

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

Caring in relational leadership for sustainability

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy (Corporate Strategy).

28 November 2022

ABSTRACT

The population continues to grow despite the continuous depletion of scarce resources, perplexing climate changes and many other related conditions, which are fast converging in an unprecedented fashion to create a complex mix of sustainability issues, thus threatening human survival and endangering environmental preservation for current and future generations. Most CEOs in leading organisations claim to take the issue of sustainability seriously, yet the Triple Bottom Line gap continues to grow indicating an urgent need to identify relevant leadership approaches for sustainability. The purpose of this study was to contribute to existing leadership literature by exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability. The study followed an exploratory qualitative of semi-structured interviews of 12 participants, including two experts across different sustainability focused organisations in a variety of sectors within South Africa. The findings of the study delivered key insights on the benefits of adding ethical values such as caring into relational leadership. It also highlighted potential areas for further exploration, in support of growing efforts towards a better understanding of sustainability leadership. These findings were then translated into a conceptual framework as a potential reference tool for business, practitioners and society at large, as they journey forward towards a sustainable future for all generations.

KEYWORDS

Relational leadership, sustainability, care, ethics of care.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Corporate Strategy at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

28 November 2022

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSI	Corporate Social Investment
ESG	Environment, Social and Governance
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
NDP	National Development Plan
TA	Thematic Analysis
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
SA	South Africa
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SOE	State Owned Entity
UN	United Nations

1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an exploratory research study aimed at getting a deeper understanding of how a particular leadership style could be useful in addressing the complex challenges of sustainability and creating a sustainable environment for all. The study interrogated the benefits of infusing caring as an ethical element into relational leadership for sustainability in sustainability focused organisations within South Africa (SA). This introductory section of the paper presents the context and justification for the research.

1.1 Background to the research problem

The continuous growth in population, waning energy resources, rising water shortages, perplexing climate changes and many other related conditions are intersecting in an unprecedented fashion to create a complex amalgamation of issues of sustainability (Kurucz et al., 2017). The World Economic Forum (2022) survey indicates the environmental risks as the most critical long-term global threats with their potentially devastating impact on people and the planet, through “climate action failure”, “extreme weather events” and “biodiversity loss”. As far back as September 2015, the United Nations (UN) member states committed themselves on behalf of their countries to take appropriate action to protect and preserve the planet and its natural resources for the current and future generations (United Nations, 2015). Through this UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were identified, to be effected within a 15-year period from the 1st of January 2016. The SDGs, also known as the global goals, are a universal call for all country member states to protect the planet and take action against poverty, hunger and discrimination and to stop any actions that are contributing to social, economic and environmental sustainability imbalances (UNDP, 2022).

SA is not immune to global sustainability issues such as climate change, which is fast becoming the most urgent of all (GlobeScan & The SustainAbility Institute by ERM, 2022). The *Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions* (2019) claims that over the last 150 years, human activities have contributed to almost all the increases in greenhouse gases that trap heat in the atmosphere, causing the planet to warmup, and resulting in more unpredictable and severe weather events. SA is unfortunately a noted contributor to this crisis due to its energy-intensive economy that is reliant on coal, resulting in its per capita carbon emissions being disproportionately high (Eberhard et al., 2014). The disastrous

effects of climate change in SA cannot be ignored, with the most recent example of the April 2022 catastrophic KwaZulu Natal floods, which were declared a National State of Disaster, and resulted in the loss of more than 400 people, including 57 school kids and many others who remain unaccounted for (Unicef South Africa, 2022). Another example are the Cape town wildfires, which have seemingly become an annual devastation, where houses are burnt to the ground and families are displaced (van Wilgen & Nicola van Wilgen-Bredenkamp, 2021). Johannesburg hail balls, like the ones reported in 2017, where structures were damaged and roads flooded (Timeslive, 2017), and the Eastern Cape droughts, which started as far back as 2015 (Mahlalela et al., 2020) are a few of the other examples of environmental catastrophes of recent times in SA. It is said that these disasters are a dejected reminder that climate change is already here, it is not a future event but something that is happening now, in this lifetime (Unicef South Africa, 2022), affecting all humanity, demanding all to pause, take note and do something to prevent more catastrophic disasters from materialising.

In 1996, former SA president Thabo Mbeki proudly proclaimed his adoration for the beautiful African “hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land” (SAHO, 2011). These natures’ wonders are disappearing at an alarming rate. Even the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (2007) once made a plea to humanity’s inner conscience to show ubuntu, an African care ethic (Terreblanche, 2018), towards the environment and its species. In his plea, Archbishop highlighted the interconnectedness across all species in the ecosystem, stating that the core existence of humanity is because of the animals and the mountains and other beings that surrounds it. Further stating that a man with no ubuntu is like cancer to the society and the environment at large (Tutu, 2007). Perhaps his plea did not fall on deaf ears, because not long after that, in 2012 South Africa (SA), through its National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, made a commitment to work with business and civil society organisations to prioritise poverty eradication, inequality reduction, job creation and to grow an inclusive economy (StatsSA, 2019). Such an act was forward-looking on the part of SA as it was done before the pronouncement of the SDGs, and these NDP goals are posited to be at 74% alignment with the global goals (StatsSA, 2019; VNR, 2019).

In November 2022, South African president Cyril Ramaphosa announced SA’s R1.5 trillion investment plan to support the country’s five-year energy transition plan, thus cementing SA’s commitment to moving away from fossil fuel dependence to greener sources of energy (Ngcuka, 2022). While SA government’s commitment to the SDGs

has been made clear through its NDP and other initiatives, the question that arises is whether businesses are on par with these plans, because government cannot succeed alone in tackling issues of sustainability. Addressing the complex issues of sustainability requires collaboration of all stakeholders in the ecosystem (Haywood et al., 2019). The 2022 GlobeScan-sustainability leaders survey also showed support for collaboration for sustainability with 40% of the 718 sustainability leaders who participated in the survey opinionating that government should lead the sustainability agenda, and 36% putting the responsibility on the private sector and multi-sectoral collaborations (GlobeScan & The SustainAbility Institute by ERM, 2022). This has revealed the expectation of a shared responsibility across all stakeholders, evidenced by the NGO's global leadership in the sustainability endeavour, which 19% of the surveyed experts assert it is owed mainly to stakeholder engagement and collaboration.

The survey also revealed that companies are expected to act more and talk less, with 21% of the surveyed experts recognising the integration of sustainability agenda into the business strategy as a core and critical driver of success in leading sustainability organisations, with only a handful of such organisations being recognised worldwide for their sustainability success (GlobeScan & The SustainAbility Institute by ERM, 2022). These results support the assertion that Chief Executive Officers (CEO) in leading organisations do not take the issue of sustainability seriously (Eccles & Klimenko, 2019; Hoffman, 2018) because the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) (Marchese et al., 2018) gap continues to grow (Bhattacharya & Polman, 2017).

So, the lingering questions are, is the failure to achieve sustainability success due to leadership attitude towards sustainability or is it their inability to lead for sustainability? These and numerous other questions support the growing claims that modern leaders' conventional approaches to the grand issues of sustainability (Etzion et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) are inefficient (Bhattacharya & Polman, 2017), and should be revamped if any progress is to be made towards tackling the issues of sustainability. It is clear that there is an urgent need for a more profound understanding and identification of new and relevant leadership approaches that would support efforts aimed at tackling sustainability issues (Etzion et al., 2017). In this regard, Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) proposed relational leadership, a leadership style that is grounded on care ethics and morality as a possible solution for directing efforts towards finding a fitting solution for the complicated issues of sustainability (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).

1.2 The research problem

1.2.1 Research problem defined

Sustainability, which for many is synonymous with Sustainable Development, is a set of context specific criteria meant to guide human beings in their socio-ecological interactions within the ecosystems (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019). The concept of sustainability emphasises the vision that humans aim to achieve in environmental, social and economic goals (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019), which are sometimes referred to as the TBL, (Eslami et al., 2019; Fry & Egel, 2021; Marchese et al., 2018). Ferraro et al., (2015), supported by Etzion et al., (2017) as well as Dyllick and Muff, (2016) posit that sustainability linkages are naturally complex with attached uncertainties due to their involvement of multiple domains, in multiple locations and long multiple timeframes, resulting in multiple interpretations and responses from the variety of actors involved. In addition, due to their long-term nature, sustainability efforts have an evaluative characteristic that increases its vulnerability to continuously changing solutions as time progresses and new actors emerge (Ferraro et al., 2015). The many intricacies and interdependencies surrounding sustainability call for a different and unconventional style of leadership, that which is grounded on morality (Fry & Egel, 2021), such as relational leadership for sustainability (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).

Relational leadership, which is purported to be the unconventional leadership style required for sustainability, is understood to be a collective style of leadership that is backed by moral values (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) aiming to promote interaction among impacted individuals (Kurucz et al., 2017) for the achievement of a set goal. However, the question of which moral values are deemed relevant for elevating this leadership style to one that is fit for tackling sustainability issues (Lemoine et al., 2019) remains open. It is on this premise that Nicholson & Kurucz (2019) are inviting scholars to study, “caring in relational leadership for sustainability...in sustainability-focused organizations” (p. 40). It is assumed to be the unconventional style of leadership that is acclaimed to possess key characteristics that are needed for leaders in the modern era, which is consumed with complex and interrelated sustainability challenges (Enqvist et al., 2018). A need for such a study, is also supported by various other authors as indicated in Appendix 1 of this paper.

1.2.2 Research purpose

1.2.2.1 Academic purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore how caring as an added ethical element in relational leadership could assist leaders in addressing sustainability issues. The chief intention of this study was to contribute to the leadership literature which intends to uncover new and unconventional leadership styles that could potentially address the complex issues of sustainability (Etzion et al., 2017; Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).

1.2.2.2 Business purpose

The mounting pressure on corporate to show their contribution towards the fight against sustainability issues by incorporating all the critical environmental and social elements into their business requires business leadership to shape up for this challenge by creating a win-win solution for society, the planet and the business itself through appropriate leadership approaches for sustainability (Sasse-Werhahn et al., 2020). Therefore, in a business context, this study aims to provide the understanding of potential benefits of injecting moral and ethical values (Lemoine et al., 2019), such as caring into relational leadership (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), to assist business in addressing the notably increasing TBL gaps (Bastini et al., 2021), which are negatively impacting on investor confidence (Eccles & Klimenko, 2019).

1.2.3 Research objectives

The objectives of this research were two pronged. Firstly, it intended to explore the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability. Secondly, it sought to explore whether there is a problem in the absence of caring in relational leadership for sustainability and whether adding care to relational leadership is an appropriate action for addressing issues of sustainability in sustainability focused organisations within South Africa.

1.3 Research question

The research intended to answer the following research question and related sub-questions:

1. What is the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability?
 - 1.1. How will adding care assist practitioners to understand relational leadership better?

1.2. What is the problem of not having care in relational leadership?

Key constructs: relational leadership, sustainability and care.

1.4 Scope of the research

The scope of this research study was focused on getting a deeper understanding of the effect of accentuating “caring” as a prominent ethical element in relational leadership for sustainability. The scope will be limited to leaders in sustainability focused organisations in South Africa.

1.5 Research contribution

1.5.1 Theoretical contribution

The study was conducted with a principal aim to contribute to the relational leadership literature as a response to a call by Nicholson and Kurucz (2019), who asserted that such a study will enable them to validate and corroborate the relational leadership supportive elements of their research study. Furthermore, because the study was conducted through a South African lens, its outcomes will potentially offer valuable insights to the business ethics literature by providing a South African rooted perspective on ethics of care to the relational leadership literature, which is largely dominated by Western philosophical concepts (Haar et al., 2019; Pérezts et al., 2020). Moreover, another potential contribution to the sustainability literature through this study is in the form of new insights uncovered and triangulated from the multi-sectoral viewpoint on relational leadership with care in sustainability focused organisations within SA, because there appeared to be no such study combining all the three sectors in the reviewed literature.

1.5.2 Practical contribution

From a business perspective, the study outcomes could assist business and other leadership practitioner in understanding a different leadership style of addressing sustainability issues (Etzion et al., 2017), such as a care infused relational leadership (Lemoine et al., 2019) for sustainability. If proven appropriate, such a leadership style could potentially provide the following benefits:

- Highlight the importance of recognising and honouring humanness in every being and their contribution towards sustainability;

- Reimagine the current destructive business practices by introducing innovative solutions with less impact on the eco-system;
- Integrate sustainability into core business strategies; and
- Contextualise and align sustainability issues with country specific requirements.

1.6 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the basis and justification of the study which explored the influence of care in relational leadership for addressing the complex challenges of sustainability in sustainability focused organisations in SA. The growing population set against the diminishing natural resources are calling for all humanity to do something. Governments are expected to collaborate with business and civil society organisations to find suitable solutions for the intricate and complex sustainability challenges. The SA government seems to be making positive strides through its sustainability friendly policies, but it needs the help of business and wider society to achieve its goals. Most CEOs of certain leading organisations claim to be embracing sustainability requirements in their businesses, but the growing TBL gap indicates a lack of understanding of the appropriate leadership style for sustainability. Hence, a call for scholars to investigate potential leadership styles that could be suitable in addressing this lingering leadership challenge for sustainability, which is what this study has responded to.

1.7 Outline of the research report

The paper is constituted of seven sections, also referred to as chapters. Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter that was discussed in the preceding section and presented the basis and justification of the study. The rest of the paper is divided into six chapters as follows:

- Chapter 2: this chapter focusses on an in-depth review of the literature, covering the key concepts and constructs that enabled the researcher to address the research study questions;
- Chapter 3: this chapter presents the main research question for the study, with supporting sub-questions;
- Chapter 4: this chapter details the research methodology that was applied in this study to answer the research question and sub-questions presented in Chapter 3;
- Chapter 5: this chapter outlines an in-depth analysis of the key research findings from the study;

- Chapter 6: this chapter presents a thorough discussion of the findings and outcomes from the analysis presented in chapter 5. This is done in contrast to the insights uncovered from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2; and
- Chapter 7: this is a conclusion chapter. It presents the proposed framework that emerged from the results of reviewed literature in Chapter 2, combined with the findings and discussions of the findings in Chapters 5 and 6. It further outlines study conclusions and limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

2 CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This section presents an in-depth review of the literature covering the key concepts and constructs that enabled the researcher to address the study's research questions. The key constructs are sustainability, relational leadership and care. The review provides an overview of the key definitions from the reviewed literature to form a common foundational understanding of the relevant definitions for this study. Incorporating a South African perspective, the review further explores opinions and arguments across all three constructs, reflecting on the importance of caring as a moral value that would drive society to be mindful of the impact of their actions for the benefit of both the current and future generations. The review further delves into relational leadership as a potential leadership for sustainability and concludes with a discussion that explores the combination of all three constructs in response to the key research question of what the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability is. Figure 1 presents a pictorial view of the structure of this chapter.

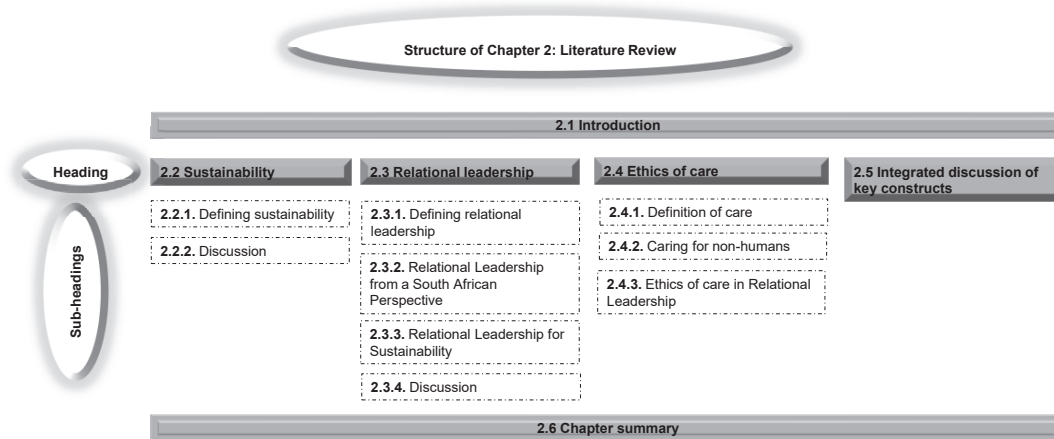


Figure 1. Structure of Chapter 2: Literature review (Source: Author)

2.2 Sustainability

2.2.1 Defining sustainability

Sustainability, which others refer to as regenerative sustainability (Gibbons, 2020), is a concept with a variety of interpretations (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) and context specific uses (Purvis et al., 2019), with no single agreed-upon definition (Eslami et al., 2019). This is problematic in validating a study (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019), and thus

necessitates that it be defined to provide a theoretical foundation and context for this study.

Salas-Zapata and Ortiz-Muñoz (2019) have suggested four definitions of Sustainability as depicted in figure 2 below.

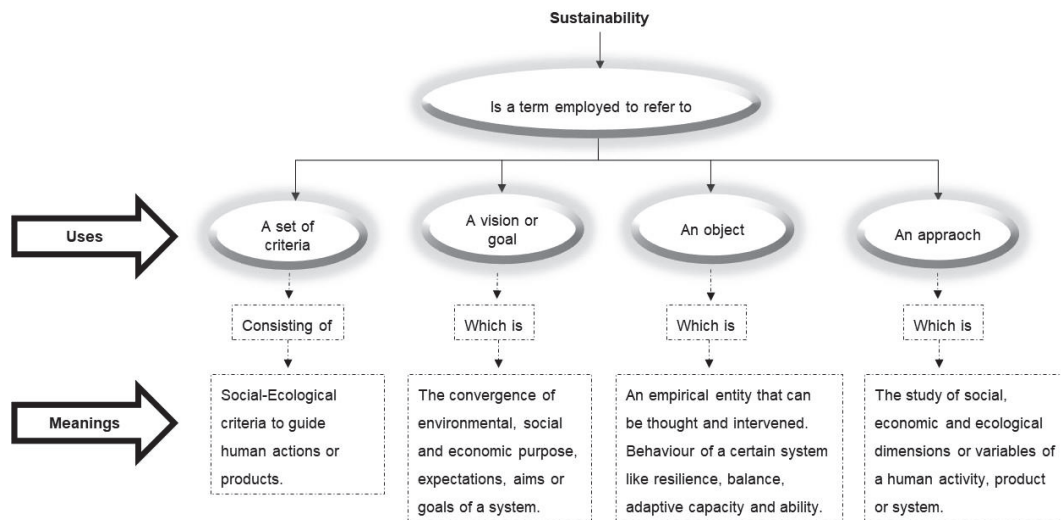


Figure 2. Uses and meanings of the concept of sustainability
(Source: Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019)

The first definition interprets sustainability as a set of criteria meant to guide human beings in their interaction with ecosystems (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019). While similar to the first definition in considering socio-ecological system interactions, the second definition emphasises the vision that humans aim to achieve in environmental, social and economic goals (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019), which others refer to as the TBL, (Eslami et al., 2019; Fry & Egel, 2021; Marchese et al., 2018) which holistically encompasses People, Profit and Planet (Martins et al., 2019). From this definition, Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz (2019) further suggest that Sustainable Development, which is defined as “meeting the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (Brundtland, 1987, p. 292), could also be taken to have the same meaning as sustainability or corporate sustainability (Sasse-Werhahn et al., 2020). Thus, providing a justification for the extensive interchangeable use of these two terms, (Eslami et al., 2019; Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019).

