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# Servant leadership as a vector of cohesion and social identification in the military training of Spanish officers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the field of Defense and Security, this study examines military education with research that allows conclusions to be drawn to define the competencies of leaders through the servant leadership model. The study contributes to research in the context of academic training on the relationship between servant leadership and relevant variables related to teamwork, such as self-efficacy, commitment, organizational identification and group cohesion.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study is carried out through a cross-sectional quantitative design with the use of validated questionnaires in which the followers express their assessment of the leaders responsible for the unit. The participants were 379 cadets (86.3% male; 21.1 years on average). The results are analyzed with structural equation models, using the partial least squares technique.

**Findings** – The main findings show the adequacy of the proposed model, in which servant leadership and the two mediating variables, work engagement and self-efficacy, are positively related. These two mediating variables are also positively related to the outcome variables: organizational identification and cohesion. The relationship between servant leadership and organizational identification is entirely mediated by work engagement and self-efficacy, while in the case of the relationship between servant leadership and cohesion, this mediation is partial.

**Research limitations/implications** – The cross-sectional analysis limits the knowledge about the evolution of the leadership process and approaching the causal relationships between the variables studied in a more clarifying way. Despite their relevance in the present work in the context of performance and military training, It is also considered of interest in future research to expand the studies in the context of the operational units, with graduate officers.

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**Practical implications** – Having a model based on servant leadership, supported by scientific evidence, provides concrete references to train cadets in leadership competencies and favors the establishment of teaching guidelines. It allows establishing references to teachers and instructions of a model that favors the cohesion and development of organizational identification in the military institution.

**Originality/value** – The research proposes an original model based on servant leadership, for the correct exercise of the military profession and the effective performance of institutions at the service of society. Through the competencies of servant leadership, the study favors inspiration to develop military education and training curricula.

**Keywords** Servant leadership, Organizational identification, Cohesion, Engagement, Self-efficacy

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

Modern states require that the power of institutions and governing bodies focus their efforts on the service of society. It requires those responsible for public administrations to exercise leadership developed with the highest commitment and quality to promote progress, sustainability, and security in nations. Throughout history, various religious and political movements have highlighted the importance of servant leadership (Northouse, 2018), and the main factors that differentiate it from other leadership styles: its deep promotion of ethical culture and the prioritization of one's own work for the benefit of others (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018; Greenleaf, 1970).

The original work on servant leadership initiated by Greenleaf (1970) has generated different lines of research in recent years, providing an inspirational theoretical approach for the world of organizations. This leadership model helps to explain the success of teams and organizations, which is why it is very commonly applied to the world of management (Kainde & Mandagi, 2023; Lu, Falahat, & Cheah, 2024). However, in the field of public administrations, specifically in the field of security, the development of studies on servant leadership is very limited, prevailing research on transformational leadership (Backhaus & Vogel, 2022).

Curiously, it is precisely in the professions related to public service in the field of Defense and Security, that the concept of service is deeply embedded in professional deontology and culture. Spanish military legislation and doctrine (DIDOM, 2018) highlight the importance of the spirit of service in the conduct of the soldier, their performance in operations and even the maximum manifestation of service in their commitment to sacrificing their life in defense of the community. For professional performance, the value of the *spirit of service* is especially highlighted as “the permanent disposition of the soldier to put the common good before their own, with a sense of selfless commitment for the benefit of others.” (DIDOM, 2018, p. 3–6). Military personnel are expected to cultivate a sustained spirit of service (even in combat situations), exemplary performance as a public servant, obedience, and strong commitment to duty.

Incorporating Servant Leadership into the military training curriculum, systematically teaching its underlying principles, and explicitly demonstrating its alignment with the armed forces' core values provides a structured pathway through which leaders may continue to cultivate their own professional growth while simultaneously fostering the development of their subordinates (Guigni, 2023; Richardson, Earnhardt, & Walker, 2023; Ruiz-Moreno *et al.*, 2021).

However, despite the importance of servant leadership in public administrations, the application of the theory in the military field and, specifically, in the military training environment, is very scarce (Edú-Valsania, Laguía, & Moriano, 2023; Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019). Certain approaches highlight the interest in developing this model in military education (Richardson *et al.*, 2023) and point to the need for further research (Blanch, Gil, Antino, & Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2016; Edú-Valsania *et al.*, 2023), especially in academic settings (Madison, Fernando, Roberts, & Eva, 2024), due to its potential impact on future generations of leaders.

