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Conceptualising Responsible Leadership in South Africa: An Interactive Qualitative Analysis

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Purpose: The studying of responsible leadership as a leadership construct is facing challenges in defining, specifically within a South African context. This has been amplified by real-world challenges such as the increased unethical behaviour. This study aims to conceptualise responsible leadership as a leadership construct across industries, encompassing both private and public sectors in the context of South Africa.

Design/methodology/approach: An exploratory qualitative design is employed: The Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), a research methodology approach qualitative in format. This involves a step-by-step application to conceptualise responsible leadership through a controlled focus groups comprising of 19 leaders representing a diverse range of industries within South African. The inductive nature of initial stages, combined with deductive techniques, facilitates detection of perspectives on responsible leadership, enhancing the exploratory aspect of qualitative research.

Findings/results: Results are illustrated using System Influence Diagram (SID): Demonstrating the primary driver in responsible leadership as growth, with sustainability and planning as secondary drivers. These secondary drivers, resulted in team mental health and values as secondary outcomes, and culminated to the primary outcome of business insight. Grounded on this, recommendations for future research are made.

Practical implications: The significance of the study resides in the conceptualisation of the construct responsible leadership, within the South African context.

Originality/value: This conceptualisation of responsible leadership is valuable because it aids in elucidating the social and ethical responsibilities of leaders, including their accountability to both stakeholders and society.

Keywords: responsible leadership; leadership; interactive qualitative analysis; qualitative research; inductive method; system influence diagram.

Introduction

A need for research denoted to responsible leadership has been identified in South Africa, given the heightened governance issues in the country. Grounded on the backdrop of South Africa's leadership governance in recent years, South Africans in general are calling for leaders to prioritise matters of society and ethical issues, over personal or political interest and gain. The related dwindling public trust in leadership, was the driving force for the Stellenbosch Business School's Centre for Studies in Responsible Leadership published manifesto in 2024. The 'New Manifesto Aims to Restore Leadership Trust' position and the need for responsible leadership as priority ahead of the democratic elections at the time, with 10 guiding principles of responsibility in leadership. This is consistent with the body of research pointing to a sharp reduction in trust across pivotal institutions. Prof De Klerk (2024) links this fall to, among other things, ethical, organisational, ecological and societal failures. A report of the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (2023) indicates this very starkly: 80% of citizens do not trust political leaders who have been flagrantly corrupt. Such erosion in trust was also reported formerly in the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer, revealing the belief that top government, business and media leaders engaged in deceptive behaviours.

Background to the problem

A significant problem has emerged in defining responsible leadership as a specific theory or construct (Pless et al., 2021). Business schools, academic leaders, organisations, governments, and society are debating the criterion for responsible leadership. Chief executive officers (CEOs), Boards of Directors and leaders at every level within organisations in both the public and private sectors,

specifically in South Africa, are now posing more questions than ever before about what is meant by responsibility and to whom it should be targeted. Eesley and Lenox (2006) observe that there was a time when it was admissible for business leaders, to be rather insentient on matters relating to the state of the natural environment, societal welfare, ethical behaviour and employee well-being, among others. Such times are long gone (Burke & Cooper, 2006). There is, therefore, growing attention paid to conceptualising responsible leadership as an emerging construct. As responsible leadership continues to be critically important and scrutinised within a South African milieu and in broader Africa, it is an emerging leadership construct, with scholars seeking to define it specifically within an organisational context.

Research problem

In previous international research related to responsible leadership, substantial focus to understand the conception, structure and measurement of responsible leadership, examining stakeholder perspectives and exploring the multi-level outcomes and orientations of responsible leadership to enhance validity and reliability are evident. According to a study conducted by Shi and Ye (2016) on an overview of responsible leadership, from a cultural context, a research gap has been identified, as research is fundamentally prevalent in a Western context. Responsible leadership in relation to cross-cultural research, for example, investigating how cultural value orientations can impact different responsible leadership behaviours, has been posed as critical to study in future (Doh & Quigley, 2014). The sentiment to conduct studies to compare responsible leadership practices from a Western context to other markets has been posed by Lu (2012). The suggestions are for future studies to be carried out in non-Western contexts, such as Africa, which would tap into related findings to possible cultural variations in responsible leadership theory. A scale development gap has also been acknowledged, with a lack of standardised scales to measure responsible leadership, especially considering different cultural contexts. This has also been echoed by Maak and Pless (2006), when they researched responsible leadership on grounds of an extension to ethical leadership.

Javed et al. (2021) conducted a study concerning stakeholder theory in responsible leadership. It examines the relationship between responsible leadership and its macro-, meso- and micro-level outcomes. The opportunity for future attention in related research has also been highlighted in the study performed by Voegtlin et al. (2012), where the need for various responsible leadership orientations must be explored as moderators, to understand their influence on the outcomes. Voegtlin et al. (2012) suggest that in general, future studies related to responsible leadership should triangulate data sources to enhance validity and reliability; this poses the need to explore innovative non-conventional research methodologies. Current previous international studies exemplify a common need for the inclusion of a diverse stakeholder perspective and enhanced multi-level analysis

regarding studies with responsible leadership as a concept and theory.

The global emphasis on unethical behaviour, specifically within a South African context with examples of bribery and corruption clearly evident, obligated businesses to deliberate innovative ways of working and to re-invent business outlook. Tsui (2020) and Agbor (2019) state that, this along with the ostensible universal financial crisis, has made finding clarity on the conceptualisation of responsible leadership and the measurement thereof, imperative to clarify and solve. In lieu of responsible leadership, no clear conceptualisation of this emerging leadership construct is obvious, particularly in the South African context.

Purpose statement

The objective of this study is to conceptualise responsible leadership, and to recognise key indispensable characteristics and drivers of responsible leadership in South Africa and in South African organisational context. This information can then be used by leadership scholars as foundation to develop measurement scales as well as interventions to address leadership concerns in the public and private sector and society at large within South Africa. The process to conceptualise responsible leadership in an organisational setting within South Africa, is an inductive method employing grounded theory as a basis. The study clarifies making use of a qualitative research approaches, utilising Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) as method, drawing on insight from industry leaders across sectors pertaining to responsible leadership. Failing to clarify the concept of responsible leadership or to address the identified research gap has significant implications for everyday business operations and society at large. The study aims to contribute towards the conceptualisation of responsible leadership from a South African organisational context.