The third definition refers to sustainability as an object portraying certain behaviours or attributes, such as resilience and the ability to maintain the social-ecological systems,

regardless of disruptions (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019). The last definition refers to an approach for studying environmental, social, and economic variables of certain systems (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019).

The glaring commonalities across these definitions, support the assertion that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019). However, for clarity and to eliminate ambiguity, this research was more aligned with the second definition, which is inclusive of the basic elements from the first definition and supports the synonymous use of sustainability with sustainable development and emphasises a need for humans to be mindful of the impact of their actions by ensuring that the fulfilment of their current needs does not jeopardise those of future generations.

2.2.2 Discussion

Purvis et al. (2018) suggest that sustainable development in its basic form refers to development that is sustainable, however the opposite meaning seems to have dominated, resulting in a multitude of societal and environmental difficulties in the form of unemployment, poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, extreme weather events, and others. As early as the 1970s concerns were raised about the continuous pursuit of economic growth for short-term gains, which relied on limitless extraction of finite planet resources with detrimental ecological impacts. Thus, arguing for a basic needs approach, with more consideration for societal and environmental problems against this never-ending, interminable chase for economic growth (Purvis et al., 2019).

The raging debates over the years for and against economic growth led to the emergence of various terms that are meant to the recognition of human and environmental needs in pursuit for economic development (Iqbal et al., 2020). After some time, the debate eventually matured with a recognition of the interdependency of all elements in the ecosystem, thus calling for a win-win solution of a forceful growth through socially and environmentally sustainable acts (Iqbal et al., 2020), termed “sustainable development”, a term credited to the Brundtland report for its popularity (Christie et al., 2019; Martins et al., 2019; Purvis et al., 2019). The interdependence of the sustainability elements stems from the simplistic premise that “poverty causes environmental degradation; this environmental degradation can be reduced by reducing poverty; to reduce poverty, developing countries need economic growth” (Purvis et al., 2019, p. 685).

The mirage pursuit for sustainability has since continued with little or no evidence of poverty alleviation, amongst other issues. To the contrary, the gap between the rich and

poor has widened, leading to the introduction of the UN's SDGs, which are intended to address these challenges (Iqbal et al., 2020) and build momentum towards tackling the mounting challenges of sustainable development (Martins et al., 2019). The SDGs, which are applicable to all types of institutions, are meant to encourage social trust amongst all stakeholders in the ecosystem, in pursuit for the delicate balance (Eslami et al., 2019) of the interwoven tripartite pillars of sustainability, which are economic growth for social development, though environmental provision (Eslami et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2020). Whilst the widely adopted definition of sustainability is generally known to focus on the three elements of society, business and the environment, Eslami et al. (2018) argue for an even broader definition to encourage buy-in from a larger audience for the pursuit of sustainability goals, further contending that the three dimensions limit creativity and innovation.

Martins et al. (2019) argue for the inclusion of a cultural aspect, which they contend would play a crucial role in aid companies in achieving their sustainability success. The assertion for a cultural inclusion is also supported by Marchese et al. (2018), who posit that, in the community development context, sustainability is usually coupled with traditional approaches to resource usage and environmental practices, which are largely based on cultural beliefs. Sustainability requires that organisation view nature as a core element of their business innovation and that they should abandon their quest for short-term gains in exchange for ethically sustainable long-term benefits for the planet, the society and the business itself (Iqbal et al., 2020). Essentially, sustainability is aimed at improving the quality of life (Marchese et al., 2018), particularly with respect to social, economic and environmental considerations for all generations. The social dimension of sustainability implores business, in pursuit for profit, to consider the welfare of their immediate stakeholders, including the employees, customers and the community where they operate. On the environmental front, organisations are urged to consider the negative impact of their operations on the environment, in pursuit of economic sustainability, which is the third dimension, referring to the company's ability to be profitable (Martins et al., 2019).

The definitions and discussion provided in the two preceding sections form a foundational base and understanding of sustainability as a construct for this research and why Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) found it appropriate to motivate for a research study on the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability. The next section delves into what relational leadership is about and its relevance for this study.

2.3 Relational leadership

The continuous growth in population, waning energy resources, rising water scarcity, perplexing climate changes and many others related conditions, are converging in an unprecedented fashion to form a complex amalgamation of issues of sustainability (Kurucz et al., 2017). Such challenges call for a collective transdisciplinary approach that is multi-level, which goes with the saying of “think global, act local”; multi-sectoral, including civil society, business and governments; and multi-disciplinary, involving social and scientific academic disciplines (Kurucz et al., 2017), as also proposed in the SDG 2030 Agenda (Fourie, 2018). However, achieving triumph in the coherent integration of all these actors is not easy, especially for a highly politicised, developing country like SA (Fourie, 2018). Successful collaboration of all the various disciplines at various levels calls for a different and unconventional style of leadership, a leadership that is grounded in ethics and morality (Fry & Egel, 2021), such as relational leadership (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Building on the foundational analysis of sustainability from the previous section, this section aims to provide an understanding of why relational leadership is proposed as the style of leadership needed to address sustainability issues.

2.3.1 Defining relational leadership

Relational leadership is another type of leadership style that has gained popularity in the literature, resulting in several definitions or associations with no single agreed upon definition (Kinder et al., 2021). A few definitions have been discovered from the reviewed literature, as depicted in figure 3, with some authors asserting that the term was introduced in the early 2000’s (Kurucz et al., 2017; McCauley & Palus, 2021) and made famous in 2006 by Prof. Mary Uhl-Bien, (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Ruppert-Winkel, 2018) in her relational leadership theory.

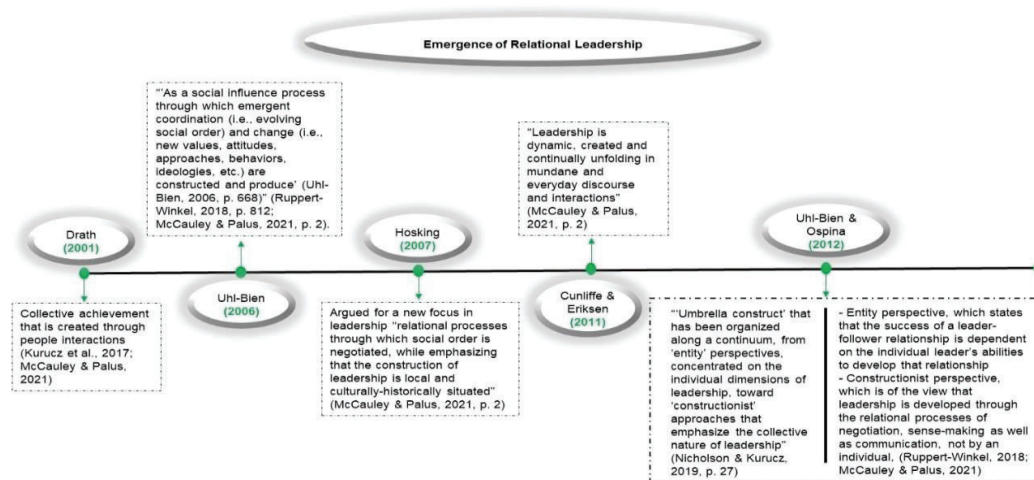


Figure 3. Timeline of Relational Leadership emergence and definitions (Source: Author)

Relational leadership, which others call democratic or some form of a leader-member exchange style of leadership (Kinder et al., 2021), could be described as a visionary, courageous and empowering (Kinder et al., 2021) leadership style that is grounded on the theory of morals (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), promoting co-creation of social processes (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Ruppert-Winkel, 2018), as well as integration of societal principles and strategies (Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Ruppert-Winkel, 2018), in a purposeful and caring manner (Kinder et al., 2021), for the collective achievement of set goals. It is a reflective and transformational style of leadership that takes an unconventional view of leadership as a collective approach emanating from the relationships created through the various connections among the impacted stakeholder group (Kurucz et al., 2017).

Having provided the foundational definition of relational leadership within the context of this paper, the next subsection extends this definition by providing a South African perspective of relational leadership.

2.3.2 Relational leadership from a South African perspective

African and South Africans specifically take pride in their rich culture and traditions (Terreblanche, 2018), and this extends to how they conduct themselves in and outside of the business environment, which is also reflected in their leadership which is largely characterised by family and social networks (Pérezts et al., 2020). Their leadership practices are generally rooted on kinship and coherence (Stenseke, 2018), which binds an individual to others on the understanding that "I am because we are", largely known as the African values of Ubuntu (Pérezts et al., 2020; Terreblanche, 2018). Ubuntu at its

core recognises humanness in every being as well as interconnected and interdependence of these beings, in that a leader's success is seen as critically dependent on how they relate to their followers. Most importantly and of relevance to this study is that Ubuntu stretches beyond living beings to include everything on the planet that humanity is bound to (Pérezts et al., 2020; Terreblanche, 2018), thus calling for care and respect to be extended to all living and non-living beings on the planet (Terreblanche, 2018). It is asserted to hold "potential for a global alternative to western environmentalism, which has not been able to halt gross environmental abuse" (Terreblanche, 2018, p. 1818). Essentially, Ubuntu encourages harmony and relatedness between leaders and followers and all species in pursuit of a common good, such that leaders who fail to relate are largely seen as unethical or suffering from ethical myopia (Pérezts et al., 2020). Through Ubuntu, Terreblanche (2018) posits that in its very own traditional culture, Africa has roots of an ethical solution to resolve the global environmental predicament.

Having provided the definition of relational leadership within the context of this paper, and through a South African lens, the next subsection aims to demonstrate how this style of leadership could be applied in addressing issues of sustainability.

2.3.3 Relational leadership for sustainability

Leadership, which is suggested to be intrinsically relational, is asserted to be ill-defined and ill-understood (Kinder et al., 2021). It plays a critical role in sustainable development due to its influence on the general mindset and mood (Iqbal et al., 2020) of the emotional actors involved. In a case for a developing, democratic country like SA, leadership means going beyond the expected, and extends to include awareness campaigns and lobbying for political will or buy-in at various levels of leadership and across different structures, including business, civil society and communities, to increase chances of success for country-level initiatives, such as those related to sustainable development (Fourie, 2018). Sustainability, which is understood to reflect issues related to the co-existence of humanity, the environment and every other being on the planet (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Wang et al., 2017), as well as the usage of limited resources for the benefit of both the current and future generations (Fry & Egel, 2021; Kurucz et al., 2017), is a complex phenomenon, demanding unconventional thinking and management practices (Fry & Egel, 2021; Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Kurucz et al. (2017) posit that the complex issues of sustainability are simply rooted in integration, because most traditional leaders fail to understand or recognise the interdependencies among the

variables within the ecosystem and the complexity resulting from such connections (Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). This study aims to contribute to the ongoing endeavours aimed at uncovering a leadership approach that would be deemed relevant for sustainability, which relies on the basic human understanding and acceptance that “A human being is a part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space” (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018, p. 1430) therefore the time and space limitation of this part is largely dependent on how humanity connects and relates with it.

2.3.4 Discussion

Relational leadership is posited to be a destructive style that would challenge and reconstruct the conventional leadership styles (McCauley & Palus, 2021), for the achievement of evolving sustainability goals. Relational leadership does not recognise individualism for leadership - it is an umbrella term that views leadership as a collective effort that emerges from new and existing, formal and informal interactions and relationships (Kurucz et al., 2017; McCauley & Palus, 2021). Because the complexity surrounding sustainability challenges is presumed to be stemming from a lack of proper integration of the many moving parts in the ecosystem and alignment of the intentions of impacted stakeholders in the ecosystem, their resolution requires “an ongoing process of reflective practice and collective mean-making among relevant social actors” (Kurucz et al., 2017, p. 190).

The added complication in this process is that ecosystems do not necessarily have a central leader, they are self-organising and rely on teaming and collaboration for the achievement of set goals (Kinder et al., 2021). The UN 2030 agenda through SDG 17 also recognises this intricacy by explicitly emphasising a need for collaboration between government, business and civil society for the successful achievement of sustainability goals (Haywood et al., 2019). Healthy partnerships and collaborations are therefore critical success factors for the achievement of multi-level global goals, meaning SA must also follow suit in its pursuit of sustainability related goals such as those tabled in the NDP and Agenda 2063 (Haywood et al., 2019).

Relational leadership is a leadership style that is geared towards the creation of a platform that enables teams to co-create solutions to challenges in a meaningful manner (Kurucz et al., 2017; McCauley & Palus, 2021). Co-creation for sustainability requires trusting relationships, which are based on transparency, trust and mutual respect (Fourie, 2018), as characterised by relational leadership. This leadership style is based on the notion that leadership sprouts from communication, negotiation and sense-

making, thus making it the ideal leadership style for the complex and continuously evolving issues of sustainability (McCauley & Palus, 2021). Another key trait of relational leadership which is crucial in the context of sustainability is its recognition of leadership as locally and culturally-historically formed (McCauley & Palus, 2021), thus supporting Martins et al. (2019) and Marchese et al. (2018)'s argument for the acknowledgement of cultural and traditional elements in sustainability because for relational leadership to be successful, impacted actors would need to have an appreciation of the various cultural beliefs and traditions of all stakeholders in the ecosystem. This is because the integration of values and social norms is critical as a key motivator of action in any setting, especially if influencing societal transformations is on the agenda (Broman et al., 2017), such as the pursuit for sustainable development.

Sustainability issues are an urgent threat to all humanity; they require people to collaborate for fitting solutions, and this collaborations requires new leadership competencies that relational leadership promotes (Broman et al., 2017). Furthermore, Broman et al. (2017) posit that if one were to select the ones most critical component for building a sustainable future, it will have to be leadership. The type of leadership that not only promotes co-creation of solutions, but also recognises leaders who are in tune with their emotions and are mindful of the impact of their actions on the TBL factors (Fry & Egel, 2021). These are unconventional leaders, whose reflective and transformational style of leadership is based on morality and promote integration of societal principles and strategies and democratic decisioning for the collective achievement of goals (Kurucz et al., 2017). This is what relational leadership is about and is the reason for its nomination as the appropriate style of leadership for sustainability.

2.4 Ethics of care

This section introduces the ethics of care as a key construct that integrated relational leadership with sustainability within the context of this study and the related research questions. It starts with a definition of the term "care" and then extends the definition to look at the application of care towards the non-human in the universe, as a key requirement for sustainability.

2.4.1 Definition of care

"Rather than asking how do we gain the capacity to care, and how do we learn to take the point of view of the other and overcome the pursuit of self-interest, we are prompted to ask instead: how do we lose the capacity to care, what

inhibits our ability to empathise with others and pick up the emotional climate, and how do we fail to register the difference between being in and out of touch? And most painfully, how do we lose the capacity to love?” (Gilligan, 2014, p. 90).

Caring as a concept is broadly understood to mean the act of nurturing something or someone (Enqvist et al., 2018) to protect or preserve its wellbeing (West et al., 2018). It is something naturally formed from childhood, from caring and being cared-for by those around us (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), leading to the assertion that it is natural for all beings to expect to be treated with kindness and compassion, from a reciprocal anticipation and belief that it is everyone’s life purpose to help others (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018). Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) describe caring as a process, which emphasises humility in learning about self and others. Various definitions of caring have emerged from the reviewed literature, depicting important themes of relevance to study. Table 1 provides a summary of these definitions and emerging themes.

Table 1. Definitions of care from reviewed literature

Definition of “Care”	Key Themes
“A consciousness of our interconnectedness with the world” (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019, p. 27).	Interconnectedness; Sustaining life; Maintaining a healthy environment; Emotions; Well-being of others
“Sustaining life, including future generation... maintaining a healthy environment” (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019, p. 27).	
“Focuses our attention to what is going on in the world with an emotional consideration of the well-being of others” (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019, p. 28).	
“Motivated by feeling with and for the other” (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019, p. 28).	Feeling
“‘Looking after’ something or someone” (Enqvist et al., 2018, p. 25).	Looking after something or someone
“The ability to literally ‘put oneself in the shoes of the other’” (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018, p. 1429).	Empathy
A crucial example of a relational value (West et al., 2018).	Relational value; Looking after something; Concern for wellbeing
“‘Looking after’ something, infused with an attentive interest and concern for its wellbeing” (West et al., 2018, p. 31).	
Denotes both the emotional concern as well as the practical act “that seek to tend to another’s needs (with or without benefit to oneself), be the other a human or a non-human entity” (Jax et al., 2018, p. 23).	Tend to another; Human or a non-human; Feelings

Definition of “Care”	Key Themes
“Care-oriented approaches emphasise dependencies, reciprocity and the highly relational character of human life” (Jax et al., 2018, p. 24)	Dependency; Reciprocity; Relational
“Pays more attention to people's needs, to how actual relations between people can be maintained and repaired” (Carmeli et al., 2017, p. 1381)	People's needs; Relations
“Having certain dispositions and feelings with a focus on sympathy, compassion, and concern for the well-being of all” (Fry & Egel, 2021, p. 12)	Feelings; Sympathy; Compassion;
“Attention to one's presence in the world... active involvement with other powerless stakeholders that are morally relevant in terms of distance in time or space” (Fry & Egel, 2021, p. 12)	Concern for wellbeing for all

(Source: Author)

At face value, the care definitions presented in Table 1 differ, however, the identified themes provide a thread that reflects what appears to be commonalities behind these definitions, ranging from empathic feelings to compassion, which is the actual application of actions induced by the said feelings towards both humans and non-humans (Jax et al., 2018). For the purposes of this study, the term care or caring could generally be defined as feelings of sympathy and compassion (Fry & Egel, 2021) that propels one to selflessly (Jax et al., 2018) act with the intention of protecting or nurturing something or someone (Enqvist et al., 2018) in order to preserve its wellbeing (West et al., 2018) for the benefit of all humans and non-humans in the current as well as future generations (Fry & Egel, 2021; Jax et al., 2018; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019).

