sometimes I feel like, oh, okay, I'm like, know how to do some of this stuff, I can like give some tips or whatever to people that are new."	Flexibility—self-assess where the need is the highest and distribute self-workload and time accordingly.
B2	"Like they have the vision and they're leading whatever's going on."	"A bit of both."	Positive attitude—maintaining an inviting and energetic environment.
B3	"Someone who has, you know, authority over everyone who's, you know, working the shift."	"A follower."	Thoughtful—quiet approach, work without prompting.
C1	"Leadership is about knowing your people."	"No, I'm not a leader. I'm not even a follower."	Knowledge and skill—the breadth of operational issues the individual could fix.
C2	"Well, I don't know if it's like being a boss. You know, some people think it's a boss. I just do my thing. People want to follow me, they can. If they don't, that's fine too."	"I don't like the word I'm a 'follower,' because that doesn't give me enough credit. Not that I want the credit, but a follower is just someone who has no either ambition or self-direction. I know	Dependability—the ability to multitask and manage his time and duties between operational support and transportation needs.

		I have a role to do. I do it."	
C3	"Leadership means to constantly look for feedback. If I'm doing something wrong, you tell me if I'm doing something wrong so that I can improve."	"I never thought of it, to be honest with you. So yeah, I never thought it."	Motherly—the amiable motherly nature; she could gently coax many of the kids to eat their meals.
C4	"I guess, for me, not like bossing people around, but doing something, do it by example like you do it and if someone follows then follows you."	"A follower."	Thoughtful—quiet approach, work without prompting.

The majority of the responses from the volunteers associated leadership with taking responsibility, providing pathways for improvement, and responding to emerging needs. Participants' understandings of leadership were consequently pragmatic and action-oriented. However, it is important to further consider two responses. Participant A3 responded that she believed in "servant leadership" without being aware that servant leadership theory constitutes an essential part of this study's conceptual framework. Participant B3 stood out as being the only participant who identified leadership with authority. Most participants identified leadership with "the right mindset" and "relevant experience" to assume influence during volunteering and in effecting the outcomes at hand at that moment. Leadership thus belonged not to a designated individual, but to each individual prepared to serve, influence, support, and act when the situation called for it.

Another interesting finding was that none of the participants identified themselves solely as leaders. Participant A3 came closest to her identifying herself as a leader, but this identification, too, was with the caveat that she identified as being both a follower and a leader,

"more oriented towards leadership." Her orientation toward leadership should be noted in light of her definition of leadership as "servant leadership"; hence, she still viewed leadership from a service point of view rather than as an authority. Most of the participants recognized themselves as either both (leader or follower) or as neither. Participant A1 defined himself more as a follower, mainly because of his "available for service" nature, which highlights the emphasis on "service" as part of volunteering.

Participants B3 and C4 identified themselves solely as followers. Despite their self-identification as followers, both Participants B3 and C4 showed thoughtfulness toward fellow volunteers during the observations—demonstrating situational awareness and a willingness to support others. Participant B3 would clean all the tables for all volunteers between sorting shifts, without any prompting or direction. Similarly, Participant C4 would clean both the interior and exterior of the delivery van after his delivery runs, as a courtesy to the next volunteer who would drive it. "I just do it" was his simple explanation for these actions. Overall, the absence of a leadership identity did not necessarily indicate the absence of leadership behavior. The participants demonstrated leadership behaviors while simultaneously not perceiving themselves as leaders. The volunteers took initiative, coordinated activities, helped fellow volunteers and others, shared specialized knowledge, provided emotional support, maintained a positive working environment, and influenced how work is accomplished—yet described those behaviors as "helping," "doing what needs to be done," or "being part of the team."

The volunteers recognized that successful service depends on fulfilling interconnected responsibilities. They recognized what needed to be accomplished, moved between tasks, supported one another, and responded to changes in workload. Observationally, leadership behavior therefore was subtle and fluid. Across the three cases, the participants broadly

understood leadership as action rather than position. Their sense of service diminished the need for individual identification with leadership.

Hierarchy

To study informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region, it was important to understand how hierarchy shaped participants' interactions with fellow volunteers in their organizations. This was especially important for understanding the *informal* aspect of distributed leadership, one of the key aspects being explored in response to RQ1. The participants' responses to the question "Are there unspoken hierarchies among fellow volunteers?" and their working styles as documented during the observational period in reference to the organizational context provide clues to how hierarchy played a role in the perception and manifestation of leadership among the participants. The responses and observational findings are noted in Table 7.

Table 7

Participant Response to Hierarchy in Volunteer Roles and Observational Working Style Cues

Participant	Response to Hierarchy in Volunteer Roles	Key Observational Working Style Cue
A1	"Very minor."	Amiable
A2	"Yes."	Collaborative
A3	"There is a little bit of a hierarchy."	Zen like
A4	"I don't think so."	Zen like
B1	"Amongst volunteers, maybe unspoken or semi-spoken. Now this question makes me think, if I am setting up a hierarchy just because I have worked here long enough. I think a lot of volunteers just happen to pop onto roles that they like or positions that they like."	Taking charge

B2	"Not in a way that feels like rigid or like our dynamic. It's just more like, okay, if this person's been here for a few years, like they know the drill."	Amiable
B3	"Unspoken. Maybe. But no one flaunts their hierarchy. Well, maybe one person, but they don't really come very often. You know, there are some people who have a personality where they come in and they immediately want to make changes. They want to tell you how you're doing stuff wrong. I never feel that works well."	Zen like
C1	"A volunteer is just a role. Doesn't make you anybody how many years you've been."	Collaborative
C2	"Yeah, because of experience. It's unspoken, it just is, and there's no animosity, there's no jealousy."	Collaborative
C3	"No."	Complimentary
C4	"Not like officially, but I know Participant C1 has been here a while. So I'll look up to him or see his idea. But I don't look at him like a boss or something."	Complimentary

The aspect of *hierarchy* amongst the participants, with respect to their volunteer roles and setting, constitutes an interesting finding. Based on the participants' responses, elements of hierarchy existed mainly in relation to (a) experience and familiarity with organizational procedures, (b) length of volunteer service at the social organization, and (c) confidence in performing particular technical and trade related tasks. However, these differences did not necessarily translate into rigid hierarchical relationships among volunteers. Instead, volunteers generally appeared to view one another as peers working toward a common organizational mission. Observations showed influence travelled laterally rather than vertically and was primarily shaped by experience and competence rather than rank. Based on these factors, the hierarchy self-adjusted itself.

That said, certain participant responses on the question of hierarchy are outliers. Participant A1 mentioned how, at a certain blood donation drive, another blood doner ambassador arrived a few hours late and confronted him to vacate the volunteer table, as this was "her" site. He also narrated another experience, in which a certain volunteer went about assigning tasks to fellow volunteers saying, "I am an ex-CEO." In both cases, Participant A1 confronted the individuals, explaining that once they entered the doors of Social Organization A, none of the volunteers had any ownership over a site or desk: as volunteers, they left their past "titles" and "honors" behind. Participant B3 also mentioned an unpleasant experience involving another volunteer who, based on their behavior, "[wanted] to tell you how you're doing stuff wrong"; this was something she did not appreciate. In all cases, it was clear that participants did not appreciate "rank" and "ownership" being thrown around by fellow volunteers.

The observational analysis of the working styles and interactions of the participants also did not show evidence of rigid hierarchy. The major working styles observed were (a) collaborative—participants working on the same task together at the same time: for example, Participant C1 and C2 changing the old carpets in the common areas together, at Social Organization C); (b) complimentary—participants working on different smaller tasks at the same time, but helping each other out when required: for example, Participants C3 and C4 working in the kitchen, bringing in produce deliveries respectively then working together to stock the pantry; and (c) Zen-like—participants staying hyper-focused on completing the task at hand, but still remaining aware of the needs of others: for example, Participant B3 focusing on her sorting activities, but still cleaning all the sorting tables.

Participants A1 and B2 had very amiable working styles. Their presences added to the positive working energy with fellow volunteers, bringing friendly conversations and humor; both

participants were observed smiling and laughing the most while working with their fellow volunteers. Being amiable could reflect these volunteers' overall personalities; however, the trait did have an impact on their working styles. During observations, Participant B1 stood out as being "in-charge." She completed multiple activities during her volunteering shifts, both at the sorting facility and the Sharehouse. Her leadership behavior was evident in observations, when fellow volunteers reached out to her for direction, for advice on sorting procedures or with questions about how to lay the boxes of food in pallets and in what order to load them. Her response to the question about hierarchy among volunteers made her question herself: "Now this question makes me think, if I am setting up a hierarchy just because I have worked here long enough." Participant B2 was among the longest serving volunteers at Social Organization B; even in her response, she recognized the fact that the evidence of hierarchy shown could be a function of her experience and length of service at the particular site.