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The present research aims to explore the impact of servant leadership in the academic context of officer education, which is characterized by a demanding curriculum where leadership programs are developed to assess the feasibility and determine the suitability of the model. Among the variables analyzed are social identification and cohesion, fundamental to understanding the proper functioning of military centers, corps and units. The servant leadership model can constitute a theoretical basis for developing a culture of ethical and positive leadership in higher education programs (Eva *et al.*, 2019) and become a validated initiative for the comprehensive training of cadets in military academies. In this research, we use the servant leadership model of Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008) and the Multidimensional Servant Leadership Scale (MSLS; Liden *et al.*, 2008), widely accepted for their psychometric strengths.

Various theoretical paradoxes may arise regarding how to balance service and command authority in the military context. However, command in hybrid environments is a characteristic of the military context (Kark, Karazi-Presler, & Tubi, 2016), where distributed and hierarchical leadership styles coexist. Furthermore, the priority given to service and mission accomplishment constitutes one of the core principles of military doctrine on which the functioning of military units is based.

This study aims to contribute to expanding the theoretical understanding of servant leadership and developing tools that support research in academic training contexts, ultimately improving teaching practices in higher education. (Blanch *et al.*, 2016).

The organizational context of this research is a military officer training center, the Academia General Militar (Zaragoza, Spain) considered a relevant setting for developing theories on groups and organizational behavior (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Liden *et al.*, 2008).

### *Servant leadership*

Greenleaf's (1970) original proposal for the definition of servant leadership has been developed and expanded by different authors (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). One of the most relevant proposals is that put forward by Liden *et al.* (2008), which proposes a model based on seven factors. This approach, further developed in a questionnaire validated in Spain (Edú-Valsania *et al.*, 2023), confirms the existence of a multidimensional construct that is based on a focus on others (seeks the good of followers, and has an interest and concern for the development of followers). Two of the seven factors focus on the leader's own characteristics through, on the one hand, *conceptual skills* (knowledge and experiences based on an understanding of the organization and the tasks to be carried out by followers), and on the other, *ethical behavior*, based on an honest, upright, fair, and open relationship with other people. Four other factors are directly linked to the social relationships that the leader maintains with their followers: *emotional support*, understood as the ability to manifest sensitivity to concerns, demonstrate empathy and actively listen to others; *empowerment*, i.e., fostering the autonomy and self-determination of followers to define their goals, accomplish their tasks, and solve work-related problems; *helping followers grow*, betting on the personal and professional development of subordinates through tutoring and mentoring; and *putting collaborators first*, which involves demonstrating actions and words to meet the professional needs of subordinates. The seventh factor focuses on the development of a *culture of service*, or in other words, providing value for the community; in this way, the leader themselves is personally aware and performs genuine actions for the benefit of the community, also developing a process of modeling behaviors among subordinates (Edú-Valsania *et al.*, 2023).

Various reviews of scientific literature and different meta-analyses raise the importance of the development of individual, team and organizational variables (Lu *et al.*, 2024). Their relevant relationship has been demonstrated in team leadership skills, the development of empowerment and satisfaction, innovation, and team performance (Liden *et al.*, 2008; Nauman, Bhatti, Imam, & Khan, 2022), with the purpose of exploring different relationships between variables of interest to expand knowledge, especially in the training environment in

military academies, given its possible consideration and application aimed at the training of military leaders.

### **Cohesion**

Cohesion can be understood as “a dynamic process reflected in the tendency for a group to stay together and remain united in the pursuit of instrumental objectives and/or the satisfaction of member affective needs” (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213). Several studies have demonstrated the existence of a positive relationship between cohesion and some of the group phenomena of interest to organizations, such as performance or job satisfaction (De Cruz, 2019; Fors, Börjesson, & Hilmarsson, 2022; Molero & Gaviria, 2017).

In the military environment, cohesion is one of the most determining factors in fulfilling the missions assigned to units (Salo & Sinkko, 2012). Studies carried out in conflicts and operations highlight the importance of cohesion in the most basic units in order to exercise leadership, maintain morale, face the dangers of combat and achieve success in missions (García-Guiu, Molero, Moriano, & Moriano León, 2015; Pastor-Álvarez, Molero Alonso, Bardera Mora, & Moriano León, 2019a).