Research questions

The following research questions will be answered in this article:

1. What is responsible leadership?
2. What are the key characteristics and drivers of responsible leadership in a South African organisational context?

Literature review

This investigation reflects over the concept of responsible leadership with a view to following its development from typical leadership theories such as Trait, Behavioural, Contingency Theories to that which is deemed more modern, for example, Transformational, Transactional and Servant Leadership. Grounded on responsible leadership that is built upon ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement and sustainability, this article demonstrates the differences between responsible and regular leadership, illustrating responsible and traditional leadership in a comparative analysis. The literature analysis extends to a global outlook,

featuring insights into the ancient African ethos of ubuntu and demonstrating how leadership practice is a product of cultural values. In South Africa specifically, apartheid and its interactions remain incredibly relevant, the contemporary economic issues and to some extent corruption further complicate an already challenging web of philosophies around diversity. Finally, the literature review articulates a cognitive system of considering global and local knowledge, and it appeals for making the change in ethics, growth inclusiveness and sustainability. The framework seeks to inform dominant models of leadership, consequently conceptualising responsible leadership.

Leadership theories

An overview of traditional leadership theories

Trait theory: This theory suggests that a few characteristics, for example, intelligence, adjustment, extraversion, reliability, among others, differentiate effective leaders from non-leaders. Common traits often found include intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability (Northouse, 2016). The theory posits that innate traits produce leaders who are predisposed to certain skills and capabilities that make them effective leaders. Preceding the earliest form of trait theory, The Great Man Theory claimed that events outside the ordinary have to be the result of extraordinary men (Zaccaro, 2007). Trait theory research has expanded to include the 'Big Five' personality dimensions: Conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, neuroticism and extraversion. These are suggested as building blocks of the predictors of leader effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002).

Behavioural theories: As opposed to trait theory, which stems from the idea that leaders are born with certain characteristics, behavioural theories take a distinct approach by concentrating solely on what an effective leader does. Two main groups of behavioural outcomes were identified in studies conducted by Ohio State University and the University of Michigan, known as task-oriented activities and relationship-oriented activities (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Task-based behaviours are variables such as organising the work, setting goals and making sure each person has a distinct role, while relationship-oriented behaviours originate from trust, support and collaboration. A key pathway that leaders can achieve desirable outcomes, is by balancing their task and relationship behaviours in what is known as the notable leadership grid (Blake & Mouton, 1985).

Contingency theories: Contingency theories propose that the best way to determine what a leader should do is to study the leader and the situation. This assessment would be around who they are, and what they do. Fiedler's Contingency Model states that the effectiveness of a leader solely depends on the style of interaction between the leader and its team, and how much control and influence the leader has over the situation (Fiedler, 1967). Situational Leadership Theory, closely related to Contingency Theory, was developed by Hersey and Blanchard postulating that leaders should change their style according to the followers' readiness or maturity and competence (Hersey et al., 2007). According to Path-Goal Theory suggested by House (1971), leaders can motivate followers by showing them a clear path to reach the goal (Path), making it easier for them by eliminating the obstacles (Path), and rewarding them with something of value (Reward).

Modern leadership approaches (just to name and discuss a few)

Transformational leadership: Transformational leadership inspires and motivates followers to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the organisation. This is important because transformational leadership is about the way leaders create and communicate their vision, encourage intellectual stimulation within their environment and act in accordance with their followers' individual needs (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These are behaviours of transformational leaders and are applied to create large-scale organisational change and innovation (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013).

Transactional leadership: Transactional leadership is a leadership style where leaders rely on rewards and punishments as their main forms of leadership to lead followers (Bass, 1985). This model dictates that the leader leads and the follower follow; job performance is rewarded while performance deemed unacceptable is addressed (Burns, 1978). This leadership approach works well in highly specialised tasks but may not drive high employee performance (Campbell, 2013). A transactional leadership comprises contingent reward, active management by exception and passive management by exception (Bass, 1990).

Servant leadership: Servant leadership suggests that a leader should first see themselves as a servant who works among the community and the team, rather than the leader to start with. This theory fosters a culture of trusting, empathy and ethical behaviour among organisations (Greenleaf, 1977). Working for the growth and health of the people in the community and calling for an ethical and alternative organisation, a servant leader is steered with the energy to put into practice of what is being taught. Servant leadership is typically described as a leadership style in which individuals motivate and encourage others to reach their potential by being a model of what they themselves hope to find in their own leaders. Key components of servant leadership include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010).

Evolution of responsible leadership as theory

Definition and core principles

Ethical decision-making: Responsible leadership requires ethical decision-making where leaders put moral principles

and values first in the decision-making process, and actions are based on justice and fairness (Maak & Pless, 2006). Ethical decisions consider the consequences for all parties affected by the decision and must seek to determine what is both fair and just to best respect the rights and dignities of those who are making them. As Trevino et al. (2006) assert, leaders must make decisions about complex moral dilemmas in ways that will specially meet stringent ethical standards and long-standing expectations on the part of their constituents.

Stakeholder engagement: Engaging with stakeholders is the core of responsible leadership. It entails considering the interests and desires of all stakeholders affected by the activities of the organisation, and a focus on openness and responsibility (Freeman, 1984). This inclusive approach to decision-making ensures that a range of viewpoints are considered and contributes to the development of equitable and sustainable solutions. It reflects an effort to develop good relations with its various stakeholders as a way of preventing hostile action that might eventually have an adverse effect on the organisation (Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

Sustainability and social responsibility: Responsible leadership integrates sustainability and social responsibility directly into its core strategy, aiming for a long-term effect on society and the environment. Sustainability-oriented leaders advance environmental stewardship, ethical business practices and social equity, ensuring that organisational goals are compatible with the broader societal and environmental goals (Doh & Stumpf, 2005). This concept deals with sustainable business practices, reduction in environmental footprints and community development (Porter & Kramer, 2006). A closer look at responsible leadership and its definitional framework reveals that there are several views and portraits on what responsible leadership is or should be. Voegtlin (2016) argues that the assessment of leaders' current level of responsibility and responsibility in leadership should be understood including the new dimension of leader accountability. This includes activities for which leaders cannot be held to account, the resolution of competing moral claims, the implications that their choices would have, and the shared approach to problem solving. Responsible leadership is a moral relationship between the leader and stakeholders refined by moral principles and values (Pless & Maak, 2005). The relationship is fastened across a root of commitment and drive that make them influence each other to be more committed and excited. Leaders accept part of the responsibility for making choices, for moving communities in a value direction, towards a more sustainable change for society and more values to be produced.