Across all three cases, volunteers appeared to respond positively to the knowledge and experience of their peers without necessarily treating those individuals as formally superior. The participants recognized that certain individuals possessed greater familiarity with organizational procedures, specialized skills, practical knowledge, or experience gained through longer periods of volunteer service. They were generally willing to seek guidance from, or defer to, these individuals, based on situational needs. But such deference did not appear to establish a permanent hierarchical relationship among volunteers. The pattern observed suggested that expertise created influence without necessarily creating status.

Agents of Social Change

As the participants reflected on the questions "Why did you decide to be a volunteer at the organization?" and "Why is volunteering at the organization important to you?", their

responses could be understood as extending beyond motivations for service. Participants considered how volunteering provided them with a practical opportunity to contribute to something larger than themselves and support the community around them. Table 8 considers participants as agents of social change, through detailing their responses to questions about their volunteer experiences at their respective organizations.

Table 8

Participants as Agents of Social Change

Participant	Response to "Why did you decide to be a volunteer at the organization?"	Response to "Why is volunteering at the organization important to you?"
A1	"It is a part of my legacy."	"Because there is someone who always needs some help."
A2	"So I grew up in a religious household and was taught that, you know, helping your neighbor, doing good deeds is a good thing."	"I believe in the mission of the Social Organization A".
A3	"I feel part of a team."	"I think that volunteering is an important thing in life."
A4	"They need this help everywhere."	"I just want to have a positive impact on my community. And I think community is one of those words where I don't just mean my neighborhood. I think the most meaningful thing we can do is to be a positive influence on our friends and family."
B1	"I think a lot of people probably take food security for granted. I feel like I saw a different side of life and realized how much my small actions of coming to help out a couple hours every Saturday really give back to other people."	"I think a lot of it has to do with giving back to my community and feeling like I'm more a part of it because of it."

B2	"The organization just honestly seemed fun. I was like newer living in the city, wanted to meet people, also wanted to do something that felt like giving back."	"Contributing to the world in a positive way."
B3	"Well, I always knew I wanted to do that. And sadly, food insecurity is such a big problem in this country, which is really sad."	"Well, because I want to be able to give back. I've been blessed, you know, and I can. I'm physically healthy enough to do it. So I just think I sort of should do it."
C1	"And my mom always said to me that in life, somebody always needs a hand. Post retirement And I was going through the newspaper, and I saw this ad up in the corner that said, 'Volunteers wanted.'"	"It just gives me, it just makes me feel good. That's, I mean, I mean, any kind of, if a volunteer tells you it doesn't, then they shouldn't be volunteering. You're here because it makes you feel good. And you're helping somebody, and these, and believe me, these people, they appreciate it. I mean, there's nothing better than some of them just giving you a hug and thank you very much for what you did or whatever."
C2	"Well, when I retired, I said I want to have time structure and diversity."	"It gives me time structure, it gives me something productive to do for others, and satisfaction."
C3	"Well, I guess the reason why I started to volunteer—first of all, again, you have to give back. I don't know, you just, again, it's just my nature to try and help people wherever you can."	"I think it's the involvement with the kids."
C4	"Well, mainly, I was looking for something to do, since I wasn't working. And it just felt like you're doing something good."	"It sort of gives you a purpose."

The participants did not describe positive social change in abstract terms; rather, they experienced it through the tangible consequences of their everyday actions. These actions included transporting blood, sorting and distributing rescued food, preparing meals, supporting

families in need, driving organizational vehicles, and assisting other volunteers and staff—representing small, individual contributions that collectively addressed larger social needs. From the volunteers' perspective, social change was therefore something they could participate in directly rather than simply hope would occur. At each of the social organizations, the decision to volunteer was connected to the opportunity it provided for the individual to contribute directly to the well-being of people within the community. The source of inspiration varied from family legacy and influence to personal transformational experiences, from intrinsic motivations to recognizing a problem in society and working toward alleviating this problem.

According to the participants at Social Organization A, transporting blood and plasma and supporting blood donation drives as ambassadors created a social link between completing a delivery and the healthcare needs of an individual whom they might never personally meet. Volunteering, therefore, provided each participant the opportunity to use their sense of altruism, offering contributions that could ultimately affect another person's life. At Social Organization B, the purpose of volunteering, according to the participants, needed to be understood through the immediacy and visibility of the social problem being addressed: food insecurity in urban areas. A box moved, a pallet organized, or produce sorted was not simply warehouse work; each activity contributed to the larger process of redirecting usable food away from waste and toward people who could benefit from it. For participants, volunteering achieved a broader social purpose of ending hunger and nutritional deficiencies in the community.

At Social Organization C, the participants understood volunteering as a much more intimate experience of social impact. As Participant C3 stated, "I think it's the involvement with the kids." Participants from Social Organization C encountered families navigating difficult circumstances associated with the hospitalization and treatment of a child. Although they could

not change the medical circumstances faced by those families, they could influence the environment surrounding that experience. According to the participants, the understanding that even small activities can make meaningful changes for those in need represented an important understanding of social change: that change does not necessarily need to be conceptualized as transforming an entire social system at once. Alleviating the difficulty in another's immediate circumstances is engaging in positive social change: cleaning rooms provided families dignity and comfort, preparing food reduced one responsibility for a parent focused on their child, transportation removed a logistical concern, and completing ongoing maintenance ensured that families encountered a safe and functioning environment. Through all these activities, volunteers at Social Organization C became agents of social change by transforming empathy into actual action.

Considered together, the participants' motivations revealed an important distinction between wanting social change and participating in social change. The volunteers' approach is direct and hands-on. At the same time, volunteers also recognize that they may not be able to solve the entire problem, or all the problems; but they know that they definitely can contribute to solving a part of a problem (RQ2). Participants' actions did not just represent passive support for positive social change, but rather were the actions of active agents, working toward tangible change: each volunteer hour at a time.

Overall Findings Summary

This multiple-case study revealed that although each social organization served a distinct humanitarian mission—blood products delivery services, food rescue and redistribution, and family-centered hospitality for pediatric healthcare; the findings consistently demonstrated that the perception and manifestation of volunteer leadership behavior emerged as a service-oriented

phenomenon rather than as a function of formal authority. The volunteers' perception of leadership was deeply rooted in intrinsic motivation and a commitment to serving others. Across all three cases, volunteers exhibited leadership behavior embedded within everyday interactions and distributed across individuals according to situational needs rather than defined hierarchy. Informal distributed leadership, therefore, emerged through competence and the willingness to support other individuals whenever operational demands required it. Leadership thus became highly fluid, with individuals alternating between leading and following depending upon immediate operational requirements, their own sense of initiative, and the experience and skill required. Leadership behaviors were often subtle and nearly invisible, emerging through emotional intelligence, flexibility, and an unwavering commitment to service. In their acts of volunteering, participants consistently focused on effecting a positive experience within their immediate communities.

Despite these shared characteristics, each organizational context shaped informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in unique ways. Within Case A, volunteer leadership centered upon operational coordination, logistical decision-making, and safeguarding and transporting critical medical resources. In Case B, leadership emerged through physical collaboration, adaptive teamwork and efficient coordination in a warehouse environment. Lastly, in Case C, leadership was primarily relational, emphasizing empathy, emotional support and compassionate service that enhanced the experiences of families navigating pediatric healthcare challenges. These contextual differences demonstrate how the perceptions and behavioral manifestations of informal distributed leadership vary according to organizational mission and volunteer responsibilities. That said, the overarching finding remained remarkably consistent: participants' actions evidence the enormity of volunteer commitment (selfless service), service-

based leadership behavior, and a focus on easing the distress of the community around them (effecting positive social change).

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. Specifically, the study considered how adult volunteers understand the nature of informal distributed leadership and demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors at the social organizations they volunteer at. I used Yukl's (1994) definition of leadership as a process where an individual influences group members to achieve a shared organization objective; and Spillane's (2006) definition of informal distributed leadership as a form of leadership that grows from daily interactions without any designated hierarchical setup.. Using these definitions and applying the *selfless service leadership for positive social change* lens, I analyzed the findings in this multi-case study, which involved three cases. A total of 17 themes were developed though individual and cross-case analysis. In this chapter, I discuss these findings in relation to related scholarship and my conceptual framework. I also present implications and recommendations for future research.

Application of the Conceptual Framework

Integrating Gandhian philosophy (Datta, 1953; Dhawan, 1946; Sarma, 1980; Varghese et al., 2017), servant leadership theory (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 1970; Russell, 2001; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011), and the social change model of leadership (Astin et al., 1996) provided a *selfless service leadership for positive social change* lens for understanding how informal distributed leadership behavior emerged and functioned among adult volunteers in urban social organizations in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. The conceptual framework enabled examination of the informal distributed leadership behavior of adult volunteers as a unit of analysis—not as a positional function, but as an interactive, moral, and

socially constructed process grounded in service, collective responsibility, and community transformation.