However, it should be noted that, although among the meta-analyses carried out on servant leadership there are different studies that raise the relationship with cohesion in the business, educational or technology companies, the approximations in the military academic field are still very limited (Lu *et al.*, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). For this reason, and due to the potential importance of servant leadership to understand one of the determining elements of the training and proper functioning of the units, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1.* Servant leadership is positively related to the group cohesion of cadets at the section level in military academia.

### *Organizational identification*

Through social identification and categorization, different phenomena of one's belonging and group training can be explained. Organizational identification is understood as the “perception of identity or belonging to the organization” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34) and allows components to assume membership in an organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Both the phenomena of group identification and the processes of group construction are fundamental for the development of effective leadership.

The importance of social identification has been highlighted in different studies in security, defense, and military emergency units as it is related to leadership and the development of group power, inclusive behaviors, and shared values. In the field of defense, its mediating effect is manifested with organizational outcomes such as morale, satisfaction or professional performance, engagement, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Jansen & Delahaij, 2019; Pastor-Álvarez *et al.*, 2019a; Shamir, Zakay, Brainin, & Popper, 2000).

According to the theoretical approaches that highlight the importance of leadership in relation to its effects on organizational identification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H2.* Servant leadership is positively related to the organizational identification of cadets at the section level in the military academic field.

### *Work engagement*

Work engagement is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). According to the job demands-resources model, work engagement arises through a motivational pathway, in which available labor resources help employees to address the

demands of their work and to get involved in performing their tasks effectively in organizations (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011).

The relationship between engagement and leadership is manifested in research through different leadership styles, such as transformational, authentic or identity leadership models (Laguía, Moriano, Molero, García-Ael, & van Dick, 2021). In relation to servant leadership, Zheng, Graham, Epitropaki, and Snape (2020) propose the mediating role of engagement on service performance, basing it on motivation and physical, emotional, and cognitive investment with the organization, especially when high levels of professional competence are manifested. Similarly, Ugaddan and Park (2017) highlight the importance of leadership in the field of administration to develop engagement in public service employees. Nonetheless, although there exist studies between leadership and work engagement, a critical review by Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011) suggests the need for further research in this field, which supports our following hypothesis:

- H3a.* Work engagement mediates the relationship between servant leadership and group cohesion of cadets at the section level in military academia.
- H3b.* Work engagement mediates the relationship between servant leadership and cadets' organizational identification.

#### *Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their own ability to successfully execute tasks and achieve goals (Bandura, 1997). The main sources of self-efficacy according to Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory are related to successful experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional states.

Research has also shown that self-efficacy is associated with persistence, dedication, satisfaction in the actions taken and motivation. Among the studies on the effect of self-efficacy on positive psychological outcomes, the meta-analysis conducted by Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) stands out, which identifies the relationship between self-efficacy and performance and the conclusion that employees with higher levels of self-efficacy achieve higher work performance. Self-confidence, in line with the scientific literature, translates into both greater individual and collective performance, in such a way that positive attitudes are favored that benefit performance in the organization, greater productivity and promotion of innovation in the development of the service (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007; Ren & Shen, 2024). Several studies also point to the mediating role of self-efficacy between different leadership styles and relevant organizational outcomes. For example, Bayraktar and Jiménez (2020) find that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and reactions to change, and Javed, Fatima, Khan, and Bashir (2021) conclude that self-efficacy (specifically, creative self-efficacy) mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative behaviors at work. Consequently, considering the role of self-efficacy on positive behaviors of social influence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4a.* Self-efficacy at work mediates the relationship between servant leadership and group cohesion of cadets at the section level in military academia.
- H4b.* Self-efficacy at work mediates the relationship between servant leadership and cadets' organizational identification.

There are also different studies that relate servant leadership to work engagement and self-efficacy (Ruiz-Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Zhou, Gul, & Tufail, 2022). This research leads us to propose the following hypotheses:

- H5a.* Servant leadership is positively related to section-level work engagement in military academia.

*H5b.* Servant leadership is positively related to section-level self-efficacy in military academia.

On the other hand, self-efficacy is also related to work engagement, which mediates the relationship between self-efficacy and other variables such as performance (Ruiz-Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Tian, Wang, Zhang, & Wen, 2019). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

*H6.* Self-efficacy at work mediates the relationship between servant leadership and cadet work engagement.