2.4.2 Caring for non-humans

Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) state that caring demands that humanity pays attention to their behaviour and existence in the world, emphasising the importance of empathy and feelings in the establishment of ideologies that are meant to guide human actions. Gilligan (2014) posits that empathy is an age-old and innate part of human evolution and a critical attribute that defines humanity (Jax et al., 2018), which, with caring, connects humans to mother nature and is vital for the survival of all species. Lithoxidou et al. (2017) agrees with this statement by suggesting that modern values that guide human behaviour need to change in order to accommodate environmental requirements (Christie et al., 2019), further citing that caring and empathy are fundamental elements to enable this change, which will help humanity recognise their interrelationship with

nature and begin to regard it with the love and respect it deserves. Empathy heightens humans' inherent characteristic of selflessness, which enables one to prioritise the needs of other beings over their own (Jax et al., 2018; Lithoxidou et al., 2017), and is noted as a critical attribute on which eco-centricity is based. Terreblanche (2018) further posits that human's inability to care is due to the lack of wanting (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018), which requires a mindset shift and renewed worldviews that are based on new communal ethos, such as Ubuntu, that recognise and emphasise the inseparable connection between humans and nature.

Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) further suggest that in order to overcome the "lack of wanting" humans are naturally pushed to act because of the ethical calling to care, which is understood to be a portrayal of "our best selves and relations" (p. 28). In this instance, natural caring is differentiated from ethical caring, be it for the environment or other beings, in that, natural caring is voluntarily extended to the other without coercion (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018) whereas ethical caring is offered out of duty to care because that is what is socially expected as a sign of humanity (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). In SA, when talking about ethics and relationships, Ubuntu often takes a centre stage because of its promotion of healthy relationships and the upholding of morality in communities and most importantly, which is of relevance to this study, because it also recognises the interconnectedness of relationships between the living and the non-living (Terreblanche, 2018).

Feminist philosophers introduced care ethics (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) to give a voice to the voiceless, who were at risk of being unjustly treated (Jax et al., 2018), such as the non-human species. While some may see "caring" as mainly focussed on people's need and relations (Carmeli et al., 2017), the ethic of care extends beyond people, it requires one to acknowledge their existence and co-existence with other beings within the universe (Jax et al., 2018; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). It also stresses the importance of taking care of the environment that feeds and houses all beings, if the expectation is for the environment to provide for the needs of all through eternity (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). Thereby, cementing a claim that "a necessary condition to become care-givers is to acknowledge one's own condition as care-receivers" (Jax et al., 2018, p. 24). Such an ask highlights a reality of interconnectedness of humans and non-humans in their sharing of the space and resources within the universe, which translates into a moral and ethical duty of all to reciprocally care for one another (Fry & Egel, 2021; Jax et al., 2018).

Jax et al. (2018) further theorise that in recognising interconnectedness of humans and nature (Fry & Egel, 2021), care ethics reflect the traditional beliefs of many indigenous communities who are of the view that nature elements, such as the sea, the mountains and the like, are also living beings and deserve the same level of respect and adoration as that afforded to humans (Chan et al., 2018). However, such an ideal seems to differ from the “norm” or the western ideology that views humans as more superior to the non-human (Jax et al., 2018; West et al., 2018), which could explain the level of care given to natural environment or the less superior. This research study calls for the recognition of caring as a multifaceted ethical and moralistic relational value that extends beyond humans to include non-humans as well all past and future generations. In essence, it is a call to “recouple humankind and ‘nature’ in order to meet global sustainability challenges” (Stenseke, 2018), in a more caring and relational manner.

2.4.3 Ethics of care in relational leadership

Care ethics direct individuals’ attention to what is happening around them, with more emphasis on the consideration of interconnectedness of all beings within the universe, and an emotional need for one to recognise their existence in relation to others (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Care is also defined in the previous section as including emotional elements of sympathy, which simply means “to suffer with” (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018, p. 1428) and compassion, which refers to the roots that binds all beings through “a Higher Power, God, the Universe, Nature or a Life Force” (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018, p. 1430). Therefore, a caring leader is one who is able to embody such emotions in their leadership style, not only to the living but to all beings in the universe. One who understands that humans are emotional beings and therefore would be comfortable with a display of caring practices in their decision-making endeavours (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), thereby encouraging others to do the same.

Ethical leadership is intertwined with virtuous words, such as care, justice, and fairness (Newstead et al., 2020). Thus, relational leadership with care could also be viewed through the ethical leadership lens, which encourages followers to voice their opinions, a two-way communication between leaders and followers and also promotes respect and care in the treatment of followers (Lemoine et al., 2019; Solinger et al., 2020). Caring in this instance is highlighted as a key element of relational leadership because it carries the emotional elements that are necessary for a new generation of leaders who recognise and appreciate the intricate interconnectedness off all within the ecosystem (Fry & Egel, 2021). These are the type of leaders who are said to not only be good for society but critical for sustainability (Lemoine et al., 2019) due to their selfless concern

for the well-being of others, including non-humans. Of course, it is only fair and prudent to acknowledge concerns that have been raised by critics of ethical leadership, who claim that it is controlling and judgemental (Solinger et al., 2020). However, its defenders say ethical leaders are not necessarily controlling or judgemental but have dual personalities of a “moral person” who has integrity and is caring and a “moral manager”, who is a role model of ethical behaviour, and, if necessary, punishes unethical behaviour (Solinger et al., 2020), as would be expected of anyone in a leadership role.

Care infused relational leadership is grounded on the humane ethical values of dignity, fairness and well-being (Rosenberg, 2022), which promote reciprocal practices of living in harmony with others (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Such leaders with a relational view appreciate the interconnected web of relationships and value the functioning of organs of the ecosystem as a collective and hold no single individual accountable for any outcomes but promote the understanding that achievements are accomplished in a collective fashion (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Ruppert-Winkel, 2018). This is the modern style of leadership for sustainability which incorporates ethics of care and compassion (Fry & Egel, 2021) and is the subject of explorations for this research study, which questions the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability.

2.5 Integrated discussion of key constructs

Sustainability, which is universally known as acting on the conscience of meeting today’s needs without compromising the future generation’s needs, is a topic of concern for many stakeholders (Sasse-Werhahn et al., 2020) including governments, business and civil society, leading to sizable investments towards initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation, economic development and environmental protection (Etzion et al., 2017). Fundamentally, these wide-ranging and intricate issues of sustainability such as poverty, illiteracy, social injustices, climate change, and many other forms of environmental degradation are wicked problems (Etzion et al., 2017). They are coined as such because they are full of unknowns, with numerous interdependencies, thus rendering the conventional management style largely ineffective (Etzion et al., 2017; Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). The SGDs were tabled as an attempt to provide much needed guidance on how to navigate these issues against economic development and other societal requirements. They represent a global contract of the recognition of critical need to protect the natural conditions and also ensure the wellbeing of all humanity (Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). However, at the rate things are going there will soon be nothing to protect, because humanity is continuously and endlessly taking from mother nature

faster than it can replenish what has been taken (Enqvist et al., 2018; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). Such threats suggest an urgent need to implement a shift or change in modern values and attitudes towards pro-environmental and sustainability values of care (Christie et al., 2019).

The progressive view of sustainable development emphasises concerns about the global economic growth, more especially its implications on social and environmental outcomes as well as issues of governance (Sasse-Werhahn et al., 2020), which require a rethinking of social and individual values that support and validate interests and practices (Christie et al., 2019) of humanity. Transitioning to sustainable behaviours is not expected to be an easy process, it will require radical development of new pathways that will embrace and foster joint action and social movements that encourage fundamental behavioural and value system shifts such as limiting the scale of consumption to that which is adequate for climate change mitigation and survival within planetary limits (Christie et al., 2019; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). Fundamentally it requires wisdom, which not only integrates knowledge with values but also includes “discernment for seeking the moral good and forms virtuous habits facilitating the cultivation of an art of living well, individually and collectively” (Sasse-Werhahn et al., 2020, p. 56).

The SDGs are supposedly meant to promote societal principles that could be applied in decision-making and reflected in daily behaviours, such as the treatment of the environment’s waning resources; ethics and morality; selflessness and a sense of community’s consideration of all beings, not just the living; and economic value as a means and not an end, amongst others (Christie et al., 2019). However, because nature is viewed and valued in very different and often contradictory ways (Pascual et al., 2017), it is critical that for sustainability to be successful, there has to be appreciation of local differences and contextual translations based on various value sets, cultures and traditions (Christie et al., 2019), which are intertwined with nature (Stenseke, 2018). These and other conditions add to the complexity of achieving sustainability success, which supports the assertion that managing for sustainability requires new and unconventional approaches that demonstrate key aspects of cultural identity, social cohesion and moral responsibility towards mother nature and are based on ethics of care, such as Ubuntu, which is an African interpretation of a care ethic, also known to be an eco-centric ethic that propels those who abide by it to treat nature and the environment with the utmost care and respect (Terreblanche, 2018). This is because, whilst nature may not have a human voice, it still has a say in how it wants to be treated and cared for (West et al., 2018) and should therefore not be ignored when it speaks.

The care ethic assists with the integration of the various layers of relationships between humanity and the environment (Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). Caring for mother nature could also be demonstrated through reciprocal behaviour between humans and the environment (West et al., 2018) and the appreciation that humanity's existence could very well be defined by their coexistence with other species and that one who takes from nature must also give back to nature (Jax et al., 2018). And one who benefits from nature's resources must also see to it that those resources are replenished (Jax et al., 2018). The majority of approaches that care about the environment share an opposing view to the western belief that humans are autonomous beings, and instead uphold the highly relational character of human life (Jax et al., 2018), which also calls for care in relational leadership in matters of sustainability.

Fry and Egel (2021) posit that care is about paying attention to one's presence in the world, saying a caring leader or organisation possesses visible traits of selflessness, further stating that care also refers to solicitude and active connection with other powerless stakeholders who are morally pertinent in terms of distance in time and space (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018). Whilst some authors assert that care is a natural responsibility shared by all (Wang et al., 2017). Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) posit that the ethics of care does not assume or require individuals, such as leaders, to be naturally caring beings for them to show ethical caring, further stating that the caring informed relational viewpoint encompasses the inclusion of emotions as key elements of humanity and decision making. As such, ethics of care relies on a pre-existing and implicit condition of a trusting relationship or the assumption of a sincere motive of the other based on the context of a relationship that has been in existence over time (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).

These are some of the foundational requirements for a relational leadership, which Ruppert-Winkel (2018) describes as a social influence process for evolving long-term social orders and changes, such as those related to sustainability. Basically, tackling issues of sustainability requires the reconciliation of interdependencies between all the key elements in the ecosystem, thus calling for the prioritisation of pertinent values and preferences by the relevant stakeholders (West et al., 2018). Values in this instance refer to that which is deemed important to individuals or society in relation to environmental attitude and behaviours and could either be a barrier (Rosenberg, 2022) or a critical entryway to sustainability transformation endeavours driven by the various stakeholders in the ecosystem.

Corporations in particular have been under immense societal and regulatory pressure to show their commitment to sustainability requirements (Bastini et al., 2021; Jansson et

al., 2017), with customer and investor stakeholders focussing on companies' performance in relation to social and environmental indicators (Jansson et al., 2017; Wiengarten et al., 2017). Sustainability is not against economic growth, to the contrary it supports it but only if it benefits humanity, reduces poverty and inequality and helps to prevent environmental degradation and climate change or generally positively contribute towards the many other sustainability goals (Bastini et al., 2021; Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021). Leaders who are pro-sustainability share a common set of relational values and endorse these values in promotion of better operational efficiency and employee motivation towards sustainable development, which strengthens sustainability commitment among stakeholders (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021).

There has been strong arguments made for companies to include sustainability goals in their strategies, given the important role played by these strategies in setting the organisational tone on what really matters to the organisation and for all to strive for (Jansson et al., 2017). However, while organisations claim to be implementing effective sustainability management systems, the visible lack of progress towards the achievement of SDG goals has raised questions about the sincerity of these claims or their willingness and ability to positively contribute (Bastini et al., 2021) to the fight against environmental degradations and other related sustainability issues.

Relational leadership with care, which promotes teaming and respect for others, is thus positioned as a fundamental approach for addressing sustainability issues (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), because such a leadership is concerned with maintaining a healthy environment for the current and future generations, which is what sustainability essentially calls for. Therefore, relational leadership for sustainability is intertwined with care ethics, stemming from the acknowledgement that both sustainability and relational leadership recognise the co-existence of every being under the planet as well as a need to preserve and share (Crosweller, 2022; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), the limited resources for the survival of both the current and future generations (Fry & Egel, 2021). Thereby highlighting the morality of a naturally shared responsibility by all, to care and be mindful of the impact of one's actions on the others, including the environment (Wang et al., 2017). However, it is important to also recognise that the success of upholding this shared responsibility lies in every individual's ethical values, shaped by their background and worldviews (Crosweller, 2022), especially the many leaders who are perceived to have the power to influence sustainability practices in the organisations, (Jansson et al., 2017). Hence, the emergent need of ethical leaders, which is said to not only be good for society but critical for sustainability (Lemoine et al., 2019).

Therefore, relational leadership for sustainability referred to in this paper is one that promotes the inclusion of care ethics, whereby a leader can be reflective and relational, and is able to view themselves with humility (Croweller, 2022) in relation to others (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Thus, creating an environment whereby a leader becomes less directive and more democratic in a collaborative manner. It is further claimed that such an approach, through active ongoing engagements with impacted stakeholders, would allow relational leaders to build strong, trusting relationships, which would make it easier for them to deal with the wickedness of sustainability issues (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). After all, leaders can only be recognised as leaders in and through the delicate relationships that bind them to their followers (Pérezts et al., 2020) and humans can only claim to be humans because of their co-existence with all the living and non-living species in the universe, on which they are all dependent (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018; Terreblanche, 2018).

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter presented a theoretical analysis of the literature that backed up the study and provide foundation on which this research study was framed, which was to establish an understanding or appreciation of what caring can do in relational leadership for sustainability. The analysis also resulted in a draft conceptual framework as depicted in figure 4 below.

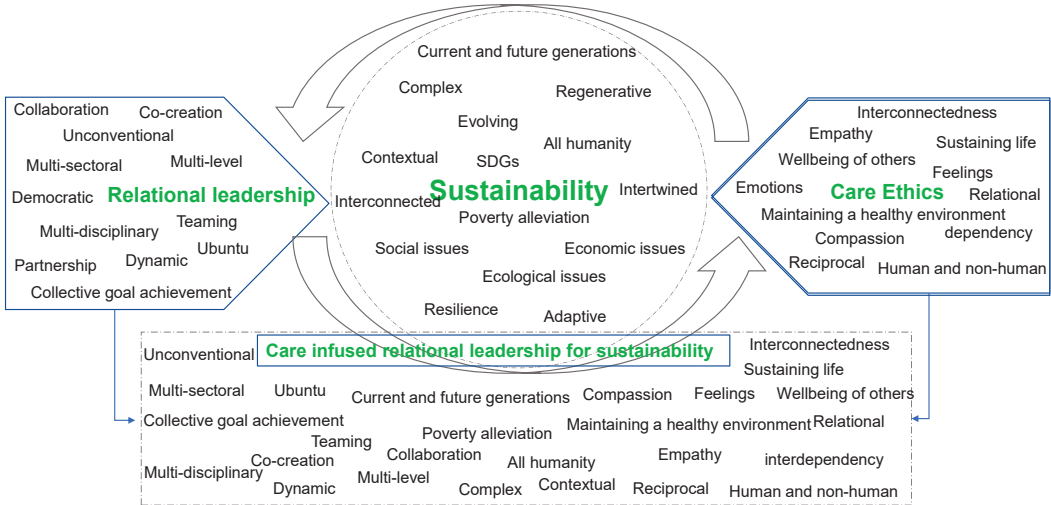


Figure 4. Initial conceptual framework of reviewed literature (Source: Author)

The draft conceptual framework in figure 4 above presents a summary of the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the study constructs per the reviewed literature. It will be updated with emerging themes from chapters 5 and 6 below. The next chapter outlines the main research question for the study, with supporting sub-questions, which are intended to assist the researcher in exploring the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability.

3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Introduction

This section of the paper aims to outline the key research question and related sub-questions which emanated as a response to a call by Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) as well as from the reviewed literature presented in chapter 2. The exploratory research questions are designed to gain a deeper understanding of how “caring” as an added ethical element in relational leadership could assist leaders in addressing issues related to sustainability.

3.2 The research question

Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) recommended that further research be made to look deeper into “caring” in relational leadership for sustainability, in sustainability focused organisations. Furthermore, Lemoine et al. (2019) claimed that their study, which reviewed moral approaches to leadership, highlighted a glaring need to better understand how moral values influence leadership and which of these moral values could be deemed relevant for elevating a certain style of leadership to one that is fit for tackling sustainability issues. Zooming in on ethics of care, the key research question for this study is:

What is the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability?

Therefore, this research question was intended to provide a deeper understanding of a care infused relational leadership and to further explore if adding “care” to relational leadership is an appropriate action for addressing issues of sustainability.

3.2.1 The sub-questions

Supporting this research question are two sub-questions which focussed on the practical implications of having such a leadership style or the absence thereof, as some claim that the seemingly apparent collective failure to combat the increasingly complex issues of sustainability is due to a lack of thorough understanding of the weaknesses of existing management models. Thereby highlighting an urgent need for such models to properly guide society and business on the appropriate leadership approaches for sustainability (Etzion et al., 2017).