Discussion of Findings

The triad of *selfless service*, *leadership*, and *positive social change* forms the study's foundational lens. Using this lens, the findings on the informal distributed leadership behavior of adult volunteers are discussed as follows: *volunteer leadership as selfless service*, *volunteers as servant leaders*, and *volunteer leadership as an act to achieve positive social change*. Each section also considers how adult volunteers perceive and demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors.

Volunteer Leadership as Selfless Service

Selfless service was reflected in the enormity of participants' commitment to service across the three cases, particularly in volunteers' willingness to contribute time, physical labor, knowledge, and emotional support without formal authority or expectation of material gain. The volunteers' actions may seem ordinary—transporting blood, navigating complex urban routes, sorting and distributing food, maintaining organizational spaces—but they required selfless service, as noted in the themes of *esprit de corps* in Case A, *physicality* in Case B, *the offering of labor* in Case C, and *the enormity of commitment to service* as in the cross-case analysis. The behavior of the volunteers demonstrated that leadership was embedded in service itself. This echoes Gandhi's assertion that true service requires subordinating the ego to collective well-being (Datta, 1953; Gandhi, 1927).

Gandhi viewed selfless service (*seva*) as an expression of moral responsibility in which individuals willingly serve others without seeking personal recognition, authority, or reward (Gandhi, 1927, 1947). The study supported the fact that adult volunteers embody the philosophy

of *seva* when they voluntarily assume responsibilities, coordinate and perform tasks, solve problems, and support fellow volunteers. As Penner (2002) described the sense of service as a key aspect of prosocial behavior depicted by volunteers, this study showed the magnitude of commitment of adult volunteers within the social organizations they serve. That said, the study found that "selflessness" also had boundaries. Volunteers wanted their service to meet the organization's purpose and to not go to "waste": e.g., participants were particular in their choice of social organization and considered how best their services could be utilized in a structured manner. The themes *navigating the urban sprawl* and *the family and self as factors in altruistic calling* from Case A; *physicality* from Case B; *I Am an Umbrella*, *the offering of labor*, and *spiritual state of mind* from Case C; and *the enormity of the commitment to service* identified through the cross-case analysis collectively illuminate how informal distributed leadership was perceived and manifested as selfless service among urban adult volunteers. Across these themes, informal distributed leadership emerged through the voluntary contribution of time, physical effort, practical knowledge, emotional presence, and personal commitment in service for others.

Understanding Informal Distributed Leadership as Selfless Service by Volunteers

When considered as selfless service, informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers becomes an ethical practice of service rather than a mechanism for exercising power. The findings corroborate that the understanding of leadership by the volunteers is very muted. Everyday acts involving humility, cooperation, initiative, and care do not overtly register as aspects of leadership among volunteers. These behaviors are not motivated by personal advancement but by a genuine desire to alleviate the burdens of others and advance the organization's social mission, as also recognized by Sundeen et al. (2007) in their findings on volunteering looked at through an Eastern philosophical lens.

Selfless service provides a way for volunteers to understand informal distributed leadership as leadership enacted through service rather than authority. For the participants in the study, the element of selfless service is very tangible, evident in the enormity of commitment, the amount of physical work required, and the view that labor is an offering. Within the Gandhian philosophy of *seva*, we define this commitment of labor among volunteers as *shramdaan* (donation of labor). In his works on Gandhi's outstanding leadership, Nazareth (2006) identifies *shramdaan* as key to following the ideals of Gandhi. For the volunteers, their contribution of labor transforms the meaning of leadership to a phenomenon in which their own small actions support the achieving of a greater good. As reflected in the cross-case theme *the understanding of leadership,* volunteers may not necessarily describe themselves as "leaders"; instead, their leadership becomes embedded in the sense of service in whichever volunteer task they are performing. Leadership is perceived through contribution. Hence, in the absence of formal authority or hierarchy, adult volunteers perceive informal distributed leadership as a collective and service-oriented process of recognizing what needs to be done and willingly assuming responsibility for doing it.

Selfless Service as a Behavioral Leadership Element among Urban Adult Volunteers

The study showed that leadership behavior in adult volunteers emerges organically from the requirements of service. In volunteer acts of service, informal distributed leadership behavior was manifested though physical contribution, situational problem servicing, taking initiative, complimentary and collaborative work ethic, knowledge sharing, and relevant application of skills. This supports Bolden's (2011) and Gronn's (2002) assertion that social organizations are dependent on volunteers' leadership behavior, exhibited through initiative-taking, collaboration, and shared accountability. As leadership does not rest on one particular volunteer, the findings

also support Spillane's (2006) notion that leadership behavior is distributed across multiple actors (volunteers, in this study), based on commitment and expertise.

A key finding is that selfless service does not remain merely an internal motivation or philosophical orientation; it becomes behaviorally observable: e.g., participants volunteering for "stat" deliveries at very short notice in Case A, cleaning all sorting tables without being asked in Case B, and ensuring the children eat their meals in Case C. Volunteers keep their "self-comfort" behind, going above and beyond their volunteer duties. Actions taken unseen and unheard, purely from altruistic motives, show evidence of leadership behavior among volunteers. The study illustrates that the philosophy of *seva* cultivates deep altruistic motives among volunteers, as reflected in the themes of *the family and self as factors in altruistic calling* from Case A; *food security as a fundamental humanitarian right* from Case B; *I am an Umbrella* and *the offering of labor* from Case C. This supports the findings of Varghese et al. (2017) that volunteer motivation can stem from a commitment to service and a transcendence of ego, where organizational goals and community needs take precedence over personal recognition. In fact, the study shows that the volunteers had very little notion of self, in their acts of service. Their acts of service support Gandhi's belief that authentic leadership emerges through ethical actions rooted in compassion, interdependence, and human dignity rather than hierarchical authority (Datta, 1953; Gandhi, 1927).

Volunteers as Servant Leaders

Servant leadership theory proposes effective leaders are servants first, prioritizing the needs, growth, and well-being of those they serve (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 1970; Russell, 2001; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011). The data showed evidence that participants had vision and behaved with honesty and integrity when performing their volunteer

tasks—evidenced in the meticulousness with which the Blood Transport Specialists handled delivery at Social Organization A; the care and attention given to food sorting by the Produce Sorters at Social Organization B; and the dedication shown by volunteers at Social Organization C when making sure that families with children in pediatric care could focus on their children and worry much less about logistical needs. Their actions encompass the element of trust, the notion of service, being a role model, pioneering in taking initiatives and solving problems, a general appreciation for all, and empowerment of self and of fellow volunteers through their actions. Consider, for instance, the collaborative working nature of volunteers across cases, the consistent sense of volunteers' awareness of others around them, and the on-site task complementing patterns based on skill, ability and mutual respect: these examples align with the functional attributes of servant leadership theory (Russell, 2001).

Participants also provided reasons related to their altruistic callings (Case A: *the family and self as factors in altruistic calling*); emotional engagement (Case C: *empathy*); wisdom, stewardship, and—to some extent—their persuasive mapping (Case C: *I am an Umbrella*). These correlate with attributes suggested by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) as the factors of servant leadership theory. The participants further showed the behavioral characteristics of servant leadership as defined by Spears (2010). Key identifiable characteristics included listening, empathy, healing, awareness, foresight, stewardship, persuasion, commitment to the growth of the organizations' mission and fellow volunteers, and a sense of community building—as detailed in the cross-case analysis theme *the understanding of leadership*. Similarly, *the understanding of leadership* theme showed evidence of the theorized characteristics of servant leadership as defined by van Dierendonck (2011): empowering people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction by action and stewardship. The servant leadership

constructs, therefore, provided a conceptual explanation for how leadership influence could emerge naturally in environments where participation was voluntary and authority structures were minimal. Leadership developed and distributed organically based on trust, expertise, experience, commitment, and credibility rather than stemming from volunteer roles: e.g., in Case A, volunteers managed the maintenance of the delivery vans and helped fellow volunteers navigate the urban roads; in Case B, volunteers intuitively loaded pallets without being instructed on how to do so; in Case C, volunteers shared the operational tasks of the day, whether it be fixing light bulbs or stocking the pantry.

Jørgensen and Ingman (2022) defined informal distributed leadership as a form of leadership exercised by everyday heroes. It is the type of leadership in which people come together, meet as equals, and initiate collective action. The study's findings support the identification of volunteers as "everyday heroes," as their contributions are expressed through ordinary, repeated acts of service that create meaningful outcomes for others. Relevant examples detailed in this study include the Case A theme *precious cargo*, the Case B theme *food security as a fundamental humanitarian right*, and the Case C theme *the offering of labor.* These findings also support Yukl's (1994) definition of leadership, in which an individual influences other members to achieve common organizational goals. The themes of *esprit de corps* from Case A, *the social reason for volunteering* from Case B, and *implicit coordination* from Case C show that the ability to influence by action, experience, camaraderie, and expertise is a key factor in exhibiting informal distributed leadership behavior among urban adult volunteers.