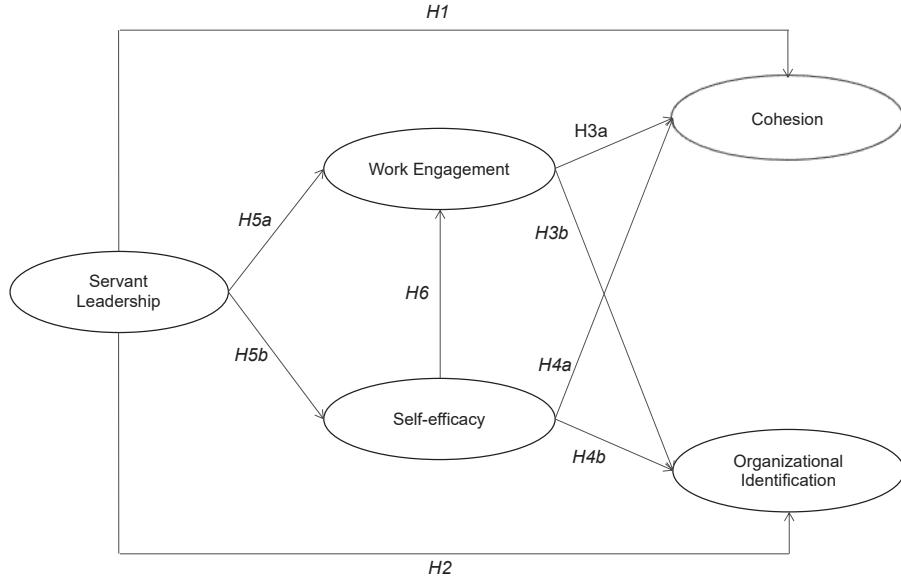
**Figure 1** outlines the theoretical model and the hypotheses formulated.

## Method

### *Context and participants*

The organizational context of this study is university education at the Academia General Militar (Izquierdo, Ortiz de Zarate, & Aparicio, 2020), developed at the Centro Universitario de la Defensa (Zaragoza, Spain) and is aimed at the development of competencies as part of a comprehensive education of military students in the field of Defense and Security. This institution is conceived as a school for leaders, where technical and humanistic preparation is combined with tactical and logistical training, training in forming competencies where the values taught play a central role for the promotion of a culture of service in the students. The cadets studied, who will be future commanders in the units, in addition to developing a rigorous and demanding five-years curriculum, engage in frequent instruction and training activities, maneuvers and physical exercises to prepare for future missions, both in national territory and in operations, with a high demand for commitment to their work leadership skills, resistance to stress, and frequent decision-making in contexts of high uncertainty.

The study population consisted of second- and third-year military students at the Centro Universitario de la Defensa-Academia General Militar. In addition to their military studies,



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model and hypothesis. Our elaboration

they are also receiving a degree in Industrial Organization Engineering. In the second year, the total number of students is 327, divided into nine class sections. In the third year, the number of students is 218, divided into nine class sections. Cadets completed a questionnaire evaluating their captain tutors and professors, in their class sections. The questionnaire was provided via a link to the Qualtrics software platform, hosted on Moodle, at the request of the researchers. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and could be withdrawn at any time.

The final sample included 379 participants (69.5% of the population studied), a response rate considered adequate, though not complete. This included 216 second-year cadets (66.1%) and 163 third-year cadets (74.8%), assigned to sections under the command of a master captain and tutor. Students in the study were considered followers of leaders (86.3% men; mean age = 21.1 years,  $SD = 2.2$ , range 18–36 years). One participant declined to participate and 17 did not complete the questionnaire, so their responses were not considered.

On average, participants had been in the Army for 2.8 years ( $SD = 2.1$ ) and had spent 5.1 months with their section chief ( $SD = 1.8$ ). Military academies are intensive boarding school training environments where cadets participate daily in multiple contexts, theoretical classes, field exercises, tactical training, and mentoring, providing them with substantially greater exposure than typical civilian educational environments. Furthermore, as second- and third-year cadets, the participants had already completed basic military training and therefore possessed the necessary competence to evaluate leadership behaviors. Three participants declined to participate in the study and were excluded from the analysis; no missing data detected in the questionnaires analyzed.