The two sub-questions sought to answer:

- 1. How will adding care assist practitioners to understand relational leadership better?; and**
- 2. What is the problem of not having care in relational leadership?**

These sub-questions sought to provide a better understanding of whether adding ethics of care to relational leadership will be of benefit to leaders and to further explore if there is a problem in the absence of caring in relational leadership for sustainability.

3.3 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the key research question and its sub-questions that this study intended to answer. Through exploring the opinions of leaders in various South African organisations and sectors towards answering the question of the influence that adding care might bring to relational leadership for sustainability, the study aimed to bring both theoretical and practical insights into understanding of this phenomenon and possibly other approaches that could be further investigated for their contribution towards tackling the challenging and multifaceted issues of sustainability. The next chapter details the methodology used for this study.

4 CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter details the research methodology that was applied in this study to answer the research question and sub-questions presented in Chapter 3. The reviewed literature informed the research questions, which in turn directed the choice and design of the methodology used. As such, the study adopted a qualitative and exploratory approach as the basis for its research design, data sampling and analysis aimed at getting a deeper understanding of what influence with “care” would have when added to relational leadership for sustainability. Furthermore, quality assurance actions as well as ethical considerations that were applied in the study are also presented in this chapter.

4.2 Choice of methodology

Hsieh and Shannon (2005), as quoted by (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) define qualitative research as a method for the subjective interpretation of research data through a methodical process of coding and themes classification, as was applied in this study. Qualitative research is also defined as a type of research that is conducted in cases where there is a need for a more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within the context or the worldview of a set population (Mayer, 2015). Moreover, in this field of research, as Braun and Clarke (2006) postulate, there is a wide variety of approaches, which enables flexibility to align the choice of methodology with the purpose of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). In this study, the researcher sought to understand the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability, which Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) claim is a topic that calls for further exploration.

4.3 Research philosophy

Defining a research philosophy for a study is a critical starting point of the research process, as it clarifies the researcher’s worldview and position about the study, which forms the foundation for the formulation of research questions and approach (Mayer, 2015). For this paper, an interpretive inquiry was conducted, focussing on the opinions and attitudes of industry experts in the field of sustainability as well as various individuals, holding leadership positions in sustainability focused organisations in a variety of sectors and industries. The intention was to look deeper into the participants’ lived experiences, which could have influenced their opinions in responding to the research questions, thus enabling the researcher to uncover insights into this little explored phenomenon. This

philosophical approach is grounded on assumptions that individuals bring meanings to situations based on their self-reflective interpretations of them (Jenner et al., 2004), in this instance, for both the research and the participants. Therefore, the interpretivist philosophy not only allowed interviewed participants freedom to apply their opinion and explanations based on their lived experiences, but it also enabled the researcher to form her own interpretations (Cypress, 2015), from the discussions with selected participants (Bell et al., 2019) from the various sustainability focused organisations under review.

4.4 Research approach

The starting point of designing a research study and the selection of the methodology is the research question, supported by the underlying research assumptions (Bono & McNamara, 2011), such as data access or availability, which will best enable the study to adequately respond to the research question, (Eisenhardt, 2021). For this study, an inductive process was followed, with an intention to get a deeper understanding of the influence of care in relational leadership when applied in sustainability-focused organisations. This entailed a series of in-depth virtual one-on-one interviews aimed at unlocking unconventional insights into what caring would do when amplified as an ethical element in relational leadership for sustainability.

4.5 Population

The research population is the study's targeted group of enquiry (Majid, 2018) or the "universe of units" (Bell et al., 2019, p. 189) from which to draw a sample for the research. For this study, the research population that was deemed relevant was individuals at various levels of leadership hierarchy with sustainability experience, irrespective of the industry, as well as experts with relevant knowledge and experience within sustainability.

4.6 Sampling method

To select participants, the study applied a purposive sampling strategy, in order to select a sample that was relevant to the research questions that the study aimed to uncover (Bell et al., 2019). Ayres (2007) asserts that a notable advantage of such a sampling strategy is that it strengthens the design of a qualitative research, by enabling it to cover all the relevant aspects of the research based on the experiences of the purposively selected participants (Busetto et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is not a convenience type of sampling, but a very deliberate approach, followed by a researcher who is clear

in their mind about the research goals and the type of participants they require to provide relevant data input to assist them in fulfilling their study goals (Bell et al., 2019).

Therefore, a sample for this study included a group of individuals that were purposively selected because of their knowledge and experience which was deemed adequate to bring meaningful insight to the study. The participants were recruited, following a transparent process with clear guidelines to minimise bias (Aguinis et al., 2018) in the selection as well as the interview process.

4.7 Sampling criteria

The sampling criteria for this study was to categorise the purposive samples into the following categories, as suggested by (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019):

1. Macro (National) level – Limited to South African borders;
2. Meso (Organisational or sectoral) level – Sustainability-focused organisations in various sectors; and
3. Micro (Individual) level – Decision makers, with sustainability experience, at various levels of leadership hierarchy in the selected organisations, as well as expert individuals with specific knowledge and experience in sustainability.

In applying this criteria, the researcher followed the following steps:

1. To kick start the selection process, the research participants were identified through existing researcher's networks, such as LinkedIn, as well as referrals from interviewed participants. Through LinkedIn contacts and emails, the researcher reached out to potential participants with details of the study, requesting them to confirm their willingness to participate as well as the appointment date for the interview. In addition, they were requested to suggest other individuals whom they deemed relevant to participate, based on the set sampling criteria;
2. The researcher also approached various, publicly known sustainability-focused organisations for potential participants, clearly stating the qualifying criteria of "decision makers, with sustainability experience, at various levels of leadership hierarchy in the selected organisations". This group of participants was first contacted by telephone, to explain the study. Those individuals who showed willingness to participate were emailed details of the study and a requested to confirm their availability. Details of the email are reflected in Appendix 2; and
3. Lastly, two sustainability experts were also included in the participants' sample. These experts were sourced from a research organisation in South Africa, based on

their knowledge, qualification and experience within the sustainability arena. The contact details of the experts were found on their organisation's website. Again, the researcher sent them an email with details about the study and requesting their participation.

These steps led to a total sample of 12 individuals, who were made up of 10 participants as well as two experts in the field of sustainability as alluded to above. Whilst the initial sample target for the study was 20, the final number was 12 interview participants. However, due to purposive sampling, the reduced number of interview participants did not in any way compromise the quality of the report, to the contrary, it provided adequate insight that was required to answer the research question. Thus, supporting the assertion that in qualitative research, there really is no compulsory "magic number" of interviews to be conducted, but that the quality of data collected to answer a researcher's questions is a key determinant of the adequate number of interviews relevant for the study (Guest et al., 2006; Pratt, 2009).

4.8 Level and Unit of analysis

The level of analysis is defined by Bell et al. (2019) as a primary unit which sets the scope boundaries for data collection and analysis in a research study as guided by the research question. Kumar (2018) postulates that the unit of analysis represents the "who" or "what" in business research that is being used to collect data as required by the level of analysis. He further posits that clarifying the unit of analysis is a critical success element for the research because a lack of clarity may lead to invalid research results and conclusions (Kumar, 2018). For this research, the primary level of analysis was focused on caring in relational leadership in sustainability-focused organisations, within various sectors in South Africa. With the unit of analysis for the study predominantly done at Meso level, being Civil Society organisations referred to as NGO, Government, including State Owned Entities (SOEs), referred to as Gov and Corporate, which is privately owned businesses referred to as Bus, as well as Micro level for the sustainability experts. The diversity of participants' background, including experts was needed to add depth and objectivity to collected data for improved analysis and to enable triangulation (Busetto et al., 2020). This therefore led to a decision by the researcher to conduct the study at a sectoral level, which made it easier for the researcher to analyse and present the collected data because, the majority of participant came from different organisations in a variety of sectors, which for the purpose of this study were grouped into three sectors as shown in Table 2 below.

The matrix depicted in Table 2 indicates the makeup of the unit of analysis according to the number of participants in each sector category. The names of organisations as well as participants in each organisation have been masked per the allocated codes to maintain confidentiality.

Table 2. Unit of analysis matrix and participant coding

Sector types	NGOs / Civil Society	Government / SOEs	Corporate / Business	Experts
Participants	NGO-3 NGO-4 NGO-7			
		Gov-1 Gov-2 Gov-3		
			Bus-1 Bus-2 Bus-3 Bus-4	
				Exp-1 Exp-2

(Source: Author)

The above table indicates the codes allocated to each participant and also shows the makeup of each sector group, such that the NGO and the Gov groups each consisted of three participants. The Bus sector had four participants with the Expert group only having two.

4.9 Data gathering process

The formal data collection process was preceded by a pilot interview, to verify the understandability of the interview questions as well as adequacy of allocated time (Busetto et al., 2020). This test was done on one individual who is an organic farmer, with a strong passion for sustainability. It provided the opportunity to test the clarity of the interview questions and that the time allocated was sufficient for a semi-structured interview. The process also allowed the researcher to test the quality of the recording application that was to be used for the interviews and lastly, it enabled the researcher to

test-run their interviewing technique and approach. Feedback received indicated that no major changes to the interview questions was required, only some process enhancements, which were applied during the interviews. When conducting interviews, providing a safe and comfortable space for interview participants is important, a key point that was raised in the pilot interview and is supported by Bell et al. (2019) who suggest a neutral location as an ideal location to conduct interviews. This is why the interviews for this study were conducted virtually, which enables the participants to choose their preferred location and time for the interviews.

Before the start of the interview, the researcher outlined the purpose of the study as well as the process of the interview and reconfirmed their consent to participate in the study and for the recording of the interview session. This was to ensure clarity and transparency on the interview process, which is asserted to not only assist with the collection of quality data, but also to contribute positively towards research analysis and results, and ultimately to lead to a good quality rating of the research (Aguinis et al., 2018). Also, to adhere to ethical research protocols, all consent forms, a sample is shown in Appendix 3, were signed prior to the start of the interview (Bell et al., 2019).

Interview recording allowed the researcher to limit note taking during the interview, thus enabling the researcher to engage more with the participant, follow up and probe for more information where necessary. This process is key for a qualitative researcher because in interviews, they are not only interested in what participants have to say but also in a manner in which they say it. It also shows the participant that the researcher is indeed interested in what they are saying, which encourages them to open up more and feel free to share more rich insights (Bell et al., 2019) for the benefit of the study, which would not have been the case if the participants felt a sense of disengagement from the researcher. Another notable benefit that resulted from interview recording is that it assisted the researcher in ensuring that all interview exchanges were properly accounted for through transcription (Bell et al., 2019). Therefore, on conclusion of the interviews, the recordings were sent to a professional transcriber, under the conditions laid out in the Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), which is shown in Appendix 4, that they had to sign. On receipt of the transcripts from the transcriber, the researcher reviewed them to ensure that they were a true reflection of what was discussed in the interview, because they were to be used as a key input into data analysis for the study (Bell et al., 2019).

4.10 Research instrument

The research instrument used for this study was a semi-structured but bounded interview approach (Josselson, 2013), with a set of open-ended questions, to guide but also allow for a flexible flow of discussion within the confines of the research questions (Ayres, 2007). A good, semi-structured interview is easy for the participant to follow and facilitates the building of a rapport, postulates Ayres (2007), which results in quality data collection. Following these guidelines, an interview questionnaire for experts and non-experts was used, as shown in Appendix 5. This interview guide was needed to provide structure and boundaries to the interview process, ensure consistency across participants and limit unnecessary bias.

The development of the research questionnaire was aimed at answering the research question and sub-questions as described in Chapter 3. With the main research question focussed on providing a deeper understanding of a care infused relational leadership and further exploring if adding care to relational leadership is an appropriate action for addressing issues of sustainability. The supporting sub-questions aimed to provide a better understanding of whether adding ethics of care to relational leadership will be of benefit to leaders and also to further explore if there is a problem in the absence of caring in relational leadership for sustainability. There was therefore a deliberate effort by the researcher to ensure a clear correlation between the interview questions, the research questions and the reviewed literature, as reflected in Table 3.

Table 3. Research questions and interview questions mapping

Research Questions	Interview questions	To Expert	To Participants
Main research question: What is the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability?	What is your understanding of relational leadership?	X	X
	What is your understanding of care or ethics of care?		X
	What will happen when adding care to relational leadership?	X	X
	From your experience, what would you credit the success of organisations that have shown positive progress towards sustainability?	X	
	Please share your thoughts on “what should be done differently to	X	X

Research Questions	Interview questions	To Expert	To Participants
	improve leadership attitudes and actions towards sustainability”?		
Sub-question 1: How will adding care assist practitioners to understand relational leadership better?	From your experience, would you say leadership has a role to play in tackling issues of sustainability? Please elaborate.	X	
	How will leadership practitioners benefit from adding care to relational leadership?	X	
Sub-question 2: What is the problem of not having care in relational leadership?	How will business benefit from adding care to relational leadership?	X	X
	In your opinion, would you say relational leadership with care is appropriate for sustainability? Why?	X	X

(Source: Author)

The use of an interview guide was primarily to guide the process and ensure that data collected was aligned with the research objectives, whilst also allowing enough room for flexibility (Bell et al., 2019) to enable participants to respond in a manner that was comfortable for them. The research questions will also be utilised to streamline the data analysis process in Chapter 5.

4.11 Data analysis approach

Through the interpretivist lens, the study systematically followed a non-linear, recursive six phased Thematic Analysis (TA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021a, 2021b) for data analysis, which Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as the foundational method of qualitative analysis. The following steps were conducted in this study:

- a. Data and writing familiarisation – this step required that the researcher be fully immersed in collected data to ensure full understanding of data for thorough analysis and that they kept reference notes for ease of reference as and when required. In this study, the interviews were video recorded, with consent from the participants. This allowed the researcher to limit note taking (Bell et al., 2019), which was critical for future reference when analysing data. In addition, the researcher was also able to focus on non-verbal data, in terms of the manner in which the participant was

conveying the information. This was another important factor to be noted as it also helped the researcher to better understand and make sense of the collected qualitative data. The researcher also made use of professional transcribers to transcribe the recorded interviews. The researcher reviewed the transcripts as a form of data familiarisation and quality control to ensure that the contents of the transcripts were a true reflection of what was discussed in the interviews before uploading them onto Atlas.ti for coding. In cases where clarity was required on the interview discussion, the researcher made use of the recorded videos for reference;

- b. Systematic data coding – this step required that the researcher systematically generate an initial set of codes for the whole data set, identify patterns and consolidate codes where there was visibility of alignment. Accordingly, to ensure systematic data coding, the researcher uploaded all quality checked interview transcripts in Atlas.ti in the order in which the interviews were undertaken and generated initial codes and patterns, which were then exported to excel for further analysis;
- c. Generating initial themes from collated and coded data – this stage required the grouping of codes into initial themes and had to be performed continuously throughout the data analysis process. To realise this requirement, the researcher ensured that as new interview transcripts were coded, emerging themes were noted on a continuous basis;
- d. Developing and reviewing themes – this fourth step was actioned by continuously reviewing and editing the list of themes as they were generated, persistently cross-checking between this and the preceding steps in an iterative manner to ensure consistency on the newly generated codes and themes as new transcripts were being coded. This iterative process and continuous checking of themes assisted the researcher to fully embrace the contents of collected data and extract additional detail that would possibly have been overlooked if there was no multiple engagements with collected data;
- e. Refining, defining, and naming themes – the final step before generating the results of the analysis was to redefine the generated themes by grouping them into appropriately refined labels for better analysis and generation of study results; and
- f. Writing the report – the last step of the process was to produce a report on the results of the analysis.

Through this process, the researcher sought to unearth relevant themes in an endeavour to present possible answers to the research questions described in Chapter 3. The identified themes were a critical step in the analysis of collected data as presented in

Chapter 5. Both Chapters 5 and 6 of this study report respectively outline the analysis that was done on collected data and the findings thereof.

4.12 Research quality and rigour

“Rigour lies in devising a systematic method whose assumptions are congruent with the way one conceptualizes the subject matter” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 96). This assertion is supported by Bono and McNamara (2011), who suggest that research design that is centred around and aligned with the research questions improves the research quality. Such a design process was also followed in this research study as detailed in the previous sections of this chapter. To promote study quality and rigour, this paper followed a systematic method of design and analysis as advised by both Braun and Clarke (2006) and Bono and McNamara (2011), also detailed in the preceding sections of this chapter. In addition, the quality of data gathered was enhanced by following a thorough interview process, which was quality checked by performing a pilot phase to verify the understandability of the interview questions as well as time allocation (Busetto et al., 2020). An interview process followed was semi-structured and directed by a questionnaire which was used to guide the process and to ensure fairness and standardisation, by asking the same basic questions to the same group of participants. In addition, rigour was enhanced by interviewing a diverse pool of participants to enable data objectivity and triangulation (Busetto et al., 2020).

4.13 Ethical considerations

This research followed ethical requirement as guided by the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria (UP), which included ensuring that prior to resuming the data gathering process for the study, ethical clearance was obtained through the relevant UP Ethics Committee as reflected in Appendix 6. Ethical requirements for a qualitative study require strict adherence to moral principles and values (Johnson et al., 2020), especially in relation to protection of participants’ identity as well as the preservation of data confidentiality (Cypress, 2015). Therefore, before participating in the research study, it was critical for the study to ensure that interview participants were informed of their rights and those of the researcher and were given a choice to freely participate. This was achieved by requesting all participants to sign a consent form, before interviews were conducted. The form detailed steps that the researcher was to undertake to protect their identity and data collected from them. Therefore, for this report, interview participants’ details have been anonymised and the research data collected was stored without

identifiers. Also, because the researcher made use of transcription and editorial services, the editor and transcribers that the researcher worked with in this report signed confidentiality agreements to strengthen the protection of participants' confidentiality. Lastly, all collected data from this research has been handed over for storage at the University of Pretoria, which has the appropriate facilities to ensure safe storage and ease of accessibility for a minimum period of 10 years.