Responsible leadership versus traditional leadership

Comparative analysis: When a leader comes with a strong emphasis on navigating power, they bring with them traditional leadership theories that focus strongly on hierarchical, top-down leadership to drive organisational performance and efficiency. Responsible leadership, in contrary, places a premium on ethical reflection, stakeholder relationships and sustainable business (Maak & Pless, 2006). A more responsible and collaborative approach is naturally pursued by responsible leaders, creating a culture that reinforces benign values and ethical behaviour. While traditional leadership's emphasis is on the competition and financial profitability, responsible leadership focusses on the long-term success and the general representation (Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Responsible leadership is a relational process of leader influence between leaders and stakeholders with the intention of accountability for the creation of societal values in the context of an organisational reality (Maak, 2016; Maak & Pless, 2016; Ritchie-Dunham et al., 2023). The importance of stakeholder interactions (Doh & Quigley, 2014) as well as the notion of responsible leadership is also emphasised when comparing responsible leadership with traditional leadership.

Case studies illustrating differences: Case studies such as the evasion of environmental checks and balances are evident in today's day and age. Numerous multinationals illustrate and constantly explore how responsible leadership can actually be applied from a sustainability viewpoint. For example, various organisations have built global known brands that embodies environmental activism and are able to demonstrate that a business can also be successful while holding social and environmental responsibilities above economic ones (Chouinard, 2006). For example, Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan shows how using incorporation of sustainability in their business strategy can drive growth and offer societal impacts (Polman, 2016). These cases have one common denominator: the positive impact of responsible leadership through improved reputation, customer loyalty and long-term profits. Maak et al. (2016), Miska et al. (2013), Pless and Appel (2012), Stahl and Sully de Luque (2014), noting that there is not a single definition of responsible leadership, well-established, globally embraced responsible leadership emerging from, but identifying various interpretations.

Responsible leadership in varying contexts
Global perspectives

Western perspectives on responsible leadership: In a Western context, there is an emphasis on holding corporations accountable to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical governance. One example of this is multinational organisations placing considerable attention on CSR programmes, like responsible sourcing and corporate's reporting transparency to build their corporate reputation and stakeholder's trust (Carroll, 1991). The focus on regulation and ethical standards mirrors a larger social trend of expectation from businesses to contribute to the social and environmental good. For example, CSR projects in the West frequently include not-for-profit partners (non-governmental organisations [NGOs]) and conform to global models (Matten & Moon, 2008).

Comparative studies involving different cultural contexts: Research comparing responsible leadership processes among cultures shows cultural differences in responsible leadership processes. In certain Asian contexts, for instance, leadership tends to focus on the well-being of the collective and social harmony, in line with the Confucian values that place importance on community and relationships over individual accomplishments (Hofstede, 1980). By comparison, Western settings may give greater priority to the freedom of individuals and corporate stewardship, which underscores the need for an appreciation of cultural differences in how leadership is practised (Dorfman & House, 2004). Literature indicates that culture influences expectations in leadership; power distance and collectivism are two cultural dimensions that impact leadership style and practices (House et al., 2004).

African perspective

The concept of 'ubuntu' and leadership: An integral part of leadership in Africa is the concept of ubuntu (Nguni Bantu word that literally means 'human-ness') that references the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. It stresses community, compassion and integral respect, which are guiding principles for the boards of trustees (Mbigi & Maree, 1995). Being an ubuntu leader means that we care about the well-being of our community, where people feel connected and have a sense of shared interests and values. The leadership that is ubuntu-based, suggests behaviour that is in line with the ubuntu value system such as empathy, modesty and group responsibility, which also promotes ethical and sustainable organisational practices (Mangaliso, 2001).

Responsible leadership specific studies within African organisations: Insight from African organisations highlight that responsible leadership often means contending with socio-economic dilemmas, advancing social equity and supporting inclusive growth. For example, African citizens contributed to the understanding of how African leaders blend imported ethical schemas and cultural values to build sustainable organisations (Nkomo 2011). It applies most critically in environments where social cohesion and community-building are prerequisites for organisational effectiveness. Bolden and Kirk (2009) have shown, from case studies conducted in African organisations, the effects of responsible leadership on employee engagement, organisation performance and community well-being. Ngambi (2004) emphasised that the dominance of Eurocentric leadership styles in South African organisations, often fails to address the unique cultural and contextual factors inherent in the region.

This emphasises the need to localise theories of leadership into the cultural, societal and economic conditions in different parts of the world.

A South African organisational context

The impact of apartheid and transformation policies: South Africa's historical legacy has had a dramatic effect on its socio-economy's architecture and the very way its organisations are set up. For this reason, transformation policies such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) are some of the mechanisms that have been put in place by the South African Government to ensure that the workforce is transformed and are representative of the nation (Booysen, 2007). These policies are designed to provide equivalent protectory opportunity and produce social justice in workplaces. The legacy of apartheid has significant implications for the enduring problems confronting leadership development and calls attention to the importance of the reconciliation, empowerment and sustainable development processes that will be commensurate with contemporary leadership challenges (Adam, 1997).

Economic landscape and organisational structures: The economy in South Africa is a composite of both first world and third-world segments accompanied by substantial wealth and income disparity. Based on this, the country presents organisational structures at both ends of the scale from multinational corporations to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Such an economic context offers opportunities and challenges for responsible leadership, calling for leaders to negotiate complex social and economic dynamics. The organisational context is greatly influenced by economic policies that support growth and counter inequality such as the National Development Plan (NPC, 2012).