### *Instruments*

*Servant leadership.* The scale adapted to Spanish by [Edú-Valsania \*et al.\* \(2023\)](#) from the servant leadership scale developed by [Liden \*et al.\* \(2008\)](#) was used. It consists of 28 items (e.g. “I would seek help from my section chief if I had a personal problem” or “My chief has a thorough understanding of the Army and its goals”) with six alternative responses, from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). The questionnaire was adapted by three professors from the military training center who were members of the research team, and a pilot test was conducted with a group of students prior to administering the questionnaire to the sample, to ensure understanding of the items. This study employs servant leadership as a unidimensional construct, in line with several previous works, as the literature shows that global scores are a valid and robust practice in psychological research (e.g. [Bobko, Roth, & Buster, 2007](#); [Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014](#); [Yagil & Oren, 2021](#)).

*Self-efficacy.* The self-efficacy subscale of the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PsyCap) by [Luthans \*et al.\* \(2007\)](#) was used, specifically the version validated in Spain by [Azanza, Domínguez, Moriano León, and Molero \(2014\)](#). The six items on this scale (e.g. “I feel confident analyzing a long-term problem to find a solution”) follow a six-point response scale, from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*).

*Work engagement.* Work Engagement was measured using the Spanish version of the Ultra-Short Measure for Work Engagement (UWES-3) developed by [Schaufeli, Shimazu, Hakanen, Salanova, and De Witte \(2019\)](#). It consists of three items (e.g. “In my work, I feel bursting with energy”), with a seven-point response scale, from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Every day*).

*Organizational identification.* The Spanish version ([Topa, Moriano León, & Morales Domínguez, 2008](#)) of the Organizational Identification Scale (OIS) by [Mael and Ashforth \(1992\)](#) was used. The score on this scale is calculated as the average of the six items (e.g. “When someone criticizes my organization, it feels like a personal insult”). Answer alternatives range from 1 (*Not at all agree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

*Cohesion.* Group cohesion was measured with the cohesion subscale of the Morale Questionnaire validated by [Pastor-Álvarez, Molero-Alonso, and Moriano-León \(2019b\)](#). The five items (e.g. “There is a lot of camaraderie in my Section”) are answered with a five-point response scale, from 1 (*Not at all agree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

An online questionnaire was administered, providing participants with a link to the Qualtrics platform, where they were informed about the objectives and characteristics of the research, and were able to participate anonymously, voluntarily, with the possibility of withdrawal, in accordance with the directives of the University Ethics Committee. The project was approved under the reference 12-SISH-PSI-2024. Participants spent an average of 16.6 minutes completing the questionnaire (SD = 7.5; range 4–49 minutes).

For data analysis, SPSS and SmartPLS v4 programs were used (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2024). SPSS was used to compute descriptive statistics for scales and samples. SmartPLS was used to perform a structural equation analysis using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This technique was chosen because it is suitable for both small and large samples, does not require assumptions of normality, and allows simultaneous analysis of various latent variables, with many indicators and hypothesized relationships (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). All variables were considered as reflective constructs, and 10,000 bootstrap samples were used.

## Results

First, the mean scores and standard deviations of the variables were calculated, as well as the correlations between them (Table 1). All variables presented mean scores higher than the theoretical average, obtaining medium-high values in general. Similarly, all correlations were positive and significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

To analyze the results, a two-step analysis was performed. First, the measurement models were examined, i.e. the factors loadings of the indicators, the internal consistency of the latent variables, and the convergent and discriminant validity between constructs. Most of the indicators presented factor loadings higher than the minimum recommended value of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2019), although it was decided to discard one of the indicators of organizational identification (“If a story in the media criticized my organization, I would feel embarrassed”) due to its low loadings and the negative impact on other parameters (in particular, on validity). Reliability, measured with Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR), was satisfactory in all cases, with values above 0.70 (Table 1). Regarding convergent validity, as a measure in which each construct converges to explain the variance of its indicators, the average extracted variance (AVE) was used for all the indicators of each construct, obtaining values higher than 0.50 (indicating that each construct explains at least 50% of the variance of its indicators) and are, therefore, acceptable. Finally, discriminant validity was examined in terms of the extent to which each construct is empirically different from the other construct in the proposed model. Traditionally, the criterion of Fornell and Larcker (1981) has been followed, according to which the square root of the AVE of each construct must be higher than the correlations of that construct with the other variables, which is fulfilled in this model (Table 1). Recently, however, a more precise analysis has been proposed, such as the *heterotrait-monotrait ratio* of