4.14 Limitations of the research design and method

The design of this research as well as the applied methodology came with certain limitations, such as:

- The research was conducted over a limited period, limiting further insights which could have been uncovered if the study had been performed over a longer period;
- The study only focussed on sustainability organisations within the SA borders, which could have yielded a partial view of the results compared to if the study was to look at different organisations across the continent or globally;
- Limiting the study to South African organisations, is likely to provide results which are skewed towards the South African worldview, which may not necessarily be congruent with the rest of the world;
- Access to study participants was an issue, which also limited the number of participants available for the study, thus limiting the results of the study;
- The conclusions of this study were based on data deduced from a small sample (Schulz & Martin-Ortega, 2018), which could be different if the sample size was bigger, perhaps including other organisations that are not necessarily sustainability-focused;
- The subjective nature of a qualitative study opens it up to potential biases stemming from both the participants and the researcher's worldviews; and
- Because the study was conducted by a novice researcher, the results could also be limited by their experience.

4.15 Chapter summary

This chapter presented a detailed outline of the research methodology, philosophy and design as well as other key elements required to achieve the research purpose as detailed in Chapter 1. The study followed a qualitative inductive research with an interpretative philosophical view. It focussed on a South African population of sustainability experts as well as individuals in varying levels of leadership hierarchy in

sustainability-focused organisations from a variety of sectors and industries. It gathered data through semi-structured virtual interviews and applied a non-linear, recursive six phased TA approach for data analysis. Steps taken to ensure research quality and rigour were also presented in this chapter, as well as research ethical considerations and limitations.

5 CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines an in-depth analysis of the research findings from the semi-structured interviews of 12 participants who were responding to the research question and sub-questions that were formulated in Chapter 3. The chapter will start by providing a brief description of the sample, followed an outline of profile for each interviewed participant. The profile description is intended to provide evidence and credibility for their qualification to participate in the study. For ease of analysis, the views of different individuals will be grouped per sector of relevance and colour coded as indicated in Table 4 below. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of the data collected from the study participants. The findings from this chapter served as a foundation for the discussion presented in Chapter 6.

Table 4. Colour coding of participant groups

	NGOs / Civil Society	Government / SOEs	Corporate / Business	Experts
Number of participants	3 Blue	3 Yellow	4 Green	2 Brown

(Source: Author)

5.2 Description of the interview sample

The study applied a purposive sampling strategy, to select a sample that was deemed relevant to the research questions that the study aimed to uncover. A sample for this study included a group of individuals that were purposively selected because of their knowledge and experience, which was considered adequate to bring meaningful insights to the study. This research study focused on leaders with experience in sustainability focused organisations in SA. The 12 individuals who were interviewed were made up of 10 participants as well as two experts all holding senior positions in the field of sustainability within SA. They included a chairman, a managing director (MD), a deputy director general (DDG), chief sustainability officer (CSO), environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) manager, two human resource (HR) directors, two programme managers, one sustainability activist as well as two sustainability experts. Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8 provide a summary of participants' backgrounds and experience in sustainability in response to interview questions 1.2 for the non-expert participants and 2.1 for the expert participants per the interview guides in Appendix 5.

Table 5. Profile summary of NGO participants

Participant code	Designation	Participant Background and Experience in Sustainability
Interview question 1.2: Please share your journey on what attracted you to this line of business?		
NGO-1	Programme manager	“I am an environmentalist by profession, I have a Master of Philosophy in environmental management, okay. So therefore, amongst the other things I’ve studied is sustainability. So that is one. Two, I am an activist, so as an activist I will be what you call eco-social, justice activist...So eco-social justice activist, because I am fighting for that space, how do we protect the environment and in order to achieve justice for the economy, for people and all of that.”
NGO-2	Sustainability activist	“I’ve always been an activist at heart. I’m an old boy that comes from the apartheid era. So, I’ve always been, how can I say, angered by injustices that I’ve seen. And fast-forwarding from that era to now, my personal journey is about finding a way in which I can address climate justice, how I can address issues that impact people, especially in the lingo that we use, we talk about ‘affected communities’.
NGO-3	Chairman	“The narrative I was exposed to was that people don’t know how to farm, black people are fortunate because farmers have created jobs, and it didn’t sit comfortably with me for some reason, even as a small child...So it was very much a search for truth and a search for understanding and how things work together, but beyond that, it was my growing awareness of climate change and the multiple environmental crises that we face. It just became a commitment to try and in some way respond to the catastrophe that we are facing”.

(Source: Author)

The three participants in the NGO sector came from two separate NGO’s, one based in Gauteng and the other in the Eastern Cape. Of the 3 participants, only NGO-1 had an academic qualification that is related to sustainability but also referred to himself as an eco-social justice activist. The other two participants did not have an academic qualification but still found themselves in this field for various personal reasons, mostly

related to activism. NGO-2 claimed to be an activist, who is the voice for the “affected communities”, while NGO-3 asserted that getting involved in this field became a personal commitment in search for the own truth and to make a positive impact to the prevailing natural catastrophes.

Table 6. Profile summary of Gov participants

Participant code	Designation	Participant Background and Experience in Sustainability
Interview question 1.2: Please share your journey on what attracted you to this line of business?		
Gov-1	DDG	“I think my professional life in the sense that I’ve worked in political office for the last twenty-four years, so I came in as a political appointee... So, it was less about the sector, more about the political mandate and as soon as I got in it and understood what the sector is all about, what it’s trying to achieve I think I just fell in love with the sector and, yeah, ended up being a backyard farmer myself”.
Gov-2	ESG manager	“For me ever since I was in school, I loved geography. It was one of my favourite topics in high school... Sustainability people are in demand right now, so yeah. That’s how my journey started and then got into consulting, started to learn the field, and it just grew and grew onto that”.
Gov-3	Programme manger	“I come from a finance background, and then spent some time in the sustainable development space, but the sort of potential of impact is what really attracted me to the sector, and I think from a renewables perspective is the ability to impact, economic, people and environmental impact. And for me renewables was the one bit that I was able to touch all three of those aspects”.

(Source: Author)

For the Gov sector, only Gov-2 was found to hold a formal qualification that is related to sustainability, which was asserted to have been a deliberate move motivated by the love for the environment. Gov-3 claimed to have joined the sector because of the potential it presented being “*ability to impact, economic, people and environmental impact*”. Lastly

Gov-1 asserted that joining the field of sustainability was through political appointment, not by choice, but after understanding it *“I think I just fell in love with the sector and, yeah ended up being a backyard farmer myself”*. Such statements almost propel one to suggest that passion and a drive to make a positive impact are what drive success in the field of sustainability. From the data collected it was further found that the participants from this sector consisted of one individual from the National Government department and two from two separate SOEs, which are based in Gauteng and Cape Town respectively.

Table 7. Profile summary of Bus participants

Participant code	Designation	Participant Background and Experience in Sustainability
Interview question 1.2: Please share your journey on what attracted you to this line of business?		
Bus-1	HR director	“I suppose it was a natural process for sustainability as well to be part of it because as I said, we work with communities, make sure that the communities we work with are sustainable”.
Bus-2	MD	“I got into renewable energy, and I loved it so much that every other role that I accepted or worked in after that was in renewable energy companies. It was an intentional career move to remain in the renewable energy space... That was me being bitten, that was my drug. And then it became my drug of choice”.
Bus-3	HR director	“...Particularly the female development or the economic development, I think that’s one think I’m very interested in, and alongside the educational equality between male and females...but what’s attracted me to it, I think has been the concept of equality, gender equality specifically”.
Bus-4	CSO	“I actually came from CSI...I also have kind of a personal history that is interlinked with community service from my parents and grandparents, so I come with that. I don’t know if one would call it baggage, I think I come with that kind of added benefit which you then bring to the corporate world. So corporate social investment felt like a natural thing for me to do”.

(Source: Author)

None of the Bus sector participants presented a formal academic qualification in the field of sustainability. Joining this sector was for Bus-1 a natural process through working closely with communities, which Bus-3 claimed it was simply because the organisation she worked for was a sustainability focused organisation (Bus-3). The other two participants in this sector claimed to have joined it through personal choices, with Bus-2 asserting that after being involved in renewable energy, *“I loved it so much... That was me being bitten, that was my drug. And then it became my drug of choice”* and Bus-4 claimed that the love for sustainability was embedded at a young age through *“a personal history that is interlinked with community service from my parents and grandparents”*. The participants for this sector were all Gauteng based, with one from retail, two from the insurance industry and the fourth from a renewable energy organisation.

Table 8. Profile summary of expert participants

Participant code	Designation	Participant Background and Experience in Sustainability
Interview Question 2.1: Please share with me your experience and involvement in the sustainability area of business.		
Exp-1	Senior environmental researcher	<p>“In the second year of my degree we had a very, very good environmental management lecturer and course, it was the time of the Earth Summit, the first one, so that stimulated my interest, and I knew I wanted to go into environmental/sustainability issues... I wrote a Chapter from PhD on Sustainability Science in Southern Africa”.</p> <p>“The topic of my dissertation was sort of looking at philosophical underpinning...how to address the reoccurring problems that are happening, the reoccurring constraints after many years of working in environmental impact assessment, that the constraints were reoccurring, and how a different way of thinking i.e.. Philosophy could be a route for different forms of environmental assessment”.</p>
Exp-2	Senior sustainability researcher	<p>“I have a PhD in Zoology, so I mean clearly that is nothing to do with business, but what really came about was there was this lack of how I understood how the world was viewed and sustainability is viewed, and what was actually</p>

Participant code	Designation	Participant Background and Experience in Sustainability
		<p>emanating from business who are the main culprits of environmental degradation”.</p> <p>“It was like well you know sustainability as a scientist meant making sure that the planet is able to continue to survive, and from a business perspective it was about maintaining the ability to make more money, the two needed to come together”.</p>

(Source: Author)

Both experts hold PhD qualifications and work in a leading South African research institution, which is based in Gauteng. Exp-1 stated that the interest was sparked at 2nd year of tertiary and ended up writing a PhD degree chapter on sustainability science in Southern Africa. Her PhD dissertation was focused on *“philosophical underpinning... how to address the reoccurring problems that are happening”*. Exp-2’s interest was founded on a need to understand *“how the world was viewed, and sustainability is viewed, and what was actually emanating from business who are the main culprits of environmental degradation”*.

5.3 Data collection and saturation

For this study, the data gathering process was done through a series of 12 virtual interviews of purposefully selected participants who are experienced decision makers in sustainability-focused organisations, with relevant insight on answering the question of what could be the influence of care if added in relational leadership for sustainability. The virtual interview approach was preferred for convenience for both the participants and the researcher and also because it afforded participants the flexibility to choose any location and time, day or night, that was comfortable for them to accommodate the interview (Bell et al., 2019). One-hour interviews were scheduled between September and November. All interviewed except one were conducted in September. The interview duration ranged between 54 and 22 minutes as indicated in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Research interview schedule summary

Participant code	Designation	Sector / Industry	Interview date	Interview length (Minutes)
Gov-1	DDG	Government	3 September	34
Bus-1	HR director	Retail	5 September	31
NGO-1	Programme manager	NGO	6 September	38
NGO-2	Sustainability activist	NGO	6 September	40
Exp-1	Senior environmental researcher	Research organisation	7 September	39
Exp-2	Senior sustainability researcher	Research organisation	8 September	32
NGO-3	Chairman	NGO	9 September	49
Bus-2	MD	Renewable energy	12 September	35
Bus-3	HR director	Insurance	16 September	22
Gov-2	ESG manager	SOE	19 September	23
Bus4	CSO	Insurance	20 September	54
Gov-3	Programme manager	SOE	3 November	20

(Source: Author)

Each interview was captured on Atlat.ti to generate the relevant new codes for analysis, which according to the researcher, saturation was reached by the end of interview 10, as evidenced by the severely reduced number of new codes in interviews 11 and 12, as reflected in figure 5 below.

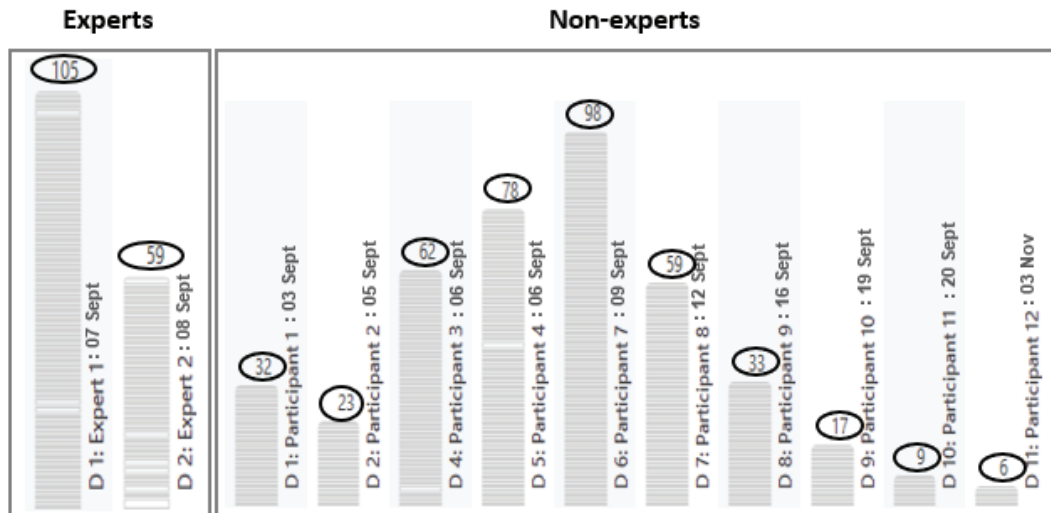


Figure 5: Code distribution per interview participant (Source: Atlas.ti)

The researcher found that from interview 10, there was not much new information emerging from the data collected in subsequent interviews, thus signalling saturation (Bell et al., 2019; Guest et al., 2006), because the added interviews were mostly either confirming or repeating what was already noted in prior interviews.

5.4 Data coding and analysis process

In theme coding and analysis, the researcher followed a non-linear, recursive TA approach that was introduced in section 4.11 above. The interview notes were transferred into Atlas.ti to generate the initial set of codes, which amounted to 581 codes. These were then exported into Excel for deduplication and refinement. In Excel the codes were grouped per research question or sub-question. This step was followed by another grouping of the codes into three categories that were aligned to the constructs of research study. The final step was the identification of themes. For reference, Appendix 7 presents a compressed and refined list of themes and codes that emanated from this process. Time allowing, more refinement would still be done to these themes. This data coding and analysis process was conducted reiteratively to the point where the researcher was convinced that all the relevant themes had been accounted for. Figure 6 below presents a pictorial view of this process.

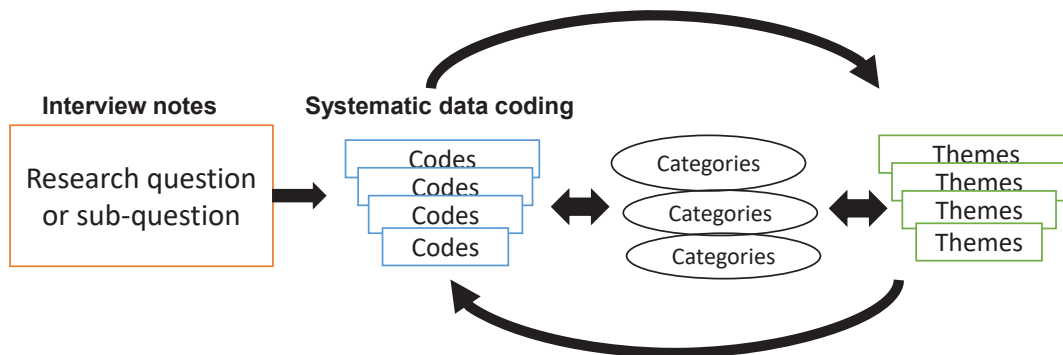


Figure 6. Coding and analysis process (Source: Author)

5.5 Presentation of results

The research findings are presented per research question and sub-question as was shown in Chapter 3 above. Key themes that were generated per research question are presented at the start of each section that is linked to a particular research question. The analysis presented in each section is only for the key theme that emerged as prevalent. Highlights of similarities and differences from emerging themes are also presented at the end of each section of the research questions. It is to be noted that, whilst the presented findings indicate a comprehensive list of identified themes, only the themes that the researcher considered to be of significance in addressing the primary research question are discussed and further filtering will be done to identify those themes to be carried over to Chapter 6 for further discussion.

5.6 Findings for research question 1

Research question 1: What is the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability?

This research question aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of relational leadership with care and also to explore if adding care to relational leadership is an appropriate action for addressing issues of sustainability. This research question was broken down into four interview questions plus an additional concluding question which was an overarching question across this research question and other sub-questions. These questions will be used to present the analysis of findings in relation to research question 1. Table 10 below presents the compressed collection of themes that emerged as related to this research question from the coding process. The X in each cell indicates areas where the theme appeared repeatedly from each sector in response to

questions related to research question 1. Blank spaces mean the theme never appeared in those sector groups.

Table 10. Compressed theme book for research question 1

Category	Theme:	NGOs	Gov	Bus	Exp
Relational Leadership	Humanness and Humanity	X	X	X	X
	Partnerships and collaboration	X	X	X	X
	Not authoritarian			X	X
	Conversational	X		X	
	Collective goal achievement	X			X
	Build teams		X	X	
	Deepens understanding	X	X		X
Care / Ethics of care	Love and respect for all	X	X	X	
	Ubuntu	X	X	X	
	Inherent	X		X	X
	Empathy	X	X		
	Interconnectedness		X		X
	Ethical thing to do			X	X
Sustainability	Challenging	X			X
	Personal responsibility	X			X
	Forward thinking	X		X	X
	TBL	X		X	X
	Education	X	X	X	X

(Source: Author)

Interview question 1: What is your understanding of relational leadership?

This was a generic interview question posed to all participants, including experts. It was intended to lay a foundation for the discussion in order to get an understanding of what the participants understood by the term “relational leadership” within the context of their work environment and general worldview.

Presentation of evidence: non-experts

Tables 11 below provides evidence through selected quotes from the various participants in various sectors and disciplines in response to the interview question 1.

Table 11. Non-expert quotes – understanding of relational leadership

Participant code	Relevant Quotes
NGO-3	“Very simply it is about honouring our common humanity and honouring whoever you are working with as a whole human being, rather than somebody who can just contribute to the success of the company or the success of the organisation”.
Gov-1	“That’s how I would understand relational leadership, that you enhance the relationship that you have with your team members both internal and external for you to be able to achieve your goal... you lead them as you would want to be led”.
Bus-3	“It’s that you lead people as though they were peers and not as though you are a parent. So, you not parenting people, it’s not authoritarian, so it’s not telling but it’s conversational, the leadership style. That would be my understanding. I guess you listen to people so much as you want to be heard”.