Leadership challenges in South Africa

Corruption and ethical dilemmas

Corruption remains an evolving issue in South Africa which affects public trust and also leads to leadership challenges within organisations. According to Rossouw (2005), in this context, leaders play a major role in reconciling interests and values, balancing moral and/or ethical and professional commitments, and an incipient culture of integrity for the prevention of corruption and in favour of transparency. Enforcing ethical standards, a strong code of ethics combined with regulations and action for the violation of these, is the first crucial step in the establishment of such a transparent and responsible system of leadership. Measures typically include legislative, organisational and cultural changes (at minimum, some reference to national public life).

Diversity and inclusion

South Africa delivers a variety of diverse workforce characteristics, which provide the ideal backdrop to steer leadership, which will be inclusive in any setting. But it is for leaders to address the problems with diversity, concerning respecting diversity through cultural tools, and having equal opportunities that can provide each employee with broader benefit (April & Blass, 2010). Embracing diversity and inclusion is essential for unlocking the complete range of the workforce and for helping an organisation satisfy its goals. Specific diversity management practices emphasise efforts expected to be associated with efficient practices, such as

targeted recruitment, policies for an inclusive workplace, ongoing training for cultural competence and bias reduction (Booysen, 2013).

A conceptual framework for responsible leadership in South Africa

Integrating global and local perspectives

Adapting global leadership theories to South African contexts: Global leadership is a source of useful, if not necessarily sufficient, criteria, but is best understood in the South African context. This consists of getting to know local cultural, social, and economic dynamics or by embedding these insights into leader practices (Bolden & Kirk, 2009). Localising global theories improves relevance and efficacy. For example, it is possible to infuse the principles of transformational leadership with the values of ubuntu to create a leadership style that is not only visionary but also community-centred (Khoza, 2005). According to Patzer et al. (2018), responsible leadership functions as a bridge between life and the economic system, drawing upon strategic actions as well ethical goals to make communicative actions work.

Incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices: Indigenous knowledge and practices such as ubuntu bring an additional layer of depth to leadership as it relates to responsible leadership. Adhering to these principles can enhance leadership approaches and build closer reinforcement with the local communities (Khoza, 2005). This serves to inform and deepen global leadership models with a local context. Such practices focus on the common good, sustainability and ethical behaviour which are dominant features of responsible leadership (Mangaliso, 2001).

Proposed model of responsible leadership for South Africa

Core competencies and behaviours: A proposed model of responsible leadership for South Africa, would be framed based on ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement, cultural competence and commitment to sustainability. This frame within South Africa could be defined by behaviours that manifest these competencies, for example, openness in communication and dealings, inclusive practices and a proactive concern for social responsibility (Maak & Pless, 2006). Leaders play a critical role in exhibiting empathy, integrity and a commitment to the common good, nurturing an organisational culture that values ethical and sustainable ways (Waldman & Balven, 2014).

Context-specific challenges and solutions: In South Africa, responsible leaders apply their leadership as a way of challenging pervasive socio-economic disparities, ongoing corruption and structural economic issues which require fundamental transformation and many more. Solutions could be cultivating ethical cultures, pushing inclusive growth and capitalising more on local knowledge and practices for the formation of sustainable and fairer enterprises (Visser, 2007). These strategies work by bringing together a mix of actors, by learning and adapting in real-time, and by piecing available resources toward long-term goals of societal improvement. Leaders could push for policy adjustments and institution changes that encourage ethical and sustainable development (Van Zyl, 2014). In Africa and specifically in South Africa, the dominant leadership philosophy is ubuntu, one that emphasises relationships, participative decision-making and concern for the welfare of the group (Nkomo, 2011), that are complimentary with the values and behaviours of responsible leadership.

Methodology

Design

An exploratory qualitative research design was used, which employed the IQA following Northcutt and McCoy's process model (2004). Interactive Qualitative Analysis is a systemic technique intended to capture the essence of phenomena by identifying themes and exploring their cause-and-effect relationships. Interactive Qualitative Analysis was applied in this study to gain primary data about responsible leadership from leaders across South Africa's industries as part of a structured focus group procedure. Interactive Qualitative Analysis focus groups are designed systematically to provide illustrations based on what participants know and have experienced (Du Preez & Du Preez, 2012). Those chosen for the study are participants who are reflective by nature and have expertise (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011); hence, they actively participate in the process of data collection and analysis (Northcutt et al., 2004), and this constitutes a controlled approach to qualitative research.

Interactive Qualitative Analysis marries the phenomenology that focusses on the participant's experience with systems theory and studies how a system functions (Patton, 2015). The collaborative nature of the IQA approach between researchers and participants during data analysis, enhances accuracy and engagement (Holloway, 2017; Larossa, 2005). Mixed methods (qualitative data collection and quantitative analysis) afford more validity and reliability for findings (Elliott et al., 1999; Yin, 2018). The overarching aim is to produce one integrative mind map from experiences shared by members within focus groups to capture the relationships among self-identified variables. Considering IQA as methodology design, typical postmodern issues of trustworthiness, dependability and confirmability are virtually eliminated because of the researcher not interpreting the data. Interactive Qualitative Analysis minimises researcher-participant power differentials (Voegtlin, 2011) and extends the same status level to participants' voices as it does to the researcher's insights.

Population and sample

This IQA focus group study sample comprised of 19 participants, of which 47% were female and 53% were male.

The majority (73%) originated from the private sector, representing retail (*n* = 6), pharmaceutical (*n* = 3), financial, minerals, and telecommunication (2 each), and food services, health, construction, and agriculture (1 each). The average age of the population was 40 years, and participants had been in leadership roles on an average of 13.5 years. Since the total number of respondents fitting this description is not estimated, convenience sampling was performed to target respondents who were in medium- and senior-level leadership positions having 3 years or more of work experience in any industry. The sample design was created to obtain the responses from experienced leaders; then the study adopted IQA's intensive sampling in selecting the respondents. This is a well-adapted phenomena that can show strong examples, such as responsible leadership (Patton, 2015), and it encompasses prior awareness and exploration work. Subjects were recruited through e-mail and were e-mailed in advance about the general topic of the study and its procedure.