The themes of *esprit de corps* and *precious cargo* from Case A; *the social reason for volunteering* and *please don't stop the music* from Case B; *implicit coordination* and *empathy* from Case C; and the cross-case themes of *understanding leadership* and *discussions about*

hierarchy collectively illuminate the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership among urban adult volunteers. The study findings present informal distributed leadership as a *diffuse* and *amorphous* form of leadership in a volunteer setting, both in volunteers' perceptions and in their leadership behavior. The perception of leadership is *amorphous*, and its manifestation is *diffused*. There is a paradox in leadership behavior among adult volunteers: individuals become influential precisely when leadership itself is not what they are seeking.

Urban Adult Volunteers' Understanding of Informal Distributed Leadership

Urban adult volunteers understood informal distributed leadership less as looking toward, or acting as, any "leader" and more as getting meaningful work done (as evidenced in the cross-case analysis themes *the understanding of leadership* and *hierarchy*). Their understanding is grounded in action, service, and responsiveness rather than position or authority. Leadership becomes visible when someone notices a need, steps forward, helps another person, shares knowledge, solves an unexpected problem, or coordinates with others without waiting to be explicitly instructed.

Volunteers understand how their service and leadership can impact the organization and the broader community. They are self-directed and motivated to learn; where the learning process is from shared experiences. They are more focused on strengths and less concerned about "problems," and more focused on what is positive and productive in the community than what is the "undesirable" (as evidenced in the cross-case analysis theme *agents of social change*). There is self-delegation and no volunteer notion of "that is not my task." Volunteers in urban social organizations play to their strengths, working where they can make the best contributions. The understanding of informal distributed leadership depends on the volunteers'

understanding of the ultimate goal of the task at hand, and how their leadership behavior contributes to the overall mission.

Uhl-Bien (2006) and Oostlander et al. (2013) defined this understanding as a phenomenon where the common purpose leads, and the actors follow. The study showed that the volunteers had a hard time boxing themselves as either "leader" or "follower," for the most part; this is clear in cross-case themes *the understanding of leadership* and *hierarchy.* The findings also support Breslin's (2017) assertion that when looked thought the servant leadership theoretical lens volunteers are not simply followers but also leaders. Urban adult volunteers understood informal distributed leadership as an amorphous and collective practice of stepping forward, stepping alongside, and sometimes stepping back for someone else to take the lead, according to what the situation and community required.

Development of Informal Distributed Leadership Behaviors among Urban Adult Volunteers

The servant leadership theory appears prime and center when exploring the informal distributed leadership behaviors demonstrated by adult volunteers. The study shows how prosocial intent is converted into relational influence, allowing leadership to emerge organically within the practice of volunteering; e.g., the themes *the family and self as factors in altruistic calling* from Case A, *the social reason for volunteering* from Case B, and *implicit coordination* from Case C. Adult volunteers at the three organizations truly internalized the fundamental dimension of servant leadership theory as proposed by Greenleaf (1970, 1977): the willingness to serve others.

The study shows that a welcoming environment is key to volunteer leadership behavior. The task at hand could be hectic, but this does not necessarily mean that the environment has to be tense. This observation supports the idea of the development of free space leadership in a

space of generosity as proposed by Jørgensen and Ingman (2022). The noncoercive environment of social organizations allow the adult volunteers to thrive; social practices introduce frameworks within which individuals and teams can operate autonomously, as evidenced in the theme *please don't stop the music* from Case B. The environment at Case Site B is welcoming, and it is okay to make mistakes and learn; volunteers would not be reprimanded. The site evolved into a safe space for the volunteers, a space where they could be their authentic selves and not worry about someone looking at their back, not worry about being judged. That does not mean the volunteers were not aware of their surroundings Their awareness was dedicated not toward measuring work but more toward who and where help and support could be provided. Such settings themselves added to the positive experience: There is no incentive to do more or competition to do less; e.g., the theme *esprit de corps* from Case A. The volunteers do what is within their realm of abilities and move towards the goal at hand as a combined entity. This supports Nielsen's (2022) assertion that volunteer leadership relies on a heightened consciousness of others, and members must know each other's perspectives, strengths, and weaknesses.

The informal distributed operations of volunteers at social organizations offers a more compelling interpretation when considered through a community-oriented framework rather than, for example, a framework focusing on individuals. The community-oriented framework steers volunteer members to reframe the information around them into decentralized, non-confrontational, and egalitarian ways of working, as suggested by Pearce and Conger (2003). The purpose-centric and community-orientation approach to leadership underlines that leadership is not vested in a person but is instead a collective system, through which all can potentially take care of the processes of organizing and implementing. Camaraderie, collaboration, and commitment drive the volunteer experience. The study showed that many acts

are communal in nature, evident from the behavior in the volunteer lounges and common volunteer meeting spaces, where, for example, volunteers shared food, took breaks, and shared stories, learning from each other's experiences, suggesting the nature of solidarity and fellowship.

Leadership among volunteers is situational rather than positional. As illustrated in the study, whether the task is determining a more efficient transportation route, helping load supplies in conjunction with other volunteers, or cleaning and completing housekeeping activities, leadership begins with noticing rather than being instructed. The study clarified that volunteers do not necessarily identify themselves as leaders; instead, leadership shifts among individuals according to the task, circumstance, experience, and immediate need. This supports *initiative* being central to volunteers' understanding of leadership, as stated by Spillane (2006). Leadership for volunteers means seeing what needs to be done and doing it.

Participants at the three organizations are so committed to their act of volunteering that they are unaware of the leadership roles they play, or purposefully do not highlight them. They do not want to engage with the binaries of leader and follower within the volunteer setting, as reflected in the cross-case themes *the understanding of leadership* and *hierarchy.* In fact, the study illustrated that any attempt to show hierarchy (by fellow volunteers) is challenged or ignored, and does not sustain; e.g., Participants A1 and B3 resisted, and disapproved of, fellow volunteers exhibiting hierarchy based on volunteer tenure or past professional experiences.

The study also locates a sense of humility in its participants: volunteering is almost akin to a spiritual act, where any projection of superiority, power, or assertiveness will be an act of desecration (This is clear in the Case C theme *the spiritual state of mind*). There is significant stress on the community the volunteers serve, which is evident from participant responses

describing how each task is performed with the community in mind—as identified in the cross-case theme *agents of social change*. Much of the volunteer hardship, as seen in the Case B theme *physicality* and the cross-case theme *the enormity of commitment to service*, were blanketed under the notion of "giving back" to the community. This supports the findings by Komives and Wagner (2016) that community involvement and service constitute powerful vehicles for leadership.

Unlike the structured and often hierarchical dynamics of a workplace, the study shows that leadership, as shown by the volunteers, requires flexibility, openness, and a collaborative spirit. There are no paychecks to motivate them, only a shared vision and a collective passion. As a result, each is open to learn how to inspire through influence rather than authority. Volunteers value practical and experiential knowledge. Such leadership influence could be earned and temporarily exercised without producing a permanent hierarchy among volunteers. Further, the study illustrates that such influence travels horizontally and not vertically. Volunteers do not necessarily announce leadership acts. Informal distributed leadership thus becomes embedded in routine practices, and is not loud and overt.

Volunteer Leadership as an Act to Achieve Positive Social Change

Upliftment of the community was evident in participants' sense of service. The volunteers' actions whether they contributed to food security, supported families experiencing difficult circumstances, sustained healthcare-related services, and reduced the workload and burdens of fellow volunteers and organizational staff: resonated with the word "community." The themes *esprit de corps* from Case A*, food security as a fundamental humanitarian right* from Case B, *I am an Umbrella* from Case C, and volunteers as *agents of social change* from the cross-case analysis illuminate how participants did not necessarily describe themselves as

activists or formal change leaders; social change emerged because their individual acts were directed toward outcomes larger than themselves. This understanding supports the centrality of *sarvodaya,* as Bilgrami (2003) explains, as an aspect of Gandhian philosophy: individual action gains greater meaning when directed toward the welfare of the broader community, particularly by improving the circumstances of those in need or those who are vulnerable.

As the study shows, adult volunteers help others based on spiritual, social, ethical, and personal principles, with almost an activism element, to drive positive change within their immediate community. The themes *food security as a fundamental humanitarian right* from Case B and *agents of social change* from the cross-case analysis together elucidate how informal distributed leadership was perceived and manifested as an expression of *sarvodaya* among urban adult volunteers. The element of activism was most pronounced in the case of Social Organization B, where volunteers were mainly driven by their organization's mission of fighting food insecurity in urban areas. This reflection related to Social Organization B is not meant to diminish the value of activism among volunteers in Social Organizations A and C; it is just an acknowledgement of the heighted visibility of the phenomenon in the case of Social Organization B, as evident in the findings.