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: non-experts

The NGO described relational leadership as the leadership style that honours humanity. The Gov and Bus group interpreted it as a style of leadership that is conversational and not authoritarian. They further suggested that it enhances teaming as it is a give and take style of leadership where the leader would lead as they wished to be led and listen as much as they also wanted to be heard.

Presentation of evidence: experts

Tables 12 below provides evidence through selected quotes from the expert participants in response to the interview question 1.

Table 12. Expert quotes – understanding of relational leadership

Participant code	Relevant Quotes
Exp-1	“...I think relational leadership is leadership as it says, through the forming of partnerships, the forming of relationships, the forming of collaborations, working with others to achieve a specific outcome or to address a specific problem. So, it is leadership where it is not a single person, ‘I know everything, I am going to say what needs to be done’.”

Participant code	Relevant Quotes
Exp-2	“To be very honest with you I have never heard of relational leadership before so I don’t have a very clear understanding about it at all, but I can assume that you know it is about your relationship that you would have about certain areas or your world view on something and how you bring that to the work that you do...”

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: experts

Exp-1 described relational leadership as a style that leads towards the achievement of a specific goal through the formation of partnerships, relationships and collaborations, further stating that in this type of setup, there is not a single person who claims to know everything. Exp-2 first proclaimed their limited knowledge of the concept “relational leadership” but offered the explanation that it is a leadership style that is about relationships and the worldviews one would bring to their work.

Comparison and conclusion

There appeared to be a general agreement across the various sector groups that relational leadership is about honouring other humans and treating them with respect for a lasting and meaningful partnership. Also, both the expert and non-expert participants generally concurred that relational leadership is a conversational and non-authoritarian style that promotes the teaming and collaboration for the achievement of a common goal.

Interview question 2: What is your understanding of care or ethics of care?

This interview question was only posed to the non-expert participants. The intention of this question was to add a layer to the initial construct of relational leadership in building up the understanding of the relevant constructs to gain insights needed to respond to the research question.

Presentation of evidence: non-experts

Table 13 below provides evidence through some of the selected quotes from the various non-expert participants in various sectors in response to this question.

Table 13. Non-expert quotes – understanding of care or ethics of care

Participant code	Relevant Quotes
NGO-3	“...Is not about personal salvation but it is about respect and love for all. So regardless of race or class or gender or whatever, the imperative is to love, and love means care. So, I suppose for me it just has been part of what I have always understood from early on as this is how we should live, because if I want to be cared for, if I want to be respected, if I want to be understood, then that is what I have to offer.”
Gov-3	“...I guess it comes down to that sort of idea of empathy, understanding of the interconnectedness.”
Bus-4	“For me caring is, can you say that caring is the ethical thing to do? And it is not the right thing to do because it doesn’t always feel like the right thing because you don’t always feel like caring.”

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: non-experts

The NGO equated care to love, positing that care is “*not about personal salvation*” but is something taught at a young age as an imperative that guides how all should exist, further asserting the teaching that “*if I want to be cared for, if I want to be respected, if I want to be understood, then that is what I have to offer.*” Gov’s understanding of care focused on empathy and interconnectedness, whilst Bus described caring as not necessarily the right thing to do but an ethical thing to do, something that one has to do regardless of whether they feel like doing it or not.

Conclusion

Different but non-contradictory definitions emerged across the three sector groups. All definitions for care were focused on emotions, with references to terms like, love (NGO); empathy (Gov); feeling (Bus); and interconnectedness (Gov).

Interview question 3: What will happen when adding care to relational leadership?

Following the build-up of foundational understanding of the key constructs, this interview question, which was posed to all interview participants, brings them together and goes to the core of the research question, with the aim of getting a deeper understanding of the influence of care in relational leadership, for sustainability. The concept “sustainability” was not highlighted in the question because all the participants were from

sustainability focused organisations, therefore the question was based on the inherent understanding that their responses will be framed within the context of sustainability. Tables 14 and Table 15 provide evidence through some of the selected quotes from the various participants in various sectors and disciplines in response to this question.

Presentation of evidence: non-experts

Tables 14 below provides evidence through selected quotes from the various non-expert participants in various sectors and disciplines in response to this question.

Table 14. Non-expert quotes – Adding care to relational leadership

Participant code	Relevant Quote
NGO-3	“The words that come to mind are that it will enrich leadership, it will expand leadership...So being a leader for me is not about saying ‘okay team, we are going from a to b, and we are going to get there in six months and by the time we get there we will have achieved xyz. It is like ‘okay team, we hope to get there, we think that is where we need to go, but let’s see what emerges as we start working together. Because we might actually spoil it, we don’t need to go there, we might need to stay right here and change stuff here, and in the process of doing that, unexpected stuff will emerge.”
Gov-3	“I guess it is taking your focus on relationship one step deeper, right? So, it is taking it from a surface level focus of trying to build a team around relational leadership, towards understanding what is relevant and important for members of that team and trying to structure implementation structure around those aspects of what is important for the individuals and team as well.”
Bus-4	“It will stretch you tremendously because it goes against sometimes our very own selfish nature and in a corporate context... that everything primes us to be the opposite of that in and this is also generalising but generally in a corporate culture, it takes maturity and also strength to almost hold that space and saying, ‘I am doing it differently as a leader’.”

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: non-experts

The NGO sector was of the view that adding care to relational leadership will promote the application of Ubuntu values in conversations, thereby enriching and enhancing the leadership and teaming. The Gov sector echoed the NGO sector’s sentiment on the strengthening of teams, asserting that adding the caring element to relational leadership

will intensify the relationship through better understanding of what is important and relevant to the individuals that make up the team. The Bus sector took a different angle with a suggestion that adding care goes against human’s inherent selfishness, which is a preferred characteristic for individuals in a corporate setting, as is reflected in leadership’s focus on KPIs and the bottom line and less on humans. They further asserted that such a move would stretch leaders and challenge their maturity and ability to do things differently and recognise humanness in everything.

Presentation of evidence: experts

Table 15 below provides evidence through selected quotes from the expert participants in various sectors and disciplines in response to the question of what will happen when adding care to relational leadership.

Table 15. Expert quotes – Adding care to relational leadership

Participant code	Relevant Quote
Exp-1	“I am not sure you could do relational leadership without care. Because I think relational leadership is person-based, it is about bringing out the best in people, about working with others, leadership through forming those relationships, linkages, networks. But maybe the care, ja, if you didn’t care I don’t think those relationships would stick. So, I think it is an intrinsic part of relational leadership but perhaps we could say yes, there needs to be care for the issue you are addressing, the sustainability.”
Exp-2	“Care and the relational leadership all start from your perception and your world views on how you have been influenced from youth all the way to your own education, on this specific topic. So, to be a true leader in the field of sustainability you obviously need to have care, or you need to have a world view that is centred around caring for your environment, and obviously then society... I think care is a very important one, but I think care is inherent and it comes to us from a young age rather than and yes, it can be learnt but it is harder.”

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence

Exp-1 referred to relational leadership as a person-based style of leadership that promotes teaming and aims to bring out the best in people, while Exp-2 posited that the result of adding care to relational leadership would be influenced by one’s upbringing

and education. However, these opinions converged on their interpretation of what would adding care to relational leadership mean for sustainability. They both suggested that adding care to relational leadership would be critical for sustainability, with Exp-1 saying, “*there needs to be care for the issue you are addressing, the sustainability*”; and Exp-2 stating that “...*to be a true leader in the field of sustainability you obviously need to have care...*”. Exp-1 further suggested that care is intrinsic to relational leadership and was also supported by Exp-2, who claimed that care is inherent from infancy.

Comparison and conclusion

Both the experts and non-experts concur that adding care to relational leadership would enhance it. The non-expert group focused on the human element in terms of better functioning teams and treating people as humans. Also stating that caring in relational leadership will propel leaders to recognise humanness in everything, an assertion that was supported by the Exp group, which claimed that for a relationship to stick, there has to be a caring element in it and also that relational leadership for sustainability cannot be successful without care.

Interview question 4: From your experience, what would you credit the success of organisations that have shown positive progress towards sustainability?

This interview question was only asked to the expert group. The intention was to indirectly bring in all the study constructs without asking a direct question. This was to probe further to get insights on whether the key elements related to the research question would feature as having some influence on sustainability success, from the experts’ point of view, as influenced by their experience.

Presentation of evidence: experts

Table 16 provides evidence through selected quotes from the expert participants in response to this question.

Table 16. Expert participant quotes – Success of organisations

Participant code	Relevant Quote
Exp-1	“It’s been significantly challenging in working towards achieving sustainability. And so I think there is not one organisation that I can say ‘this one is a success’...But what I will say is that I do think that non-governmental

Participant code	Relevant Quote
	organisations, NGO's, play an incredibly important role both on a global scale and on a local scale in achieving sustainability, particularly those organisations that work directly with people on the ground, with communities, and which - I guess this speaks to your topic – in which there is a sense of vocation in what these NGOs are doing, there is a sense of as you would say, 'care', there is a sense of personal responsibility in what they are doing".
Exp-2	"I would accredit it to having leaders that were forward thinking, that embraced the notion or were able to see how business is so dependent on our social and environmental resources and being able to see how the risks are coming to materialising and changing, and being forward thinking, to be able to adapt to those risks now, rather than before the risk became an actual physical problem... the likes of Unilever for example, they have been instrumental. Walmart is doing a great job in that field too".

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence

Exp-1 asserted that there's generally no single organisation that could be claimed as successful, however, credit was given to NGOs, at global and local level, as the sector that has the most significant impact. And this was posited to them working closely with impacted people and communities with much dedication and a sense of vocation. Exp-2 suggested Unilever and Walmart as the successful organisations, accrediting their success to their forward thinking and appreciation of the interdependencies that exist between business, society and the environment.

Conclusion

There was no explicit consensus between the experts on what is a success factor for organisations that are seen as leaders in the area of sustainability, with Exp-1 suggesting a sense of vocation, citing NGOs as an example and Exp2 claiming it could be due to their futuristic thinking, citing Unilever and Walmart as examples of such companies.

Concluding question: Please share your thoughts on “what should be done differently to improve leadership attitudes and actions towards sustainability”?

This final interview question was an all-encompassing question posed to all participants to give them the opportunity to share their last thoughts on the topic and to bring in the practical side of the study. It was intended to enable participants to freely open up about

their opinion on what style of leadership is really needed for sustainability and to further explore if in their opinion, the participants saw a care infused relational leadership as a potential leadership style for sustainability, which is what this study intended to understand. Also, the question aimed to gather additional key insights that could have been missed from the data gathered from other interview questions.

Presentation of evidence: all sectors

Tables 17, 18, 19, and 20 provide evidence through selected quotes from the various participants in various sector groups and disciplines in response to the concluding question, which asked them to share their thoughts on what should be done differently to improve leadership attitudes and actions towards sustainability.

Table 17. NGO quotes – Improving leadership attitudes and actions

Participant code	Relevant Quote
NGO-1	“It is all about the leadership... if the big boss of that company is not willing, it is not going to happen, even with the policy there. So, the change needs to happen at the top, at the apex of that company”.
NGO-2	“To start with, leadership, if you’re talking within the business sector, it’s really very much focused on the bottom line... it’s more about getting the culture right, and that doesn’t come easy, I mean, you have to have the will to start with it, to actually get that culture right”.
NGO-3	“What I believe is black African leaders who are deeply connected with their African roots and are able to lead in a way that gives expression to the values of Ubuntu...reconnect with what is valuable in African culture, and you must bring it to the table, because things depend on that”.

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: NGOs

The NGO sector postulated that for leadership attitudes and actions to change, there has to be a will from the highest office of the organisation because leadership is responsible for driving change and setting direction and culture. They further suggested that the application of Ubuntu values could be the solution to the sustainability issues in Africa, and by extension SA.

Table 18. Gov quotes – Improving leadership attitudes and actions

Participant code	Relevant Quote
Gov-1	“It’s impossible for any leadership style to be successful, unless you incorporate what you call ethics of care, because unless you care, forget about the results... sustainability and the benefits of sustainability are dependent on whether the leaders in the different sectors do think about “I don’t exist alone, it’s me, it’s other people, its communities, society, but it’s the environment, it’s the air, it’s the soil”.
Gov-2	“you’re never too old to learn. So, for me, I believe every leader, or every company should introduce a sustainability module for all staff members... just to understand what sustainability is and how does it impact your triple-bottom-line? Because it is gonna impact. No business nowadays is not gonna be affected by sustainability”.
Gov-3	“I think a lot of work needs to be done to remove this ‘us’ vs sustainability vs not, and I think a lot more needs to be done to articulate the benefit of taking a more relational view to development...it is around contextualising a lot of what are Western developed world concepts around sustainable development, ethics of care, etc, and making that relevant within a South African context. So, South Africanising these developed world sort of ideas, I guess”.

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: Gov

The Gov sector stressed the importance of recognising interdependencies and interconnectedness of all elements of the ecosystem through the application of relational leadership with care. They also suggested education about sustainability as a critical step towards changing leadership attitudes in relation to sustainability and ensuring that they do not perceive sustainability as separate from the overall business operations. Furthermore, they suggested that the Western developed concepts of sustainability should be contextualised and made relevant for the South African environment for better understanding of sustainability issues and benefits.

Table 19. Bus quotes – Improving leadership attitudes and actions

Participant code	Relevant Quote
Bus-1	“Sustainability, unfortunately is a long end game... It’s gotta be engrained within the strategies, it’s gotta be engrained in how we do things, people have got to understand what the benefits are and what the future benefits are. I

Participant code	Relevant Quote
	think we kind of stuck in today and the pressures of today and we don't spend enough time thinking about the future".
Bus-2	"I think, you know, it's done as a box ticking exercise. But even in our deliverables it's not weighed at the same level as cutting costs and increasing revenue... Ja, there's almost a change that might need to happen and perhaps, now that I think about it, it might even start with taking on the responsibility of looking after this country, right? And not relegating it to just government".
Bus-3	"We need to educate people on sustainability, period. Right? And why sustainability is important, the sustainability goals, and I think if people know about it, there'll be better appreciation of what sustainability is about".
Bus-4	"Immersive experiences because I think just by virtue of how our society is set up and being SA, we live in gated communities... embedding it in executive and leadership training programmes I think is crucial, immersive experiences so that we remain aware of the world, and the challenges around it".

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: Bus sector

The Bus sector stressed the importance of integrating sustainability into business strategies and working towards achieving their sustainability targets with care, not just as a box-ticking exercise. They also suggested education through immersive experiences as an important lever in assisting leaders to better understand the issues that sustainability is intending to address and the role they could play towards tackling these issues.

Table 20. Expert quotes – Improving leadership attitudes and actions

Participant code	Relevant Quote
Exp-1	"Looking towards shared goals with understanding that you are part of an ecosystem but not just understanding, feeling, feeling that you are part of an ecosystem, that you are dependent on the natural environment, that other communities are dependent on you, and you are dependent on them; the interrelationship between a person and their environment and a person and other communities, other people... I hope it is via human growth and wisdom. Wisdom, I think we need wisdom, together with care. Care and wisdom together".

Participant code	Relevant Quote
Exp-2	<p>“So, sustainability as we know it, is not enough right now. So, in moving towards sustainability as the global leaders are showing now, it used to be something else, but that something else or that net positivity, where it needs to move to, is going to come from the younger generations.... So, I think the change is going to come from the pressures and the growing risks on us in society and on humans and on business and that is going to come from the younger generations”.</p>

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: experts

Exp-1 suggested that understanding through the emotions of caring and feeling of all the interdependencies and interrelationships amongst all elements of the ecosystem is required and that care alone is not enough, thus suggesting that care should be accompanied by wisdom for it to bring about the needed change. Exp-2 posited that sustainability will eventually be achieved due to the environmental and other risk pressures on humanity, however a younger generation of leaders are the ones who will come up with innovative solutions to address the evolving issues of sustainability.

Comparison and conclusion

The general consensus amongst all participants was that business needs to reimagine itself and integrate sustainability into their strategies and to consider introducing younger leaders who are posited to have the will for sustainable development and a better understanding of sustainability, thus placing them in a better position to introduce the necessary organisations change and drive towards the culture of caring about sustainability. They further emphasised the importance of incorporating care if their actions that are geared towards addressing the issues of sustainability are to be impactful and sustainable. Education, through immersive experiences was also highlighted as an important lever for changing leadership attitudes and actions towards sustainability.

5.6.1 Summary of findings for research question 1

Table 21 presents a brief outline of the key themes discovered in response to research question 1. The themes have been grouped according to the categories that are linked to the research constructs. The shaded themes are the those that will be carried over to Chapter 6 as input for further discussion.

Table 21. Key themes from research question 1

Category	Theme:	NGOs	Gov	Bus	Exp
Relational Leadership	Humanness and Humanity	X	X	X	
	Partnerships and collaboration	X	X	X	X
	Not authoritarian	X		X	X
	Conversational	X		X	
	Collective goal achievement	X			X
	Build teams		X	X	
	Deepens understanding	X	X		X
Care / Ethics of care	Love and respect for all	X	X	X	
	Ubuntu	X	X	X	
	Inherent	X		X	X
	Empathy	X	X		
	Interconnectedness		X		X
	Ethical thing to do			X	X
Sustainability	Challenging	X			X
	Personal responsibility	X			X
	Forward thinking	X		X	X
	TBL	X		X	X
	Education	X	X	X	X

(Source: Author)

Analysis and conclusion

The notable themes that surfaced repeatedly from the various sector groups and experts that were associated with research question 1 include partnerships and collaborations and the deepening of understanding. Also, there seemed to be a common understanding across the various groups of what care means, which was mostly associated with emotions of love and respect. That understanding was extended to the enhancement of relational leadership when combined with care, making it a potential leadership approach that could be suitable for sustainability. In additions. There was no agreement between the experts on what could be accredited to sustainability success, with Exp-1 suggesting a sense of vocation and personal commitment and Exp-2 asserting it could be due to forward thinking and acceptance of interdependence of the elements in the ecosystem.

5.7 Findings for research sub-question 1

Research sub-question 1: How will adding care assist practitioners to understand relational leadership better?