Data generation and analysis procedures

The IQA focus group took place over a 5-h duration in an online format. The researcher stated that participants participation indicated consent, though they were able to leave at any stage. Subjects were told that the session would be recorded to facilitate data analysis. The researcher emphasised that there were no incorrect or correct responses and encouraged authenticity among the participants. All invitees received a demographic information sheet to be mailed back to the researcher with assurances of confidentiality, except within the focus group itself. The problem statement of the study was stated, and the participants were made aware of their role both individually and collectively through data collection. The problem went on to ask: (1) what leaders and organisations do or should do environmentally, socially and morally, and (2) how it would know the answer. The IQA guided virtual process includes a series of data analysis steps that are to be conducted in sequence (Behling et al., 2021). These stages are brainstorming and individual exercises, inductive coding, axial coding and theoretical coding.

Brainstorm and individual exercise

The first stage involves data collection, where researchers gather data through the focus group setting. This phase commenced with an issue declaration read out to the focus group as follows: 'Maak and Pless (2006) and Voegtlin (2016) explains responsible leadership as a relational influence course among leaders and stakeholders, setup towards the formation of accountability in matters relating to value conception within an organisational context. Responsible leadership are described as a 'social-relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction'. Today, one has leaders facing varied laws, regulations moral expectations, and on the other hand cumulative demands from several stakeholders to defend behaviour of their organisations. Now tell me what does responsible leadership means to you'. Participants began with a mental imagery exercise, silently brainstorming and reflecting on responsible leadership in their workplace experiences. They were guided with prompts to visualise engaging with and behaving as responsible leaders, thereafter asked to list their thoughts in the meeting chat box.

Inductive coding

The researcher consolidated these individual inputs. The researcher coordinated a group review of the individual inputs, aiming for a shared meaning. Participants organised words and phrases into clusters, known as affinities, referred to as inductive coding within the IQA process. During this clustering stage, participants arranged the thoughts in the meeting chat box via a virtual white board in groups with shared meanings. This continues pending an agreement is reached with the placement of thoughts into affinity groups bearing a collective view.

Axial coding

The second stage involves coding, where the researchers identify key themes or categories in the data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Sandelowski, 2000) referred to as the Affinity Analysis or Axial coding process. The researcher divided participants into smaller groups, assigning each a cluster to name and describe. Descriptions included themes, contrasts, comparisons and examples. The groups reconvened to present their findings, achieving consensus on the affinities' names and descriptions. The final affinity analysis portion is then prepared.

Theoretical coding

Through this phase, the researchers organise the codes into larger themes, formally referred to as Theoretical Coding in the IQA process (Behling et al., 2021). This phase involves interpretation, where the researchers an in-depth analysis the data to draw conclusions about the research topic (Silverman, 2010). In this phase, the researcher divided the group of participants into smaller groups to ascertain influences, in other terms cause-and-effect relationships among identified affinities. The researcher sends an Affinity Relationship Table (ART) to each group, to facilitates the theoretical coding process, based and prepared on the Northcutt and Mccoy (2004) template, based on the number of affinities or themes identified in the previous stage of the IQA process (in this case six themes). Once each group conclude this individual group exercise, bigger groups reconvene, where a scribe of the group present the individual group's ART. Subsequently, the focus group were adjourned in line with the Pareto protocol stipulated by Northcutt et al. (2004), analysis was performed following the focus group by counting the individual relationship codes.

Once the focus group phases are concluded, Pareto protocols and principles are followed based on Northcutt et al. (2004). These data extraction, protocols and analysis include process outputs in the form of the Frequency Table (theoretical focus group coding), the Frequency Ordered Table (focus group theoretical coding), the Frequency Conflict Analysis, the

Interrelationship Diagram (IRD), and the Tentative SID Assignments, at end to construct a Systems Influence Diagram (SID). The SID is built following the systematic process by Northcutt and McCoy (2004, pp. 173–184) that offers the exact steps and rules of constructing the hypothetical model, thereby making it possible for other researchers to replicate it. Lastly, the researcher then drew a mind map of the group's analysis or a hypothetical model of their group's reality. The hypothetical model can be described as a system of response tendencies that the participants revert to in their efforts to deal with the impact of their emotionally absent fathers.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa's School of Business Leadership Research Ethics Review Committee (GSBL CRERC). (No. 2021_SBL_AC_009_FA).

Results

Inductive coding finding

Grounded on the Brainstorm and Individual Exercise phase of the IQA process, 72 key thoughts or words were consolidated by the researcher based on the individual inputs and the inductive coding process. These consequently form the foundation for the Axial coding process.

Axial coding findings

During the Axial coding process, facilitated by the researcher, participants sorted and refined the thoughts 'data' into six themes, using colour blocking to differentiate clusters. The 72 identified words were grouped into these six themes, also referred to as affinities. These findings are illustrated in Table 1, with numbers serving as organisational tools. During this process, each affinity was labelled and described accordingly.

Theoretical coding findings

The IQA frequency tables provide a summary of the frequency and percentage findings of specific themes or codes in a dataset according to Northcutt et al. (2004). Interactive Qualitative Analysis frequency tables can assist by identify common themes and patterns, also compare different cases and outcomes, and explore relationships among themes or clusters (Guest et al., 2012). However, Hennink et al. (2020) have identified some limitations relating to IQA frequency tables; the subjective interpretation of data by the researcher and possible oversimplification of complex qualitative data, which were not identified as concern within this study. The total frequency findings for each affinity pair are displayed in Table 2a and Table 2b. Every set of affinities can have a limit of six relationships, which is the amount of people in the sub-group. For instance, one participant claimed that affinity 1 (Growth) affects affinity 2 (Business Insight) (arrow direction: →), while five participants indicated that affinity 2 affects affinity 1 (arrow direction: ←). In the event where the total

TABLE 1: Affinity illustration and analysis (Axial coding).