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables

	M	SD	$\alpha$	CFC	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Servant leadership	4.15	0.99	0.97	0.98	0.58	0.76				
2. Self-efficacy	5.01	0.63	0.85	0.86	0.58	0.33***	0.75			
3. Work engagement	6.04	1.07	0.89	0.90	0.83	0.32***	0.43***	0.91		
4. Identification	4.03	0.67	0.78	0.79	0.54	0.20***	0.30***	0.32***	0.73	
5. Cohesion	3.97	0.75	0.87	0.87	0.66	0.24***	0.42***	0.30***	0.21***	0.81

**Note(s):**  $N = 379$ .  $\alpha$ : Crobach’s Alpha; CFC: composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted. The diagonal represents the square root of the AVE for each variable

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

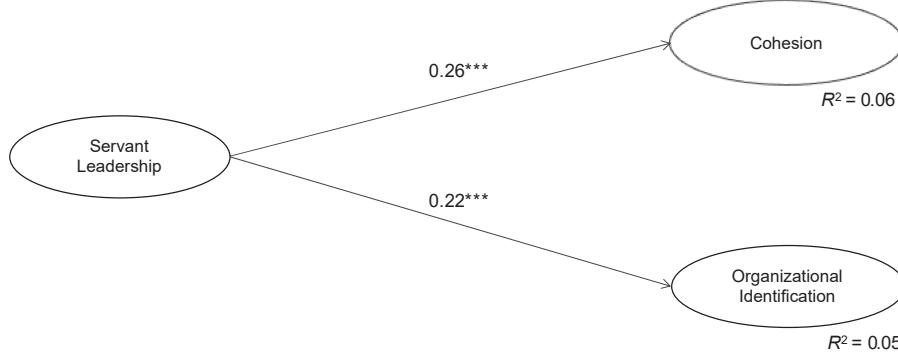
correlations (HTMT), which is defined as the mean value of the correlations of the indicators between constructs in relation to the mean of the mean correlations of the indicators measuring the same construct (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Values below 0.90 represent adequate validity, and a more conservative value of 0.85 is recommended when the constructs are conceptually different. In the present model, all values were below 0.50.

Once the analysis of the measurement models has been considered satisfactory, we move on to the second step: the analysis of the structural model. From the results analyzed in Figure 2, we can confirm the first two hypotheses of the research, which proposed the existence of a positive and significant relationship between servant leadership and group cohesion (H1;  $\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$ ) and group identification in the military academic setting (H2;  $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$ ). The coefficients of determination (*adjusted R*<sup>2</sup>) are, nonetheless, low.

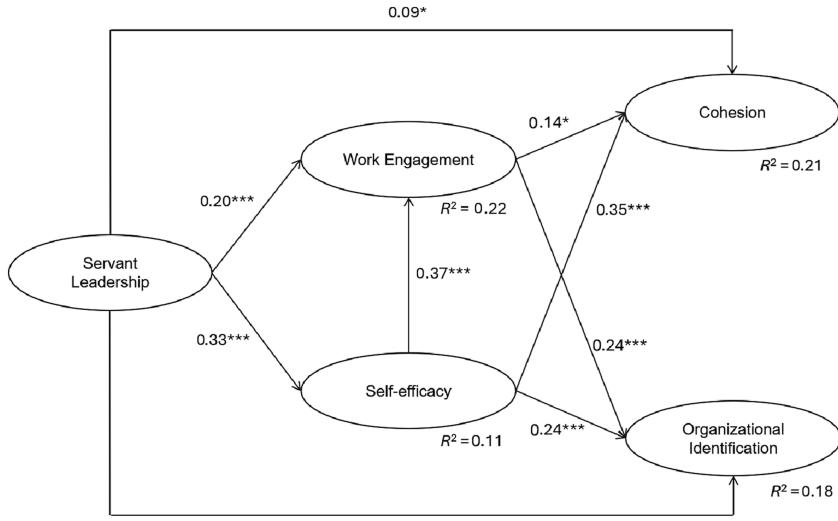
Figure 3 shows the standardized coefficients of the relationships between constructs and their level of significance for the complete model. The relationship between servant leadership and the two mediating variables, work engagement and self-efficacy, is positive and significant (H5a:  $\beta = 0.20, p < 0.001$ , and H5b:  $\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$ , respectively). Similarly, self-efficacy is positively related to work engagement (H6;  $\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$ ). And these two mediating variables are positively related to the two outcome variables: cohesion and organizational identification. The relationship between servant leadership and organizational identification is fully mediated by work engagement and self-efficacy, while in the case of the relationship between servant leadership and cohesion, mediation is partial as the beta coefficient ( $\beta = 0.09, p < 0.05$ ) is still significant. In this model, there are no collinearity problems as all the variance inflation factors (FIV) are below 1.5. The coefficients of determination (*adjusted R*<sup>2</sup>) are greater than 0.10 in all endogenous variables (Figure 3), confirming the adequacy of this mediation model. According to the results presented in Figure 3, hypotheses H3a, H3b, H4a and H4b are confirmed, in which the existence of mediation between servant leadership and the variables of group cohesion and organizational identification through work engagement and self-efficacy was proposed.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the suitability of the servant leadership model in the context of officer training in military educational centers and to analyze the relationships between this type of leadership and psychosocial variables of interest such as group cohesion and identification, work engagement and self-efficacy.