Importantly, participants' responses suggested that leadership behaviors were sustained by deeply held values related to compassion, dignity, and responsibility toward others, as seen in the cross-case analysis themes *the enormity of commitment to service* and the volunteers' identifying themselves as *agents of social change*. These self-understandings and self-identifications shaped how volunteers interpreted their roles within urban social organizations and how they engaged in community-oriented action. Leadership among volunteers was understood as both an internal moral orientation and an external social practice aimed at positive

transformation within communities. This interpretation aligns with Stephan et al.'s (2016) conception of positive social change as a process that transforms social relationships, institutions, and collective well-being beyond individual benefit.

Understanding Informal Distributed Leadership as a Mechanism for Positive Social Change

The study shows that volunteers may not necessarily conceptualize positive social change as something abstract or revolutionary. Instead, they understand it experientially by making another person's situation slightly better, helping one family, ensuring one delivery reaches its destination, preventing resources from being wasted, or enabling other volunteers to contribute successfully—as is clear in the cross-case theme *agents of social change*. Hence, adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region perceive informal distributed leadership as a mechanism for their voluntary services to effect collective community impact. Informal distributed leadership democratizes solving urban social challenges as we see in the Case A theme of *navigating the urban sprawl*. The findings support the conceptualization of leadership as a collaborative process aimed at creating positive change for the common good through values such as collaboration, common purpose, citizenship, and commitment, as described by Astin et al. (1996).

The philosophy of *sarvodaya* views individual actions as meaningful only when they contribute to the welfare of the broader society (Gandhi, 1947). We can revisit volunteer behavior in conjunction with Gandhi's talisman to look at the face of the most destitute when in doubt about self's actions. In this frame of reference, the findings support the notion that informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers is fundamentally a process of collective action in pursuit of social betterment in their immediate community.

The urban setting played a crucial role in adult volunteers' understanding of informal distributed leadership as a mechanism for positive social change. The urban environment exposes volunteers to opportunities for collective upliftment, allowing them to recognize that their individual service contributes to a larger common good. For example, the three social organizations in this study addressed key urban challenges. Case Sites A and C responded to urban centers as the key centers for meeting healthcare needs. Urban centers have a concentration of medical facilities within a compact geographic area, thereby requiring greater ancillary support for blood donation and transport as well as housing for families with children under complex pediatric care. Case Site B addressed the food insecurity challenge prevalent in high-population-density urban areas.

Such urban challenges placed the volunteers in direct contact with complex and visible community needs, creating situations in which leadership needed to be adaptive and distributed. Delivering lifesaving blood products to hospitals, redirecting surplus food toward communities experiencing food insecurity, and supporting families whose children are receiving medical treatment provide volunteers with tangible evidence that individual contributions can become socially consequential when combined with the efforts of others. The connection among individual action, collective effort, and community outcome becomes visible. Volunteers therefore understand positive social change not exclusively as large-scale institutional reform but as the cumulative outcome of ordinary individuals responding to community needs, as findings in cross-case theme *agents of social change* illustrate. The strive for positive social change among volunteers furthers Chambré's (2020) assertion that volunteer leadership is an organizational asset that sustains participation, strengthens commitment, and stabilizes collaboration in contexts where urban social issues need to be addressed. It connects personal

agency with community welfare. Volunteers thus exercise informal distributed leadership behavior not to increase their own influence but to expand the organization's capacity to address community needs, reduce inequities, and improve the quality of life for others.

The Instillation of Sarvodaya in Informal Distributed Leadership Behavior in Volunteers

The instillation of *seva* (selfless service) among volunteers answers the question "How can I serve?" The instillation of *sarvodaya* (upliftment of all: positive social change) in volunteers expands the concern to "How can my service contribute to the well-being of the community?" The study shows that adult urban volunteers instill *sarvodaya* in informal distributed leadership by transforming individual acts of service into shared responsibility for collective well-being. Through inclusive participation, mutual support, knowledge sharing, and collective problem-solving, volunteers distribute leadership across the group while directing that leadership toward outcomes that extend beyond themselves and contribute to the upliftment of others, as evidenced in the cross-case theme *agents of social change*. This is also in line with Briggs et al. (2009) assertion that volunteers are drivers of social change. For example, when volunteers transport a unit of blood, sort a box of donated produce, maintain a shared space, or alleviate a burden for a family in need, these actions sustain systems of care and support that produce positive consequences for the community.

Diversity among participants also helped bridge generational differences by uniting volunteers around a purpose larger than themselves. In doing so, diversity became not a barrier to collective action, but a source of community impact. In this study, many of the participants were retired professionals; however, there were some working professionals and part-time professionals. Volunteers encompassed at least three generations. With them they brought skills, wisdom, and expertise, and applied it toward collective positive outcomes for the social

organization and the members it served. For example, in Case B, the younger volunteer (Participants B2) was very adept at social media and assisted by spreading Social Organization C's mission statement digitally across donation partners and food access programs. On the other hand, older participants brought knowledge of processes and mentoring abilities with them. In combination, volunteers held a shared responsibility for collective well-being, for the organizations they served and the greater community.

Erdurmazlı (2019), Schneider and George (2011), and Trastek et al. (2014) considered volunteer leadership goals as promoting social upliftment, community health, and civic engagement. The findings from this study corroborate their understandings, offering examples from the urban environment and its specific issues—the transportation of blood for patient communities in need, the fight against hunger and food insecurity, and the openness to perform all kinds of tasks in support of families with children under pediatric care, all in high density and high demand areas. Through direct engagement with these realities, volunteers moved from viewing service as assistance to beneficiaries toward understanding their contributions as part of a broader responsibility for community well-being.

Among urban adult volunteers, there is a continuum from selfless service to collective impact. The willingness to serve represents the broader social consequence and purpose toward which such service was directed.

Implications for Practice

Exploring the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers carries several important implications for practice—particularly for leadership development in social organizations, volunteer management, leadership education, and community development initiatives. First, the findings encourage social organizations to

rethink traditional hierarchical leadership structures. The study shows that leadership is a shared, relational process that can emerge through collective participation rather than formal authority alone. This perspective can help organizations create environments where adults feel empowered to contribute ideas, take initiative, and participate in decision-making processes through prosocial behavior rather than relying solely on directives from designated authorities.

Second, the study informs volunteer recruitment, training, and retention practices by highlighting the importance of organizational cultures grounded in trust, collaboration, mutual respect, value for the volunteers' time, and shared responsibility. The study showed that environmental factors positively influence informal leadership development. Volunteers regard the social organization as the space that allows them to self-actuate. Hence, understanding how informal leadership behaviors emerge among volunteers can help organizations design leadership development opportunities that focus on service, empathy, and ethical engagement in a collegial, enabling environment rather than solely on positional leadership skills.

Third, the study has implications for leadership education by emphasizing experiential, relational, and practice-based forms of leadership. The research elucidated that volunteers demonstrate leadership behaviors through collaborative participation, with each contributing based on individual strengths and expertise. Organizations can therefore benefit from collaborative environments to strengthen distributed leadership capability.

Finally, the findings have broader implications for positive social change by showing how ordinary community members enact leadership through the offering of labor and skill. In this sense, the study encourages practitioners and organizations to view leadership as a socially constructed process embedded within everyday volunteer action in their community. Every volunteer hour spent can contribute to the well-being of someone in need.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may explore informal distributed leadership across different organizational and cultural contexts. Comparative studies involving rural and urban organizations, faith-based and secular organizations, or organizations operating in different environmental contexts can help determine how contextual factors influence the development and perception of volunteer informal distributed leadership behaviors. Since this study focused on the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region, expanding the geographical scope would further enhance the transferability and broader applicability of the findings.

Additionally, mixed-methods or quantitative studies can complement existing qualitative findings by measuring patterns of distributed leadership behaviors and the extent of volunteer engagement across population groups, such as students, working adults, and retirees. A survey-based study could be designed to cover a large sample of the volunteer population. Such approaches can help validate emerging themes and identify broader trends of volunteer leadership in social organizations.

Further inquiry could also examine the roles of mentorship and reflective practice in developing informal leadership capacities among volunteers. Since informal leadership often emerges through participation and lived experience, future studies may explore how experiential learning environments, leadership development programs, and peer mentoring contribute to the cultivation of informal distributed leadership behaviors. Similarly, reflective practice can enable volunteers to critically examine their experiences, recognize instances in which they exercised influence or supported collective action, and develop a deeper awareness of their own emerging leadership capacities.

Conclusion

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metropolitan region. Three urban social organizations, representing various areas of community service, were examined. Data gathered through participant interviews and direct observations provided multiple perspectives on the volunteers' leadership experiences. The study revealed leadership not only through what participants said leadership meant to them, but also through how it was enacted in their everyday volunteering practices.