Affinities	Description
Theme 1: Growth	As a leader challenging your team by holding you and them accountable, this is created by positioning clear expectations. Through team accountability, leadership gets steered towards empowering people, delegation of workload and tasks in the process and challenge the status quo. This is done in a firm accretive way to drive growth as a team, individual leadership growth as well as growth on outcome (business objectives).
Theme 2: Business insight	Attain the necessary data, knowledge and insights of the business, in a systematic, agile and through paradox navigation approach, to make key decisions to solve business challenges. Not limited to problem solving, but to add value, to drive business excellence and to create win-win situations. Business insight in respect to responsible leadership instil a continuous space of learning and promotes the development of knowledge.
Theme 3: Value	Personal individual values serve as guiding compass for responsible leaders. These values and traits include being vulnerable and transparent, ethical and moral principled, consistent in one's actions, acts honest and with integrity and motivate others while adding value. These identified leadership values are driving behaviours and culture within organisation.
Theme 4: Team mental health	Showing mutual respect towards team members and creating an environment where team members feel comfortable to ask questions and act in a non-judgemental safe space. Making team members feel valued within a team context where feedback is included in their milieu. As a responsible leader one illustrates kindness and care, act fair and calm, have a balanced and unbiased approach, listen and support team members and being flexible and inclusive in decision making and problem solving (this involves elevated levels of emotional intelligence). These leadership behaviour drives organisational culture, mental health in a team context, as well as on an individual level.
Theme 5: Planning	Responsible leadership involves planning to drive efficiencies, achieve objectives, and add value to stakeholders. Leaders develop and guide plans, inspiring creativity and vision. They collaborate with team members, focus on long-term goals, and take ownership and accountability. Responsible leaders adapt plans as needed, instilling contingency planning and maintaining a change-ready, open-minded approach.
Theme 6: Sustainability	Responsible leaders initiate and takes responsibility of motions that provide a sustained long-term goal and result. Responsible leaders create a better sustainable environment for the people coming in after them and are concerned to add value to stakeholders from a sustainability perspective in a broader environmental context and society at large. Responsible leaders drive care in their activities and actions in view of environmental, society and governance environments.

TABLE 2a: Frequency table based on theoretical focus group coding.

Frequency table	
Affinity name	**Possible relationships**
1. Growth	A → B
2. Business insights	A ← B
3. Values	A < > B (No Relationship)
4. Team mental health	
5. Planning	
6. Sustainability	

relationship is not adding up to six, it implies that one of the participants did not foresee any relationship among the affinities (< >). The frequency of each affinity relationship is documented in a spreadsheet, which is then used to compute all the relationships mentioned in the Affinity Relationship Diagrams.

Table 2a, Table 2b and Table 3, based on Northcutt et al. (2004), illustrates the outcome of the affinity pairs frequencies, which were then transferred to the Frequency Order Table findings as shown in Table 4. The frequencies subsequently get ranked in descending order based on the number of relationships between them (from 5 to 67 relationships). The Cumulative Frequency column displays the cumulative count of relationships, while Cumulative

TABLE 2b: Frequency table based on theoretical focus group coding.

Affinity pair relationship	Frequency	Affinity pair relationship	Frequency
1 > 2	0	2 < 5	1
1 < 2	5	2 > 6	5
1 > 3	0	2 < 6	0
1 < 3	5	3 > 4	5
1 > 4	0	3 < 4	0
1 < 4	5	3 > 5	3
1 > 5	1	3 < 5	1
1 < 5	4	3 > 6	5
1 > 6	0	3 < 6	0
1 < 6	4	4 > 5	3
2 > 3	3	4 < 5	2
2 < 3	1	4 > 6	4
2 > 4	1	4 < 6	0
2 < 4	0	5 > 6	4
2 > 5	4	5 < 6	1
Total frequency	-	-	**67**

TABLE 3: Frequency ordered table (focus group theoretical coding).

	Frequency ordered table				
Affinity pair relationship	Frequency sorted (descending)	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent (relation)	Cumulative percent (frequency)	Power
3 > 6	5	5	3.0	7.0	4.0
3 > 4	5	10	7.0	15.0	8.0
2 > 6	5	15	10.0	22.0	12.0
1 < 4	5	20	13.0	30.0	16.0
1 < 3	5	25	17.0	37.0	21.0
1 < 2	5	30	20.0	45.0	25.0
5 > 6	4	34	23.0	51.0	27.0
4 > 6	4	38	27.0	57.0	30.0
2 > 5	4	42	30.0	63.0	33.0
1 > 6	4	46	33.0	69.0	35.0
1 < 5	4	50	37.0	75.0	38.0
4 > 5	3	53	40.0	79.0	39.0
3 > 5	3	56	43.0	**84.0**	40.0
2 > 3	3	59	47.0	88.0	41.0
4 < 5	**2**	**61**	**50.0**	**91.0**	**41.0**
5 < 6	1	62	53.0	92.0	39.0
3 < 5	1	63	57.0	94.0	37.0
2 > 4	1	64	60.0	95.0	35.0
2 < 5	1	65	63.0	97.0	34.0
2 < 3	1	66	67.0	98.0	32.0
1 > 5	1	67	70.0	100.0	30.0
4 < 6	0	67	73.0	100.0	27.0
3 < 6	0	67	77.0	100.0	23.0
3 < 4	0	67	80.0	100.0	20.0
2 < 6	0	67	83.0	100.0	17.0
2 < 4	0	67	87.0	100.0	13.0
1 > 6	0	67	90.0	100.0	10.0
1 > 4	0	67	93.0	100.0	7.0
1 > 3	0	67	97.0	100.0	3.0
1 > 2	0	67	100.0	100.0	0.0
Total frequency	67	Equal total frequency	Equals 100%	Equals 100%	Power = E−D

Note: The bold values are where the cumulative percentage of frequencies reached 80%.

Percent (Relation) column indicates the cumulative percentage of ratios over the total. The Cumulative Percent (Frequency) column stipulates the accumulated percentage of the total relations, while the Power column was calculated by subtracting the cumulative percentage (ratios) from the frequency (cumulative percentage).