This research sub-question had two supporting questions which were only directed at the expert participants. It was intended to support the key research question by focussing on the practical implications of having such a care infused relational leadership style in addressing sustainability issues. The focus of this research sub-question was on expert participants. It was intended to gather their insights, based on their expert opinion, that would contribute to the better understanding of this style of leadership that the study was investigating. Table 22 below presents a compressed collection of themes that emerged from the coding process as related to this research sub-question. X denotes areas where the themes emerged from per the analysis of coded data as related to this sub-question. Blank spaces mean the theme never appeared in either one of the experts. The conclusion section will also present the selected themes from this research sub-question that will be carried over to Chapter 6 for further analysis.

Table 22. Compressed theme book from research sub-question 1

Category	Theme:	Exp-1	Exp-2
Relational Leadership	Contextual	X	X
	Integrating	X	X
	Form linkages		X
	Form networks	X	
	Form partnerships	X	X
	Build teams		X
	Person based	X	
Care / Ethics of care	Intrinsic to relational leadership	X	
	Compromise	X	
	Genuine	X	X
	Inherent	X	X
	Characteristic		X
	Difficult to learn	X	X
Sustainability	Challenging		X
	Global issue	X	X
	Orchestra	X	
	Unconventional approach	X	X

(Source: Author)

Interview question 1: From your experience, would you say leadership has a role to play in tackling issues of sustainability? Please elaborate.

This interview question was directed at the expert participants, who were presumed to provide a non-biased opinion on the study subject. The intention was to go deeper into their worldview based on their experience within the sustainability environment to provide insight into whether sustainability requires a different style of leadership, as asserted in this study. Additionally, the question aimed to further explore the understanding of whether leadership, at the very core, has any contribution to the success or failure in tackling the issues of sustainability, which would also contribute to answering the main research question of the study as it relates exploring the appropriate style of leadership for sustainability.

Presentation of evidence: experts

Table 23 provides evidence through the selected quotes from the expert participants in response to this question.

Table 23. Expert quotes – Role of leadership in sustainability success

Participant code	Relevant Quotes
Exp-1	“Definitely, in the same way though that leadership has a role to play in addressing any problem. And I will just think a little bit more if there is something unique to sustainability I think issues of sustainability span a very broad range of skills required to address them... So, in order to bring this together in a concert, like in an orchestra, you need someone that this guiding people in the same direction...No one leader can know, or one person can know what the best way is for all of those different disciplines, therefore it is about removing obstacles to enable those specialists, those people on the ground, those communities to achieve what they want to achieve in addressing sustainability”
Exp-2	“Definitely. I mean leadership doesn’t necessarily mean the CEO of a company or the head of the board, that kind of stuff; leadership means being able to understand a current trend and be able to communicate that trend or those issues to the powers that be and influencing their behaviour to change... I have noticed in terms of the sustainability field that sometimes it is very hard to grow sustainability or to grow the idea of sustainability specifically when you have CEOs who are completely money-driven, not necessarily societal or environmental driven. So, it is very hard to change”

Participant code	Relevant Quotes
	<p>“...there aren’t many people on boards that come with a science background or an environmental background. So, it is very hard to also influence, and the board members are also old people, so it is the older way of thinking. So, sustainability has been a new way of thinking.”</p>

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence

Exp-1 said leadership is important in addressing any issue. However, because sustainability is diverse and demands a broad range of skills to tackle, it is similar to an orchestra and therefore requires someone with leadership qualities that would remove obstacles and enable different team members with different skills to work cohesively towards achieving sustainability success. Exp-2 concurred with Exp-1 that leadership for sustainability is important, further asserting that leadership for sustainability does not necessarily sit at the top, because most individual who are currently holding top leadership positions in most organisations are old and do not understand sustainability, which requires a new way of thinking.

Conclusion

Both experts agreed that leadership is important for achieving sustainability success, with key qualities such as influencing and obstacle removal as well as integration skills similar to those of an orchestra conductor who is able to lead and direct people with different skills in a logical and organised manner.

Interview question 2: How will leadership practitioners benefit from adding care to relational leadership?

This interview question was also only directed at the expert participants, who were presumed to provide a non-biased opinion on the study subject. It was meant to add another layer to the previous interview question that only focused on leadership, with or without care. Again, with this question the intention was to go deeper into their worldview based on the expert participants’ experience within the sustainability environment, this time focussing on what care would do to relational leadership. The element of “sustainability” was not highlighted in the question, because the intent was to get insight

from the expert responses on whether care in relational leadership matters in general or only matter to issues that are specifically related to sustainability.

Presentation of evidence: experts

Table 24 provides evidence through some of the selected quotes from the expert participants in response to this question.

Table 24. Expert quotes – Benefit for leadership practitioners

Participant code	Relevant Quotes
Exp-1	“I would like to say ‘genuine care’...I think genuine care is intrinsic to the success of relational leadership. So genuine care for those that you are partnering with and their goals, which means relinquishing possibly, or compromising on some of your own goals, or forming collaboration so that the outcome of the two organisations coming together might look different to what they would if they were separate”.
Exp-2	“I definitely think leaders need to have that care and that care would come across in leaders in the way that they behave and the way they act. You can’t, just like you can’t force someone to respect you, you can’t force care either... So, to make other people care and get them to associate with care, you have got to demonstrate that care so that they can follow and be followers in your leadership. Ja, so I think care and respect kind of lie on the same platform there. Like I say, you can’t demand respect, you have got to earn it, same as you can’t demand someone to care for something. You have got to teach them. And that is the job of leaders”.

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence

Exp-1 cited genuine care as being “*intrinsic to the success of relational leadership*”, as it would enrich partnerships and collaborations and such that “*the outcome of the two organisations coming together might look different to what they would if they were separate.*” Exp-2 stated that it is important for leaders to care and to teach it to their followers through behaviour, suggesting that “*to make other people care and get them to associate with care, you have got to demonstrate that care so that they can follow and be followers in your leadership*”. Exp-2 further claimed that care is the same as respect, and therefore cannot be forced but is earned.

Conclusion

Both experts agreed on the expected positive results that practitioners would gain when adding care to relational leadership, such as increasing chances of goal achievement and gaining respect from the followers in a reciprocal manner.

5.7.1 Summary of findings for research sub-question 1

Table 25 presents a brief outline of the key themes discovered in response to research sub-question 1. For transparency, the table also shows themes that have emerged from the responses to the questions related to research question 1. However, this section will focus on the selected ones that the researcher wished to put a spotlight on. The shaded themes are the selected ones to be carried over to Chapter 6 as input for further discussion.

Table 25. Key themes from research sub-question 1

Category	Theme:	Exp-1	Exp-2
Relational Leadership	Contextual	X	X
	Integrating	X	X
	Form linkages		X
	Form networks	X	
	Form partnerships	X	X
	Build teams		X
	Person based	X	
Care / Ethics of care	Intrinsic to relational leadership	X	
	Compromise	X	
	Genuine	X	X
	Inherent	X	X
	Characteristic		X
	Difficult to learn	X	X
Sustainability	Challenging		X
	Global issue	X	X
	Orchestra	X	
	Unconventional approach	X	X

(Source: Author)

Analysis and conclusion

Both expert participants concurred that because achieving sustainability is not easy, it requires caring and adding the element of care to relational leadership will assist

practitioners in understanding relational leadership better and how to address the issues of sustainability through meaningful collaborations that would accrue from relationships that would have been established through care. The one theme that stood out as of notable interest from this research sub-question was an orchestra, which was likened to sustainability because of its complexity and requirement for a broad range of skills.

5.8 Findings for research sub-question 2

Research sub-question 2: What is the problem of not having care in relational leadership?

This research sub-question was intended to support the key research question by focussing on the practical implications of having a care infused relational leadership style in addressing complex issues of sustainability. This research sub-question was directed at all participants. It was intended to gather their insights on the practicalities of not having care in relational leadership and in leadership in general. Again, the concept sustainability was not highlighted in the question because all the participants were from sustainability focused organisations, therefore the question was based on the presumption that their responses will be framed within the context of sustainability.

Table 26 below presents a collection of compressed themes that emerged from the coding process as related to this research sub-question. The X in each cell indicates areas where the theme appeared repeatedly from each sector in response to questions related to research sub-question 2. Blank spaces mean the theme never appeared in those sector groups. The conclusion section will present selected themes from this research sub-question that will be carried over to Chapter 6 for further analysis.

Table 26. Compressed theme book for research sub-question 2

Category	Theme:	NGOs	Gov	Bus	Exp
Relational Leadership	Shapes thinking and culture	X			
	TBL	X			X
Care / Ethics of care	Unmeasurable	X			X
	Characteristic				X
	Opposition to corporate	X		X	
	Lacking in business			X	
	Soft		X	X	
	Genuine				X

Category	Theme:	NGOs	Gov	Bus	Exp
	Different for old generation	X		X	X
Sustainability	Social, economic, ecological problem	X	X	X	X
	Bravery	X		X	
	Improve quality of life	X		X	X
	Regeneration				X
	Greenwashing			X	X

(Source: Author)

Interview question 1: How will business benefit from adding care to relational leadership?

This interview question was probing the participants to provide insight in understanding of whether or not there is a problem for business if leadership fails to portray ethics of care in relational leadership. That is, can relational leadership be successfully applied without care. That is the essence of this question.

Presentation of evidence: non-experts

Table 27 provides evidence through selected quotes from the various participants in various sectors and disciplines in response to this question.

Table 27. Non-expert quotes – Benefit of care to business

Participant code	Relevant Quote
NGO-3	“I just think business has got to completely reimagine itself... I think my question is around are businesses brave enough to ask the hard questions, because so many businesses require us to ignore care, not all businesses, but so many businesses require ignoring impacts on people and environment. Ja. Extraction is by nature kind of destructive so how do you mitigate against the impact of what you do as a business?”.
Gov-3	“I think it is probably a longer-term benefit rather than a short-term benefit, but you would likely to see some sort of efficiency increases, less staff turnaround, less staff churn, more willingness to go the extra mile, etc. so I think ja, there would definitely be benefits but it would

Participant code	Relevant Quote
	likely be in the short term on the softer side but on the long term you should potentially see some efficiency benefits as well".
Bus-2	"I think that it would elevate... the concept of caring, right, there's a softness to it which is in complete opposition to corporate, right? So corporate is not soft, it's about making money, it's cut-throat, it's tough, you understand what I'm saying? So, it's almost bringing in what is lacking, right, bringing in what is lacking again by the recognition of the human, you know, and the recognition of the other as yourself, right? That you care...Cause you don't only care today, you care always".

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: non-experts

The NGO sector opinionated that for business to enjoy the benefits of adding care to relational leadership, they need to reimagine their operations and be brave enough to allow innovative ideas to take them to unimaginable places of sustainability. This they must do with realistic expectations of long-term benefits as per Gov's assertion. Bus further challenged business to do the opposite of what it is naturally primed to do, which is to drive profitability at all costs, and to instead allow their leadership to be vulnerable and recognise others in the ecosystem by showing care towards them. They posited that such an act will elevate business, but if it is done with sincere dedication, stating that "*you don't only care today, you care always*".

Presentation of evidence: experts

Table 28 below provides evidence through selected quotes from the expert participants when asked if they thought business would benefit from adding care to relational leadership?

Table 28. Expert quotes – Benefit of care to business

Participant code	Relevant Quote
Exp-1	"I think business would benefit the same way anyone would benefit, the same way an individual would benefit, the same way a global organization would benefit, business would benefit, which is this: I think that people sense, so I am going to go into a very ethereal space, I think that people sense when

Participant code	Relevant Quote
	another individual, businesses are made up of individuals, when another individual or a business let's say has a genuine sense of care, I think people respond to that. I think they have a natural, I think it is inbuilt in us, to respond to someone, something, an organisation that genuinely cares. And I think that is a natural response of human nature...however if they are doing it with the purpose of improving caring only to the purpose of improving the bottom line, I think ultimately that will be seen through; it has to be genuine care".
Exp-2	"It would benefit a lot but like I say, I don't know how you can make someone care, unless the caring is already in existence, because it is like a characteristic of you as a person...it is a difficult one. It is unmeasurable, but obviously you would like someone who cares about the subject matter or the domain in which they are applying for jobs or they are working in their field, but I can't measure the amount of care someone will need or have".

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: experts

Exp-1 asserted that adding care to relational leadership will benefit business, further emphasising that it has to be genuine, because if the care is only intended to boost the bottom-line, it would be recognised as such, and the benefits of that care will not be sustainable. Exp-2 agreed with Exp-1 that business will benefit from adding care to relational leadership but highlighted a potential complication in justifying the act of caring or the amount of care that business can benefit from, due to it being claimed as an inherent characteristic of humans and therefore unmeasurable.

Comparison and conclusion

Both the experts and non-experts agreed that business would indeed benefit from adding care to relational leadership. Because business is understood as only being concerned about profits or the bottom line, adding an element of care is expected to stretch them and challenge business to reimagine itself and do things differently. They further underscored the importance of extending genuine care, which business would need to practise on a daily basis if the expected benefits are to accrue in a sustainable manner.

Interview question 2: In your opinion, would you say relational leadership with care is appropriate for sustainability? Why?

This research sub-question was meant to contextualise the previous research question, which was a generic probe of benefit to business, from adding care in relational leadership. This sub-question was specifically directed at sustainability, wanting to understand if relational leadership with care is indeed appropriate for sustainability.

Presentation of evidence: non-experts

Table 29 provides evidence through the selected quotes from the various participants in various sectors and disciplines in response to this question.

Table 29. Non-expert quotes – Leadership with care for sustainability

Participant code	Relevant Quote
NGO-2	<p>“It is a difficult one. It is unmeasurable, but obviously you would like someone who cares about the subject matter or the domain in which they are applying for jobs or they are working in their field, but I can’t measure the amount of care someone will need or have...It needs to begin from within the organisation to actually shape the thinking and the culture”.</p> <p>“The environment is a living ecosystem, you touch one part, you affect a multiple of other parts... We need to exploit it in a way that it is sustained, in a way that it also gets an opportunity to regrow itself”.</p>
Gov-2	<p>“If you take that care in relational leadership you understand where to draw the line, for example if you wanna develop something, what are the impacts it’s gonna have on the environment? What are the impacts it’s gonna have on the social community and what are the governance issues within that community which you’re going to be working with? Cause remember, it’s all three aspects... if you do it with the care and the understanding of it you will have a win-win situation in that sense”.</p>
Bus-4	<p>“I would say care and relational leadership is critical for you if you are working in sustainability. I can’t see it happening any other way...I don’t think we have a generation of leaders now that were raised you know in that way, and they care differently about others, and maybe this concept of sustainability is still foreign and new to them”.</p>

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: non-experts

The NGO sector was of the view that because the environment is a living ecosystem it needs to be exploited with care to enable it to rejuvenate itself. However, for that to

happen they opinionated that a leader with care would have to set the tone, but also indicated a concern that caring being unmeasurable could pose a challenge in terms of knowing if the individual really cares or cares enough to successfully pursue the set goals of sustainability. This assertion was supported by Gov who claimed that sustainability requires leaders with the ability to treat all the elements in the ecosystem with care and understanding if it is to lead to a win-win situation for all who are involved. Bus also supported the notion that relational leadership with care is appropriate for sustainability; however, they also highlighted a challenge with the current old leadership that because they were raised in a different era, caring means something different to them and because sustainability is a foreign term to them, caring for sustainability might also be a challenge to them.

Presentation of evidence: experts

Table 30 provides evidence through the selected quotes from the expert participants in in response interview question that asked them for a justified opinion whether relational leadership with care is appropriate for sustainability.

Table 30. Expert quotes – Leadership with care for sustainability

Participant code	Relevant quotes
Exp-1	“So, sustainability is not only a kind of ecological problem, and in many instances, it might be more of a social problem or economic problem than an ecological one. And achieving sustainability goals requires care in so many ways... So, we are aiming to achieve it because we want to improve the quality of life, of people, on the planet. So that is the ultimate... I think a personal connection to the natural environment and a personal sense of connection to the natural environment and disadvantaged communities, is essential to achieving sustainable development”.
Exp-2	“I would say yes and no... leaders in sustainability or regeneration or resilience, however you want to see sustainability as it is evolving, those leaders and the ones that make the biggest difference would be the ones that have caring, and relational leadership associated with sustainability. However, because sustainability is now such a huge driver of business in terms of their reputation, in terms of their risks, a lot of people are now just doing it because they need to tick the boxes...I think there are two parts, there are the ones who are the leaders and then the ones who are just the followers, and the leaders are the ones that have the relationship with caring in relational leadership, and the followers are just following trends”.

(Source: Author)

Analysis of evidence: experts

Exp-1 posited that because sustainability is concerned with improving quality of life, of the people, mostly the disadvantaged of the communities as well as the planet, it therefore requires a caring leader with personal connection to all the elements in the ecosystem. Exp-2 brought in a slightly different view, which suggested that while caring is important when addressing issues of sustainability, it might not be the only driver for sustainability success. Exp-2 postulated that caring relational leaders will naturally achieve sustainability success, but the non-caring leaders could also achieve sustainability success not because they care but, simply because environmental risks, societal and other pressures are forcing them to adhere to sustainability requirements. So, they could do it just to tick the box of adherence and in the process achieve sustainability.

Comparison and conclusion

The sentiments shared by both the experts and non-expert participants in relation to the appropriateness of relational leadership with care for sustainability came across as generally congruent, except for the noted divergent point raised by Exp-2 that sometimes, achieving sustainability might not result from caring, but it could be due to rising market pressures that are forcing leaders to do what is expected of them to achieve sustainability.

5.8.1 Summary of findings for research sub-question 2

Table 31 presents a brief outline of the key themes discovered in response to research sub-question 2. The table only shows new themes that have not been identified in the previous sections of this chapter. Again, the same process was followed in this section by grouping themes according to the categories that are linked to the research constructs. The shaded area indicates those themes that the researcher has identified to be carried over to Chapter 6 as input for further discussion.