**Figure 2.** Results of the structural model: direct relationships model. Note.  $N = 379$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Own elaboration



**Figure 3.** Results of the structural model: mediation model. Note.  $N = 379$ . Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships ( $p > 0.05$ ) \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ . Own elaboration

The study of servant leadership in military contexts is particularly valuable because it allows us to examine how an approach focused on development and emotional support of subordinates operates in traditionally hierarchical organizations oriented toward discipline and operational effectiveness.

Our results highlight a positive relationship between servant leadership and group cohesion and identification, variables critical to the effectiveness of military units and the commitment and satisfaction of their components. Cohesion in military units is directly related to performance subordinate satisfaction and unit readiness (Oliver, Harman, Hoover, Hayes, & Pandhi, 1999).

The study also underscores the relationship between servant leadership and organizational identification. Research in military contexts links leadership, with motivation, effectiveness, professional identification, loyalty, and obedience (Lisbona, Morales, & Palaci, 2006). In educational settings, social identification promotes commitment, belonging and socialization, crucial during training periods that take place as in academies such as military teaching centers.

Results also suggest a mediating role for work engagement and self-efficacy between servant leadership and outcomes, consistent with findings for transformational and authentic leadership (Juyumaya & Torres, 2023). The importance of developing engagement in organizations lies in its potential to promote a higher quality of service and the generation of positive mental states, being an aspect of great relevance in military academies due to their integration into administrations as public services with a marked commitment and availability to society.

Regarding self-efficacy, the style of servant leadership developed by section chiefs positively influences the motivation of cadet followers, which, together with personal and contextual resources (Bandura, 1997), supports comprehensive training and personal growth. Enhancing followers' self-efficacy encourages behaviors that foster belonging, participation, and communication within the unit.

### *Theoretical and practical implications*

Studying the effects of servant leadership in the military provides theoretical and practical insights for cadet education and unit effectiveness. Servant leadership offers a reference model guiding behaviors and actions necessary for student training.

This approach is also applicable beyond the military in sectors as education, public administration, private enterprise, and healthcare where social responsibility, promoting autonomy, collaboration, and flexibility are emphasized to enhance motivation and engagement.

Promoting self-efficacy is key to empowering members, increasing confidence in facing challenges, and adapting to complex, volatile, and uncertain environments in which organizations and institutions operate.

Similarly, one of the most important theoretical contributions to emerge from this study is that authority and service are not incompatible forces but rather complementary ones, as leadership can be understood as a moral influence grounded in the development of human relationships. The concept of “lead to serve” does not weaken the capacity for command; on the contrary, it can strengthen a leader’s influence and can be applied in sectors beyond the military, as a servant leadership makes it possible to combine firmness with humanity.

Observing the results of the study on the practical significance of servant leadership in the field of military training, it fosters group cohesion and identification, aspects closely related to team effectiveness and resilience. The positive results of this type of leadership allow us to consider the importance of leaders’ professional and ethical competencies, as well as the impact of emotional support, empowerment, and the guidance they provide to subordinates in fostering both subordinate commitment and self-efficacy, thus enhancing unit effectiveness.