Based on and as suggested by Northcutt & McCoy (2004), Pareto's principles were used to select the affinity pairs for the shared mind map construction, which balances maximum variation with minimum relationships. When the cumulative percentage of frequencies reached 80%, the most substantial variance was incorporated in the continuing relationships, and remaining relationships were disregarded. According to the cut-off point illustrated in Table 4, whereby cumulative percentage of the frequencies reached 91.0% in the 15 set of relationships among affinities 4 < 5 that accumulated to 50% of the relationships. All affinity relationships beneath this point ought to be omitted in the composition of the mind map. Therefore, the researcher will utilise the minimum number of relationships indicating the most meaningful amount of variation in this regard.

To ensure exclusion of any ambiguous relationships, Northcutt et al. (2004) recommended evaluating those relationships earmarked in the preceding step to recognise possible conflicts, 'grounded on this'. Table 5 represents the Frequency Conflict Analysis findings, where the affinity relationship pairs get examined and the researcher identified areas where both affinity areas are present (example 1 > 2 and 1 < 2). In this case, affinity pairs 4 < 5 and 4 > 5 were identified. As per the Pareto analysis procedure (Northcutt et al., 2004), the relation that obtained the highest number of indications of the participants should solely be considered. It is evident that the 4 < 5 affinity set consists of a frequency of 2, while 4 > 5 entails frequency of 3. During this circumstance, the 4 < 5 relation will be excluded while the 4 > 5 relation will be included within the construction of the map. During this process, exclusion was only limited to one pairs of relationship (4 < 5), leaving 14 relationship combinations for application within the mind map construction.

In line with Northcutt et al. (2004), the last phase during the Pareto analysis is to inform the mind map; this donates to the IRD, a universal used tool in the IQA process. It assists to visually represent the relationships between the different factors identified during the Pareto analysis procedure (Kashif & Satirenjit, 2022) by mapping out the connections among these factors. Consequently, it becomes easier to understand how they influence each other and the overall problem (Alexander, 2018).

The IRD for the focus group was structured by duplicating every affinity relationship pair in the diagram and calculating the value of Δ (Smuts, 2014). The calculation process is based on counting the number of up arrows or *Outs*, count the number of left arrows or *Ins*, and next subtract the number of *Ins* from the *Outs* to determine the (D) Deltas. Thus, D equals the *Out* minus *In*. In line with De Tommaso et al. (2021), the resulting diagram was arranged in descending delta sequence, at best to present the stance of each affinity within the structure. Table 6 presents these resulting findings via the IRD in decreasing order of Δ. As described by Northcutt et al. (2004), IRD serves as basis for the development of the System Influence Diagram (SID) to distinguish among affinities in

the SID or also referred to as topological zones (Kashif & Satirenjit, 2022).

Grounded on the IRD results, the Tentative SID Assignment table are realised. As evident from Table 7 findings, the growth affinity was found to be the primary determinant of the system, second by sustainability and planning as secondary drivers. The team mental health and values affinities served as secondary outcomes. Business insight emerged as a primary outcome within the system, receiving the greatest influences from other factors. The primary

TABLE 4: Frequency conflict analysis.

Frequency conflict analysis				
Affinity pair relationship	Frequency	Conflict?	Notes	Inclusion criteria
1 < 2	5	-	-	Include
1 < 3	5	-	-	Include
1 < 4	5	-	-	Include
1 < 5	4	-	-	Include
1 < 6	4	-	-	Include
2 > 3	3	-	-	Include
2 > 5	4	-	-	Include
2 > 6	5	-	-	Include
3 > 4	5	-	-	Include
3 > 5	3	-	-	Include
3 > 6	5	-	-	Include
4 < 5	2	?	-	**Exclude**
4 > 5	3	?	Use this one	Include
4 > 6	4	-	-	Include
5 > 6	4	-	-	Include

Note: The bold text are Highlights at what point it gets exclude.

TABLE 5: Interrelationship diagram (version is in descending order of Δ).

Interrelationship diagram – Sorted in descending order of D								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	OUT	IN	D
1	←	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	5	0	5
6	←	↑	↑	↑	↑	■	4	1	3
5	←	↑	↑	↑	■	←	3	2	1
4	←	↑	↑	■	←	←	1	3	-2
3			■		←	←	1	4	-3
2	←	■	←	←	←	←	0	5	-5

TABLE 6: Tentative system influence diagram assignments.

Tentative SID assignments	
1	Growth (Primary driver)
6	Sustainability (Secondary driver)
5	Planning (Secondary driver)
4	Team mental health (Secondary outcome)
3	Values (Secondary outcome)
2	Business insight (Primary outcome)

SID, System Influence Diagram.

and secondary outcomes were equally deemed dependent variables in the system.

The IRD's constant relationships were established among the ellipses by positioning the affinities in their respective topological zones. An arrow was used to represent each relationship, resulting in the formation of the first cluttered version of the SID, illustrated in line with the IQA process (Northcutt et al., 2004). However, this version proved challenging to comprehend as it contained all the relationships. According to Northcutt et al. (2004), the topological zones in this study were rearranged, removing redundant links in the initial cluttered version to steer an uncluttered version as illustrated in Figure 1. This results in enhancing the visibility of links among affinities, making it effortless to recognise. Although specific links or relationships have been eliminated, an indirect pathway from the driver to the outcome may be kept among an intermediate affinity (Northcutt et al.). Authors notice that removing redundant links, poses a noteworthy step in the diagramming process to see that the resulting diagrams are clear and concise.

Northcutt et al. (2004) state that the IQA focus group's primary outcome is the result of the most straightforward and somewhat most informative interpretation of relationships encompassed in the IRD. Thus, a final uncluttered SID, representing the IQA results by means of a SID is indicated in Figure 1. The SID in the IQA process helps to identify primary and secondary drivers that influence a particular phenomenon, in this instance responsible leadership. In this study. the primary driver *Growth* in the SID represent the critical factor that impact responsible leadership under study, while the secondary drivers *Sustainability* and *Planning* explain how the primary drivers influence the system. The secondary outcomes *Team Mental Health* and *Values,* represent the effects of the primary and secondary drivers, while the primary outcome identified as *Business Insight*, represent the ultimate goals of the system.