The findings demonstrated that informal distributed leadership was deeply embedded within the ordinary activities of volunteering, when volunteers believed in the organization's mission and the cause. Volunteers exercised influence without identifying themselves as leaders. They provided services, took initiative, shared knowledge, mentored peers, anticipated needs, solved operational problems, coordinated activities, offered emotional support, and applied specialized professional and life skills to meet the organizational mission. These activities were broadly performed unprompted. Leadership, therefore, did not consistently reside with a single individual; instead, it shifted among volunteers, according to experience, expertise, relationships, and situational demands; thus being amorphous and diffused in the process.

In conclusion, the findings and the interpretation of the data, through the lens of *selfless service leadership for positive social change*, raise a pertinent question. Should urban adult volunteers exhibiting informal distributed leadership behavior within their social organization context be labeled as "Community Gandhians"?

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security

TO: Haijun Kang
Educational Leadership
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number: IRB-13704

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 03/31/2026

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Exploring the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region/EDACE 999: Doctoral Research."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written – and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category: Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security (ORICS), and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 03/31/2026 12:47 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu

Appendix B: Flyer Soliciting Research Participants

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Leadership Behaviors of Adult Volunteers in Urban Social Organizations

About the Study

This research examines how adult volunteers interact, coordinate activities, and demonstrate leadership in real-world urban social organizations.

What Participation Involves

- One-on-one interview (45–60 minutes) (one to two sessions)
- Observation of your volunteer activities at your regular service location
- All information and data collected will remain confidential

Eligibility

- Age 18 or older
- Willing to be interviewed and to be observed during volunteering activities
- Been a volunteer for more than a year with the organization

Why Participate?

Your experiences will contribute to research on informal distributed leadership among adult volunteers in urban contexts,

Interested or Have Questions?

Researcher: Yugant Patra, Email: ypatra@ksu.edu

Principal Investigator: Dr. Haijun Kang, Email: hjkang@ksu.edu

You can also reach out to the **volunteer co-ordinator** for your organization if you have any questions,

All participation is voluntary, and your identity will remain confidential.

Appendix C: Study Participant Confirmation E-Mail

Subject: Confirmation to participate in a research study on informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers

Dear Participant,

Thank you for expressing you interest in participating in the study on informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers. I am writing to seek your confirmation to take part in the qualitative research study titled **"Exploring the Perception and Manifestation of Informal Distributed Leadership Behavior among Adult Volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania Metro Region."** This study is being conducted as part of a doctoral research project in the field of adult learning and leadership studies.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how leadership behaviors emerge, are perceived and are practiced among adult volunteers working within urban social organizations. Participation in this study will involve a one-on-one, semistructured interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes either in-person or via zoom per your convenience (There could be follow-up interview requests if needed to cover the interview questions or follow-ups required). The preference would be to have the interview in-person. I will also conduct an unobstructive observational engagement within your volunteer setting to better understand leadership dynamics in the context of the study.

Your participation is entirely **voluntary**, and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Prior to participation, you will be asked to review and sign an **informed consent form** (a copy of which is attached with this e-mail for your perusal)**.** The **informed consent form** outlines the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks, benefits, and measures taken to protect your confidentiality. All data will be kept confidential, and any identifying information will be removed or anonymized in research reports and publications.

If you would like additional information about the study, please feel free to reply to this email. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Yugant Patra

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Informed Consent Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

PROJECT TITLE:

Exploring the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region.

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:		**PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:**		**LENGTH OF STUDY:**	

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Haijun Kang

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Yugant Patra

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: hjkang@ksu.edu or (785) 532-2027

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: Dr. Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506
rubin@ksu.edu, (785) 532-3224

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of the study is to understand the perception and manifestation of informal distributed leadership behavior among adult volunteers in the Southeast Pennsylvania metro region. The exploration of informal distributed leadership behavior studies how volunteers in social organizations voluntarily forgo status, share the same privileges regardless of background, and focus on the collective cause at hand. This research explores how this inclusive, human-centered approach fosters camaraderie, inclusiveness, and cooperation, emphasizing empathy and a shared commitment to positive community change.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

In my study, I will conduct interviews with the participants in person or via Zoom. I will also observe participants' activities while they work, supporting their respective social organizations. The interviews will be recorded, and once transcribed, I will delete the recordings from the device. I will ensure that the names of participants and the social organizations are not used and appropriate pseudonyms are used.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

My data gathering, analysis, and reporting will not reveal participants' personal information or their social organization affiliations. Both the de-identified and processed data will be kept in a secure location. I will store the data in a password-protected folder accessible only to myself, the researcher, my major professor, and IRB members upon request. Moreover, I will delete raw data - interview audio and transcripts upon project completion. No video files will be collected during the study. Any static digital images taken during volunteer activities at the social organization will not capture any participant's recognizable features.

BENEFITS ANTICPATED:

This study advances understanding of informal distributed leadership by identifying how adult volunteers in social organizations develop and sustain leadership practices through relational influence, shared responsibility, and contextually situated interactions. By focusing on leadership models that operate without formal hierarchy, the research clarifies how alternative orientations emerge and respond to structural changes, such as the flattening of hierarchies shaped by generational, technological, and economic forces.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

After the interviews are transcribed, the recordings on the device will be deleted. Your names will not be used in any publications or reports. Any personal identifiable data will not be stored as part of any transcription. The interview transcription will be stored in the researcher's password protected device and the backup of the data in a password protected storage device. The information collected as part of this research could be used for further research studies without additional consent, but no personal identifiable data will be shared as part of further studies.
The information or biospecimens that will be collected as part of this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent. **No Personal Identifiable Data will be shared if information is used for future research studies.**

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME: _____

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE: _____ **DATE:** _____

Appendix E: Semistructured Interview Protocol

Guiding Research Questions:

RQ1: What are adult volunteers' understandings of the nature of informal distributed leadership?

RQ2: How do urban adult volunteers demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors?

Pre-Interview Steps:

- Welcome, introductions, and thank you
- Collect Informed Consent, if not already submitted by participant
- Ask if there are any questions about the study or about informed consent
- State the recording and interview will begin
- Start recording to record to device
- Begin the interview with another thank you

Question Number	Interview Questions	Conceptual Framework Mapping	Research Question in focus as part of the response
1	Tell me about yourself?	Gandhian Philosophy	RQ1
2	How did you get associated with the organization?	Gandhian Philosophy	RQ1
3	How many years have you been associated with the organization?	Gandhian Philosophy	RQ1
4	Can you describe your role as a volunteer in this organization?	Gandhian Philosophy	RQ2
5	Could you describe a typical set of activities you perform during the time you volunteer with the organization?	Gandhian Philosophy	RQ2
6	What initially motivated you to get involved?	Gandhian Philosophy Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ2

7	Why did you decide to be a volunteer at the organization?	Gandhian Philosophy Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ2
8	When you think of "leadership" what comes to mind?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ1
9	While volunteering at the organization, do you identify yourself as a leader or follower?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ1
10	Can you describe a situation where you stepped up to lead? What happened? What triggered that? How did others respond?	Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ2
11	Are there particular moments where you have naturally taken initiative?	Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ2
12	How are decisions typically made amongst fellow volunteers?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ1,RQ2
13	Can you describe how coordination happens among fellow volunteers when there is no direct instruction from staff?	Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ2
14	How does working in an urban environment shape your volunteering work and purpose? Are there challenges specific to this urban setting for volunteer work? How does the pace, diversity, or unpredictability of the environment affect your work as a volunteer?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ1,RQ2
15	Are there unspoken hierarchies among fellow volunteers?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory	RQ1,RQ2
16	How is knowledge or skills shared amongst volunteers?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ2
17	Could you describe your interactions with other volunteers at the organization?	Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ2
18	How would you describe your experience differently if you were a paid worker at the organization?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ1,RQ2

19	What would you be doing otherwise, if not volunteering at the organization?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory	RQ1
20	Do you have a specific story of where you felt any emotions while volunteering with the organization?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory Social Change Model of Leadership	RQ1,RQ2
21	Why is volunteering at the organization important to you?	Gandhian Philosophy Servant Leadership Theory	RQ1

Post-Interview Steps:

- End the recording
- Thank the participant
- End meeting
- When recording has finished processing download the recording to password protected device
- Convert recording into text transcript
- Remove all personal identifiable information from the transcript
- Review and correct transcription for typographical errors
- Save transcription document to password protected computer
- Upload transcribed document to NVivo with the case organization, participant pseudonym and date as identifiers

Appendix F: Observation Protocol

Guiding Research Questions:

RQ1: What are adult volunteers' understandings of the nature of informal distributed leadership?

RQ2: How do urban adult volunteers demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors?