On the one hand, this study highlights the importance of promoting personal development based on competencies and ethical behavior, always advocated by the professional deontology of the military. Social relationships necessary to maintain effective interaction with the team members they lead, translate into demonstrating emotional support for followers based on the knowledge, communication and empathy of their subordinates. The development of the concept of empowerment is in line with the philosophy of mission-oriented command, where the fostering of the subordinate’s initiative and decision-making capacity should be established in the daily functioning of the units, both on a regular basis and in operations. The mission-oriented style of command is part of the curriculum of military academies where servant leadership can be an ideal vector for application to the military context due to its direct and positive effects on group cohesion and identification, in line with [García-Guiu, Moya, Molero, and Moriano \(2016\)](#). The concept of mission-oriented command is a philosophy that has been implemented in Western land armies where initiative is fostered by a leadership style that enhances decentralized decision-making while maintaining the command’s purpose in accomplishing missions.

Another facet that a good servant leader should foster is their commitment to the growth of their followers; the subordinate’s self-efficacy and personal development should be encouraged through tutoring, guidance, and mentoring. In this regard, the annual evaluation reports issued by commanders on their subordinates have an important influence on professional prospects, and the work of captains as tutors and section chiefs is an appropriate procedure for developing this competence. Finally, the proposal suggested by the servant leadership model in military training is also of interest, since it proposes that it is the leader who fosters the creation of a culture of service based on example and humility as opposed to narcissism and the use of institutions, putting collaborators above their own priorities, seeking the benefit of service to the Army, and by extension, favoring the interests of society with their sacrifice, dedication, and commitment.

Regarding the recommendations for future practice, in addition to those presented in the previous paragraphs, special emphasis is placed on the use of written journals to promote students’ self-awareness and the development of their professional competencies. Furthermore, for fostering ethical development, we propose incorporating practical case

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studies that address diverse ethical dilemmas related to service within units, as well as implementing role-playing activities. These initiatives would enable students to engage with situations requiring emotional support for subordinates, the empowerment of others, and the prioritization of collective interests over individual ones in the fulfillment of duty.

Among the specific examples of the implementation of servant leadership in military training programs, it is worth highlighting the alignment that can be enhanced in the tutoring plan carried out by the captain instructors, who are also the cadet section leaders, fostering a personal relationship and individual development for the student. Also, assuming responsibilities as class leaders and serving as internal order guards at the military center are valuable opportunities for students to exercise leadership roles. Other teaching opportunities based on servant leadership can be fostered in military training when cadets assume effective command of small units in the field, promoting the empowerment necessary for growth in tactical command competencies. Regarding the recommendations that can be derived from the study, the following are proposed: promoting competencies derived from the service leadership style, as well as studying cases and including activities in the leadership plan that reinforce empowerment and create a service culture.

#### *Limitations and future research*

The present research, despite offering interesting contributions to the study of leadership, also has different limitations. On the one hand, this is a cross-sectional analysis, which limits the knowledge about the evolution of the leadership process and hinders a clearer examination of the causal relationships between the variables studied. We suggest that further research should analyze different time points to complete the study of the evolution of the psychosocial phenomenon developed around servant leadership.

Since student participation in the research was voluntary, and although the obtained response rate (69.5% of the population) is generally considered adequate for the use of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and is high relative to the sample composition, it is necessary to consider potential non-response errors. We acknowledge that, despite the high degree of participation, the residual non-response error still carries the risk of selection bias, which represents a methodological limitation that must be addressed.

In relation to the variables studied, despite their relevance in the present work in the context of performance and military training, it would be of interest to complement them with other variables that increase knowledge of the underlying processes and allow us to assess the effects on other variables such as group power or group effectiveness. It is also considered of interest in future research to expand the studies in the context of the operational units, with graduate officers, thus complementing the conclusions obtained in a context outside the teaching field.

In line with the points discussed above, we also propose conducting new research to examine the change and development of leadership skills through specific competency-development programs. These may take the form of workshops or courses designed to provide in-depth training in the competencies on which the model is studied model is based, thereby enabling a more systematic and evidence-based assessment of its impact. Such an approach would also encourage longitudinal studies of the model, allowing for the analysis of its effects and evolution over time.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is important to highlight the relevance that a model based on servant leadership can represent in the field of military training, supported by scientifically proven results, as it provides specific references to develop students' competencies and promote teaching guidelines of action directly aligned with the correct exercise of the military profession. The development of competencies, the promotion of ethical conduct, the growth and the empowerment of a culture of service and leadership at all levels in organizations and

public administrations aim to be the key lines of action to favor the improvement of the performance of institutions to effectively fulfill their missions at the service of society.

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### Artificial intelligence tools use

At no time during the elaboration of the research and writing of the text has Generative Artificial Intelligence been used.

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