By identifying these elements and their relationships, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and develop more effective interventions and strategies (Northcutt et al., 2004). Northcutt et al. suggest that the mind map generated from the IQA procedures is a compilation of relationships that creates a coherent illustration of the theory in practice; in this case the conceptualisation of responsible leadership in the context of South African. This illustration signifies the group's
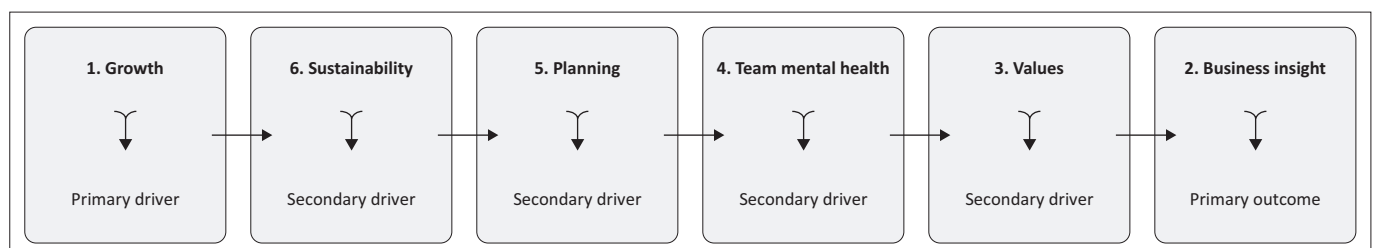

FIGURE 1: System influence diagram (uncluttered version).

comprehension of the significance of a specific phenomenon, in this study being that of responsible leadership.

Discussion

The results of this study in a South African context, are consistent with those of some academic literature concerning the phenomenon of responsible leadership and contribute to both the similarities and specifics about the construct. This coheres with Pless and Maak's (2005) construct of responsible leadership as a moral bond between leaders and stakeholders, where value is identified as an intended outcome of responsible leadership, but not at its core. This suggests that value is both a driver of and an outcome of responsible leadership. In addition, the research underscores that sustainability is a field of action for responsible leadership, which is in line with Pless and Maak (2005). argumentation that responsible leadership focusses on long-term social impacts and value creation. The article further examines the distinct characteristics of responsible leadership, comparing it to global principles and the South African context. As Grobler and Singh (2018) and a host of African scholars have alluded, the philosophical foundation of leadership in Africa, including South Africa, is ubuntu. Ubuntu is focussed on the root, human and collective constituents: group requirements and contentions. Therefore, the identification of responsible leadership conception in South Africa consists of components such as development and team health. Moreover, results pointing to business acumen as the main outcome of ethical leadership Maak, Pless and Voegtlin, (2016) further support Maak, Pless and Voegtlin, (2016) cross-cultural approach. Responsible leaders, they observed, were those who were strategically balancing business performance and insight to create the double bottom line. These research areas of sustainability and planning as elements of responsible leadership align with the larger patina of responsible citizenship, such as corporate responsibility, stakeholder engagement and value-based leadership.

Implications for research and practice

This study on responsible leadership in South African organisational contexts holds significant implications from academic, practical and societal perspectives. Responsible leadership theory encompasses diverse perspectives and lacks consensus regarding its definition and practical application. This study addresses these gaps through empirical research, offering insights that contribute uniquely to both academic scholarship and practical applications within organisational settings.

Academic implication

This research enriches the evolving field of responsible leadership theory by providing a comprehensive conceptualisation. It fills existing gaps in the literature and guides future research efforts (e.g., to serve as foundation for scale development), particularly within the South African context. By enhancing understanding and offering a foundation for future studies, this research aims to advance global discourse on responsible leadership.

Practical implication

From a practical standpoint, the study offers actionable insights for organisational stakeholders. Leaders, managers, and human resource practitioners can utilise these findings to inform decision-making and enhance responsible practices within their respective organisations. This includes developing guidelines, evaluation criteria, and policy frameworks that promote responsible leadership behaviours across sectors.

Societal implication

Beyond organisational settings, this study contributes to societal discussions on responsibility. By highlighting environmental, social and ethical responsibilities of leaders and organisations, it fosters broader awareness and encourages responsible practices across public and private sectors in South Africa. This societal impact aims to mitigate unethical behaviours and promotes sustainable development goals. In summary, this study not only advances theoretical understanding but also offers practical tools and societal benefits, positioning responsible leadership as a critical framework for enhancing organisational effectiveness and societal impact in South Africa and beyond.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Limitations

It's important to recognise some possible limitations to the IQA research methodology, as outlined by Northcutt et al. (2004). These limitations include but are not limited to potential issues with small sample sizes and subjectivity (Bernard et al., 2010), as well as a focus on qualitative data without a clear framework for dealing with conflicting data (Bazeley, 2013; Fryer, 2014). In addition, IQA can present difficulties when accounting for complex systems (Creswell, 2013). Despite these limitations, IQA has shown value in complex systems research (Flick, 2022) and can offer in-depth insights into phenomena that may be challenging to quantify.

Recommendations

Grounded on these results, the recommendation would be to develop a measuring scale or questionnaire that can be applied to study the construct further, within an organisational setting. An instrument based on the primary and secondary drivers, as well as the outcomes resulted in this study, at end enable a form of measurement of responsible leadership within a South African organisational context. Alternatively, the specific responsible leadership drivers and outcomes identified in this IQA study can be incorporated in future qualitative or quantitative research to explore the phenomena further into Africa. More noteworthy examples of IQA research reports have been identified and include those by Behling et al. (2021) and Shaw et al. (2019) that may be applied in such future research.

Conclusion

The research seeks to expand the knowledge of responsible leadership in a South African setting. Based on an inductive approach; IQA insights from respective industry leaders have provided conceptualisation on key characteristics and drivers of responsible leadership. The outcome not only addresses an important research gap, but provides groundwork for developing future measurement tools and interventions across public and private sectors. Based on South Africa perspective, theoretical knowledge and practical applications will therefore be advanced through ongoing scholarly focus on responsible leadership in varied contexts moving forward.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

W.K. contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, resources, writing the original draft and visualisation. A.G. was responsible for supervision, methodology selection, visualisation and writing, review and editing.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials. The data are available from A.G., upon reasonable request.

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