Researcher Role: Non Participant Observer

1. Field Note Template:

   Date:
   Observation Start Time:
   Observation End Time:
   Event Type:

2. Environment Description:

3. Illustrative Schematic Diagram of Participant Positioning in the environment:

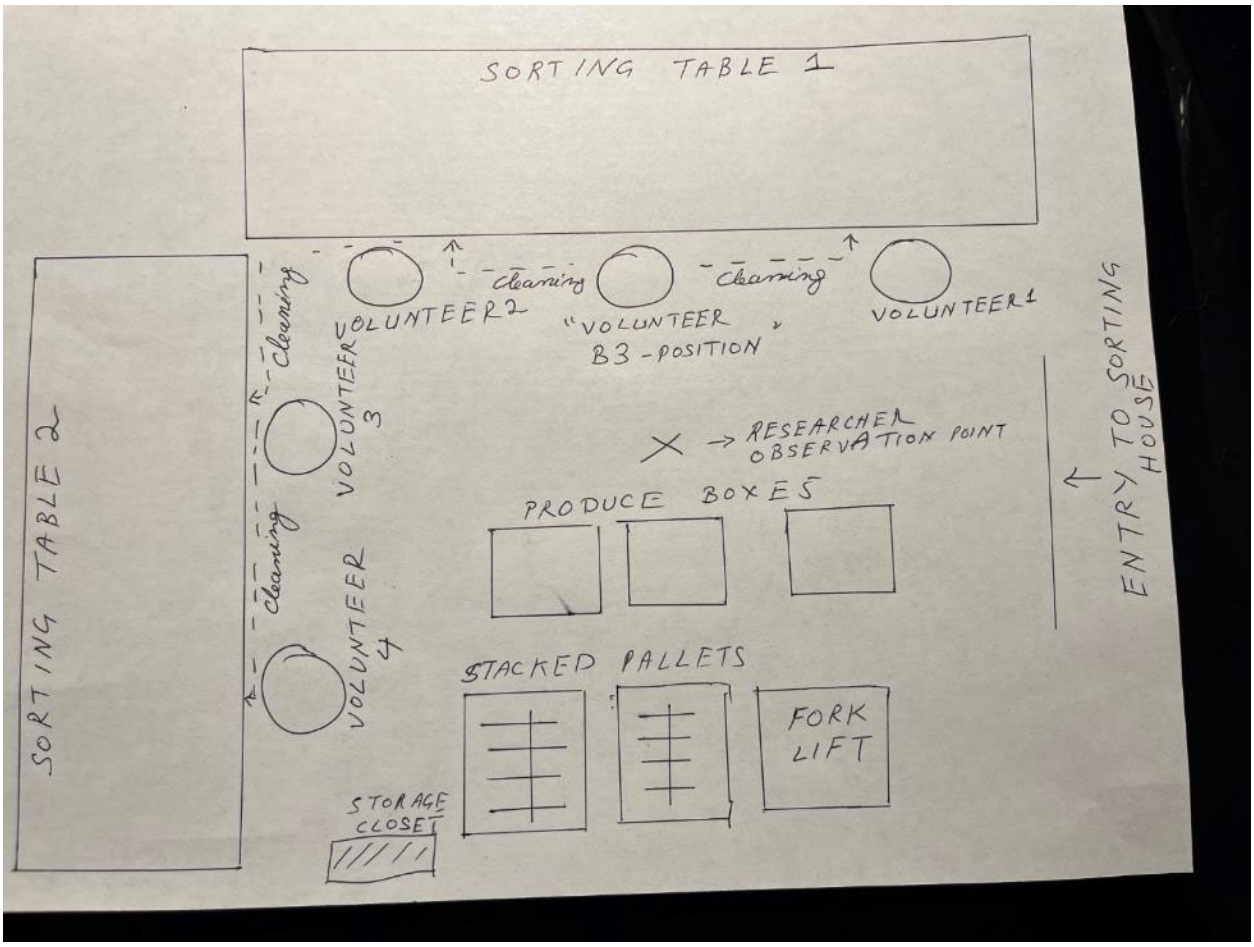
   3.1 Participant Interaction Map/s

4. Chronological notes with timestamps every 5–10 minutes

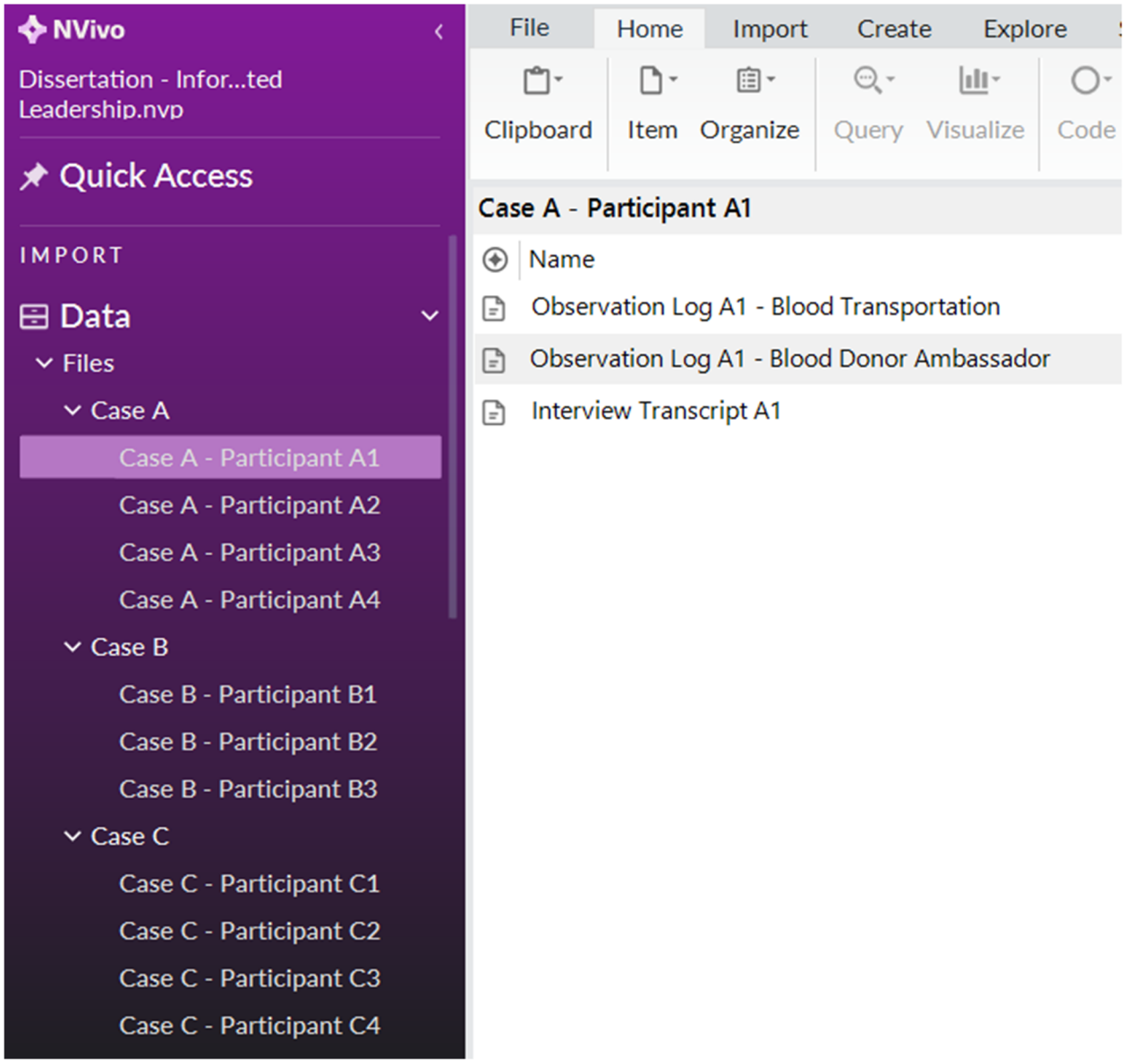
- Activities description
- Verbal interactions
- Non-verbal interactions
- Behavioral cues
- Subtleties documentation
- Researcher reaction and notes

Field Notes will be saved on password protected external drive and the data will be uploaded to NVivo with the Participant pseudonym, Organization pseudonym and date and time stamp.

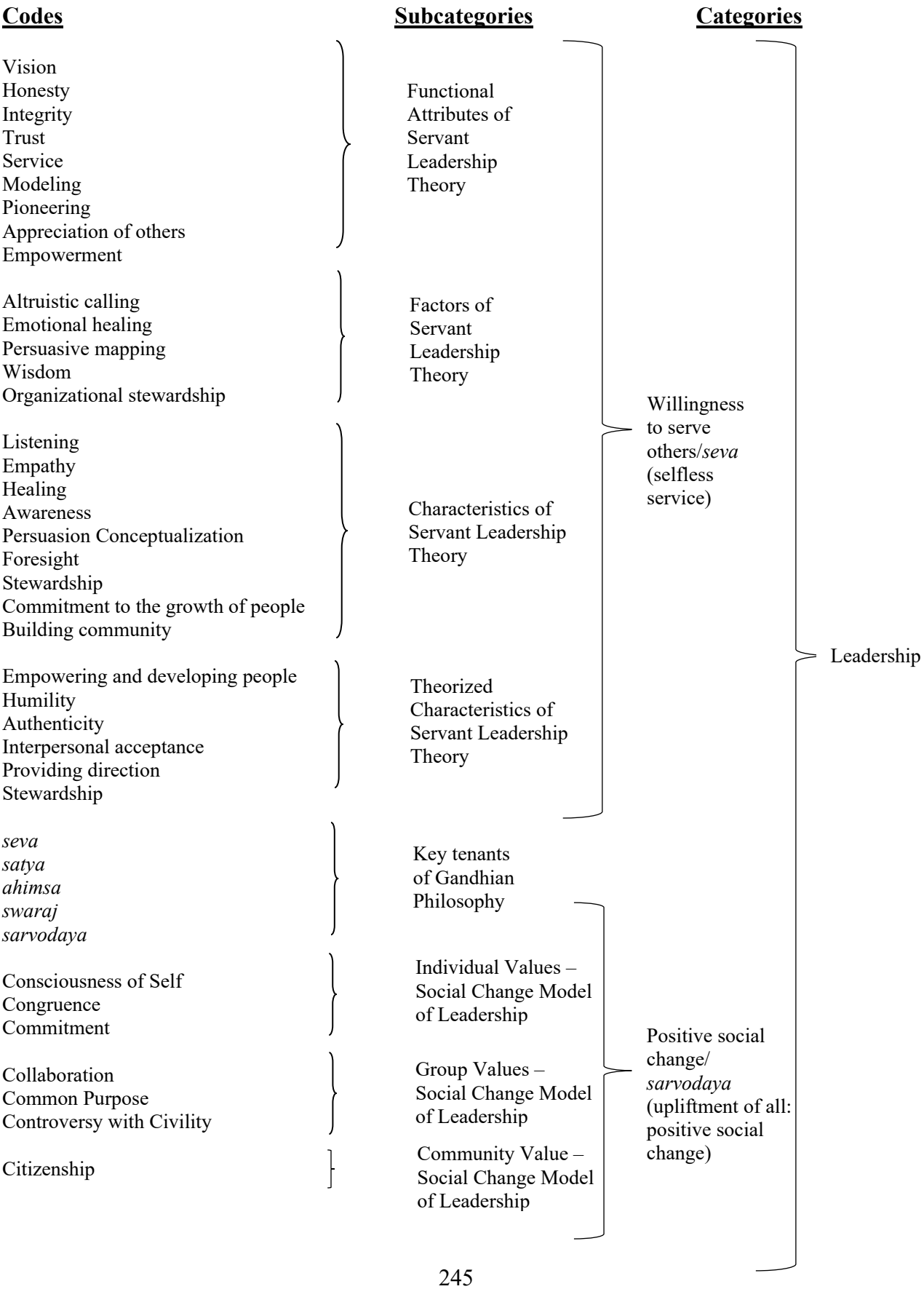
Appendix G: Example of Schematic Diagram of Participant Positioning in the Environment and Interaction



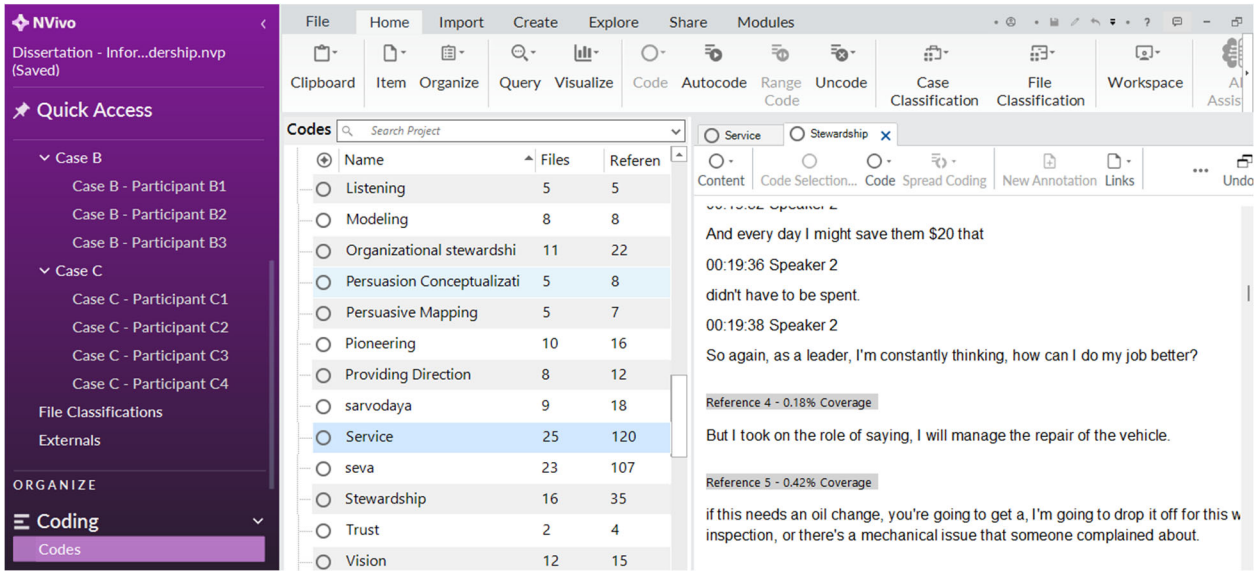
Appendix H: Data Management in NVivo



Appendix I: Codebook



Appendix J: Example of Coding Process in NVivo



Appendix K: Detailed Analytical Memo Protocol

Date:

Study:

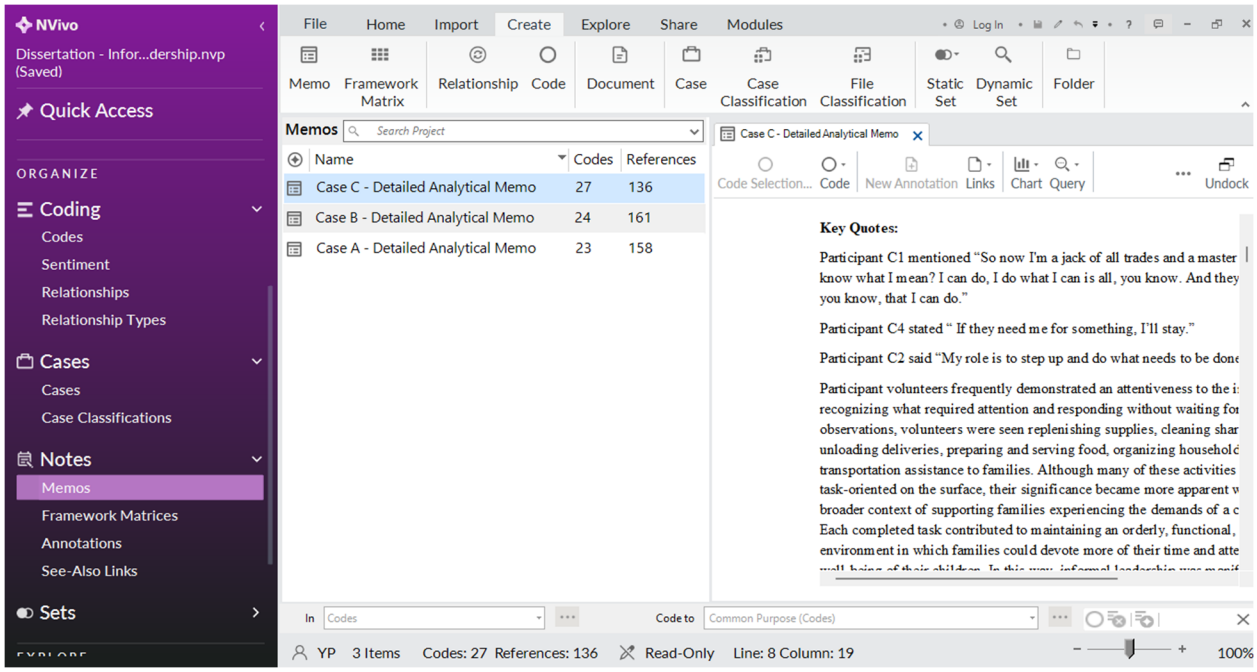
Prepared By:

Guiding Research Questions:

RQ1: What are adult volunteers' understandings of the nature of informal distributed leadership?

RQ2: How do urban adult volunteers demonstrate informal distributed leadership behaviors?

Detailed Analytical Memo Generation Steps:

- Write data narrative based on coded data
- Elaborate reflections and interpretations
- Revisit coding if required
- Update data narrative
- Update reflections and interpretations
- Build connections to other data elements
- Identify emerging patterns supported by the conceptual framework
- Formalize emerging patterns into themes
- Document theme elaboration – Apply the study lens in writing the narrative

Appendix L: Example of Cross-case Coding Process in NVivo