Table 31. Key themes from research sub-question 2

Category	Theme:	NGOs	Gov	Bus	Exp
Relational Leadership	Shapes thinking and culture	X			
	TBL	X			X
Care / Ethics of care	Unmeasurable	X			X
	Characteristic				X
	Opposition to corporate	X		X	

Category	Theme:	NGOs	Gov	Bus	Exp
	Lacking in business			X	
	Soft		X	X	
	Genuine				X
	Different for old generation	X		X	X
Sustainability	Social, economic, ecological problem	X	X	X	X
	Bravery	X			
	Improve quality of life	X		X	X
	Regeneration				X
	Greenwashing			X	X

(Source: Author)

Analysis and conclusion

The general understanding from this sub-question was that business only cares about profit or the bottom line, which is not what is needed when pursuing sustainability goals, because they have a long-term yield and could be challenging to business, which is always chasing short-term results. Therefore, adding care to relational leadership is expected to propel business to reimagine itself and how it generates income in a sustainable manner. However, another sentiment that was revealed which was of a different view was that business could still remain uncaring but adhere to sustainability requirements as a result of societal pressures. Whilst this caring might be limited to minimum transactions that would enable business to “tick the box” of sustainability compliance, it might assist in positively contributing towards some of the sustainability targets.

5.9 Chapter summary

This chapter outlined the findings from the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability. The analysis was structured in line with the research question and research sub-questions presented in Chapter 3. Figure 7 presents a conceptual framework from the research findings.



Figure 7. Updated conceptual framework (Source: Author)

The updated conceptual framework is based on the various themes that emerged from the literature review in Chapter 2 and updated with those that emerged from the analysis of the findings from this chapter. The ones that are black and bolded indicate the themes that emerged from both the reviewed literature and the findings analysis, with the blue highlight indicating the themes that have emerged from the findings. Chapter 6 discusses the findings from this chapter in relation to the reviewed literature as presented in Chapter 2. Therefore, it should be noted that the presented draft framework is still in a draft format and is yet to be updated with possible new themes in the literature that will be identified after the review and analysis of key themes from chapter 5 against the extant literature. At the end of Chapter 6 an updated conceptual framework will also be presented.

6 CHAPTER: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines a detailed discussion of the research findings from the semi-structured interviewed as presented in Chapter 5, in contrast to the insights uncovered from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The discussion of the findings is structured per research question, constructs and themes. Themes that emerged in Chapter 5 are compared and juxtaposed against the key themed constructs from the reviewed literature as they pertain to each research question. The discussion is limited to a maximum of 4 themes per construct. A summary of each section is presented to highlight key findings and potential areas of contribution to the existing body of literature that aims to explore the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability, particularly in sustainability focused organisations within SA borders. In cases where differences between findings and literature were identified, the following three step systematic process was followed to verify the spotted difference:

Step 1: The researcher revisited the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 to verify, using keywords, if there was any association with the identified theme, if any literature was found to support the theme, and updates were reflected in the relevant sections of this chapter and also reflected in the updated conceptual framework presented at the end of this chapter. If no literature was identified in this step, step 2 followed.

Step 2: The researcher selected articles from the reviewed literature to verify the claim of a new theme; if the theme was proven to exist, the updates were reflected in the relevant section of this chapter and also reflected in the updated conceptual framework presented at the end of this chapter. If no literature was identified in this step, then step 3 followed.

Step 3: The researcher selected 3 new articles not used in the literature review to validate the claim of a new theme, if there were still no matches found, then the theme was claimed as a potential difference and a new contribution to the literature.

6.2 Discussion of results for research question 1

Research Question 1: What is the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability?

This research question was intended to provide a deeper understanding of a care infused relational leadership and to further explore if adding care to relational leadership is an appropriate action for addressing issues of sustainability. The discussion of results of research question 1 are presented based on the key themes that were constructed from the data analysis in Chapter 5 and grouped per the relevant research study constructs. The findings for each theme are compared against the extant literature to determine if they are consistent or not with the existing literature.

6.2.1 Care theme 1: Love and respect

Recap of key findings from literature

Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) posit that caring demands humanity to pay attention to their behaviour and existence in the world, emphasising the importance of empathy and feelings in the establishment of ideologies that are meant to guide human actions, with empathy being asserted as an age-old innate part of human evolution (Gilligan, 2014) and a critical attribute that defines humanity (Jax et al., 2018) which, when linked with caring, connects humans to the environment and is vital for the survival of all species. For this to happen, Lithoxidou et al. (2017) asserts that modern values that guide human behaviour need to change to include fundamental elements such as caring and empathy to enable humanity to recognise their interrelationship with nature and begin to regard it with the love and respect it deserves.

Furthermore, care ethics reflect the traditional beliefs of many indigenous communities who are of the view that nature's elements, such as the sea, the mountains and the like, are also living beings and deserve the same level of respect and adoration as that afforded to humans (Chan et al., 2018). Nicholson & Kurucz (2019) further suggests a differentiation between natural and ethical caring, suggesting that natural caring is voluntarily extended to the other without coercion (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018) whereas ethical caring is offered out of duty to care because that is what is socially expected as a sign of humanity (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).

Recap of key research findings

The participants described care and ethics of care as an empathetic act which embodies respect and love for all, further asserting that love means care and caring is an ethical thing to do and one is expected to do it regardless of their feeling. They claimed that caring in a corporate environment is a challenge because in corporate individuals are taught not care about anything but the financial targets, therefore caring will be a stretch

for business as it will propel them to recognise humanness in every being and recognise other individuals as humans and start prioritising them over profits.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The reviewed literature described caring as an act that when extended to all beings, both human and non-human, reflects love, empathy and respect, which positively correlates with the research findings which also alluded to caring as being equal to love and treating others with respect. Another interesting correlation that the participants described, is caring as an ethical thing to do, which in the literature it was also described as an act which is ethically performed out of duty and due to societal expectation and pressures.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in relation to love and respect as a theme linked to the research construct of care or ethics of care and was found to be consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, which claims that care ethics reflect the traditional ethos that all humanity, including the species should be treated with the same level of respect and adoration.

6.2.2 Care theme 2: Ubuntu

Recap of key findings from literature

Terreblanche (2018) asserts that human's inability to care is due to the lack of wanting (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018), which could be blamed on the Western belief that humans are autonomous beings (Jax et al., 2018). This lack of wanting to change requires a mindset shift and renewed worldviews that are based on new communal ethos, such as Ubuntu, which recognises and emphasises the inseparable connection between humans and nature. Ubuntu is an African interpretation of a care ethic, that propels those who abide by it to treat nature and the environment with the utmost care and respect (Terreblanche, 2018), because whilst nature may not have a human voice, it still has a say in how it wants to be treated and cared for (West et al., 2018). The ethic of care, through Ubuntu values, assists with the integration of the various layers of relationships between humanity and the environment (Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019).

Therefore, caring for mother nature could also be demonstrated through the reciprocal behaviour between humans and the environment (West et al., 2018) and the appreciation that humanity's existence could very well be defined by their coexistence with other species and that one who takes from nature must also give back to nature (Jax et al.,

2018). And one who benefits from nature's resources must also see to it that those resources are replenished (Jax et al., 2018).

Recap of key research findings

The findings linked Ubuntu to the traditional upbringing that was embedded in the majority of Africans, which taught them to care not only for the living but also to the non-living, asserting that recognising humanness in everything transcends into the recognition of humanity in humans and all the species and therefore treating them with love and care.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

According to the reviewed literature, Ubuntu is defined as an African interpretation of the ethic of care, which is taught and instilled in many Africans at a young age. This literature's claim was found to be similar to the research findings which also claimed that Ubuntu values are embedded to Africans at a young age, teaching them to recognise humanness in everything and therefore treat all, even the non-human species with care.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in relation to Ubuntu as a theme linked to ethics of care appears to be consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, which asserts that the ethic of care, through Ubuntu values, supports the integration of the various layers of relationships between humanity and the environment and helps to cement the appreciation that humanity's existence could very well be defined by their coexistence with other species.

6.2.3 Care theme 3: Inherent

Recap of key findings from literature

Caring as a concept is broadly understood to mean the act of nurturing something or someone (Enqvist et al., 2018) to protect or preserve its wellbeing (West et al., 2018). It is understood to be something that is naturally formed from childhood, from caring and being cared-for by those around us (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), leading to the assertion that it is natural for all beings to expect to be treated with kindness and compassion, from a reciprocal anticipation and belief that it is everyone's life purpose to help others (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018). It is further alleged that with empathy, the humans' inherent characteristic of care, which is reflected in their selfless acts, enables them to prioritise

the needs of other beings over their own, (Jax et al., 2018; Lithoxidou et al., 2017), and is noted as a critical attribute on which eco-centricity is based.

Recap of key research findings

The findings indicated a general understanding that care is an ethics that is embedded from a young age, with others suggesting that it is how humans are expected to carry themselves or live, asserting that if as a human you expect others to care for you, to respect you and to understand you, then that is what you should offer first before expecting it back.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The reviewed literature identifies caring as something that is formed from childhood practices of being cared-for by others which is similar to what the findings suggested that care is an ethic that is embedded from a young age, which creates an expectation that all humanity should live by this ethic.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in relation to inherent as a theme linked to the Ethics of care was found to be consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, that care is a natural characteristic that is instilled in humans from a young age and is generally expected from all humanity.

6.2.4 Relational leadership theme 1: Humanness and humanity

Recap of key findings from literature

Relational leadership from a South African perspective is asserted to be generally rooted on the kinship and coherence (Stenseke, 2018), which binds all humanity, both living and non-living, based on the principal understanding that “I am because we are”, which is largely known as the African values of Ubuntu (Pérezts et al., 2020; Terreblanche, 2018). Therefore, honouring humanity is a critical requirement for a relational leader who is in tune with their emotions and is mindful of the impact of their actions on the TBL factors (Fry & Egel, 2021). Such leaders are suggested to be unconventional, whose reflective and transformational style of leadership is based on morality and promotes integration of societal principles and strategies and democratic decisioning for the collective achievement of goals (Kurucz et al., 2017).

Recap of key research findings

Participants suggested that relational leadership is about recognising and treating other humans in a dignified manner, through honouring “our common humanity” and humanness of the living and the non-living, and also recognising other individuals as whole beings, not just as tools needed to contribute to organisational success. Furthermore, it was suggested that relational leadership is a person-based type of leadership, which promotes treating other humans with dignity.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The reviewed literature identifies relational leadership as a style that promotes the appreciation of other humans and recognising the humanity in them and in every other being. This view was supported by the participants as a critical characteristic that defines the successful practising of relational leadership as leadership style for sustainability.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in relation to humanness and humanity as a theme linked to relational leadership is consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, which asserts that sustainability issues require unconventional leadership styles such as relational leadership, which requires leaders to honour and respect all humanity for the achievement of sustainability success.

6.2.5 Relational leadership theme 2: Partnerships and collaboration

Recap of key findings from literature

Sustainability issues are an urgent threat to all humanity and require that people collaborate for fitting solutions. However, achieving triumph in the coherent integration of all these actors is not easy. It requires successful collaboration of all the various disciplines at various levels and calls for a different and unconventional style of leadership, a leadership that is grounded on ethics and morality (Fry & Egel, 2021), such as relational leadership (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Successful collaboration and partnership for sustainability requires new leadership competencies with a collective transdisciplinary approach that is multi-level; multi-sectoral, and multi-disciplinary, involving social and scientific academic disciplines (Kurucz et al., 2017), as proposed in the SDG 2030 Agenda (Fourie, 2018). This is the type of leadership approach that relational leadership is purported to promote (Broman et al., 2017) because it does not recognise individualism for leadership but is an umbrella term that views leadership as a collective effort that emerges from new and existing, formal and informal interactions and

partnerships (Kurucz et al., 2017; McCauley & Palus, 2021). Relational leadership is posited to be a destructive style that would challenge and reconstruct the conventional single member leadership styles (McCauley & Palus, 2021), for the achievement of evolving sustainability goals.

Recap of key research findings

Participants articulated their understanding of relational leadership as a style of leadership that is conversational and non-authoritarian and is based on the formation of partnerships and collaborations for the collective achievement of a specific goal or to address a specific problem such as sustainability. Relational leadership was further suggested to be a leadership style that enhances team relationships, where a leader accepts that there is no one individual with all the answers but that the solution would emerge from healthy collaborations and partnerships with the relevant stakeholders in the ecosystem. Furthermore, relational leaders were alleged to be the type of leaders who would lead as they would have wanted to be led.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The reviewed literature suggest that healthy partnerships and collaborations are what defined the success of relational leadership. Such a view was also supported by the participants who defined relational leadership as a non-authoritarian style of leadership that appreciates that a leader does not have to have all the answers to solve a problem, but that solutions are likely to emerge from healthy partnerships and collaborations with stakeholders within the ecosystem.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in relation to partnerships and collaboration theme that is linked to relational leadership is consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, which asserts that, unconventional leadership styles such as relational leadership require leaders to have healthy partnerships and collaborations for the achievement of a goal or a solution to intricate problems such as those of sustainability.

6.2.6 Relational leadership theme 3: Understanding

Recap of key findings from literature

Kurucz et al. (2017) assert that the complex issues of sustainability are a result of failure by traditional leaders to understand or recognise the interdependencies among the

variables within the ecosystem and the complexity resulting from such connections (Plajulián & Guevara, 2019).

Recap of key research findings

The participants suggested education about sustainability and the related intricacies as a crucial step towards changing leadership attitudes and ensuring that their actions are reflective of leaders who understand the interconnectedness of all elements in the ecosystem. They also suggested education through immersive experiences as an important lever in assisting leaders to better understand the issues that sustainability is intending to address and the role they could play towards tackling these issues.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The extant literature claims that leadership’s lack of understanding of sustainability issues contributes to sustainability complexities. This assertion was also supported by the participants who suggested that leaders need to be educated about sustainability to change their attitudes and actions towards it.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in understanding as a theme related to relational leadership construct is consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, which asserts that traditional leaders’ lack of understanding of sustainability contributes to the issues surrounding sustainability.

6.2.7 Conclusion of the main research question

The main research question, through various supporting question sought to understand the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability. Table 32 presents a summary of theoretical similarities and differences noted when comparing emergent themes from research question 1 and existing literature.

Table 32. Key theoretical similarities and differences from research question 1

Section	Construct	Theme	Theory from literature	Research findings
Similarities				
6.2.1	Care	Love and respect	Lithoxoidou et al. (2017) asserts that key elements such as caring and empathy are required to	Participants described care or ethics of care as an empathetic act which

Section	Construct	Theme	Theory from literature	Research findings
			enable humanity to recognise their interrelation with nature and begin to regard it with the love and respect it deserves.	embodies respect and love for all.
6.2.2		Ubuntu	Ubuntu is an African interpretation of a care ethic, that propels those who abide by it to treat nature and the environment with the utmost care and respect (Terreblanche, 2018),	Ubuntu is linked to the traditional upbringing that was embedded to the majority of Africans teaching them to care for all
6.2.3		Inherent	Care is understood to be something that is naturally formed from childhood, from caring and being cared-for by those around us (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019),	Care is an ethics that is embedded from a young age
6.2.4	Relational leadership	Humanness and humanity	Relational leadership is rooted on the kinship and coherence (Stenseke 2018), which binds all humanity, both living and non-living.	Relational leadership is about recognising and treating other humans in a dignified manner, through honouring “our common humanity” and humanness of the living and the non-living.
6.2.5		Partnerships and collaboration	Successful collaboration and partnership for sustainability requires new leadership competencies with a collective transdisciplinary approach that is multi-level; multi-sectoral, and multi-	Relational leadership is a style of leadership that is conversational and non-authoritarian and is based on the formation of partnerships and

Section	Construct	Theme	Theory from literature	Research findings
			disciplinary, involving social and scientific academic disciplines (Kurucz et al., 2017), such as relational leadership.	collaborations for the collective achievement of a specific goal.
6.2.6		Understanding	The complex issues of sustainability are alleged to be resulting from failure by traditional leaders to understand or recognise the interconnections among the eco-system variables (Kurucz et al., 2017; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019)	Education about sustainability is needed as a crucial step towards in ensuring that leadership actions are reflective of leaders who understand the interconnectedness of all elements in the eco-system

(Source: Author)

6.3 Discussion of results for research sub-question 1

Research sub-question 1: How will adding care assist practitioners to understand relational leadership better?

This research sub-question was intended to support the key research question by focussing on the practical implications of having such a care infused relational leadership style in addressing sustainability issues. The discussion of results to research sub-question 1 are also presented based on the key themes that were constructed from the data analysis in Chapter 5 and grouped per the relevant research study constructs. The findings for each theme are compared against the extant literature to determine if they are consistent or not with the existing literature.

6.3.1 Sustainability theme 1: Unconventional approach

Recap of key findings from literature

Sustainability is a complex phenomenon, demanding unconventional thinking and management practices (Fry & Egel, 2021; Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz,

2019). Kurucz et al. (2017) further claims that the complex issues of sustainability are simply rooted in integration, because of the inability of traditional leaders to understand and recognise the interdependencies among the variables within the ecosystem as well as the complexity resulting from such connections (Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). Therefore, it is critical that if the pursuit for sustainability is to be successful, there has to be some appreciation of local differences and contextual translations based on different value sets, cultures and traditions (Christie et al., 2019), which are intertwined with nature (Stenseke, 2018). These and other conditions add to the complexity of achieving sustainability success, which supports the assertion that managing for sustainability requires new and unconventional approaches that demonstrate key aspects of cultural identity, social cohesion and moral responsibility towards mother nature.

Recap of key research findings

The assertion from participants that sustainability requires unconventional approaches was founded on the suggestion that organisations struggle to respond to the evolving issues of sustainability because most organisational leaders, from the board level at the top, are from the old generation, with traditional approaches of leadership and do not understand sustainability and the requirements attached to it. These leaders are mostly interested in pursuing profits, with less regard of how the business operations impact on the environment and other ecosystem elements, thereby leading to the claim that a new and unconventional leadership approach is required if sustainability issues are to be tackled successfully.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The extant literature claims that conventional styles of leadership are not suited for the complex and intricate issues of sustainability. Such an assertion was supported by the participants who stated that the lack of understanding of sustainability issues by the old generation calls for a new way of thinking that will reflect the appreciation of the interconnectedness of all the elements in the ecosystem.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in relation to unconventional approach as a theme for the sustainability construct is consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, which asserts that sustainability requires the recognition and appreciation of the intricacies and the different interpretation that are linked to it and that the traditional styles of leadership are not suited for sustainability, thereby calling for an unconventional style of leadership for sustainability.

6.3.2 Sustainability theme 2: Orchestra

Recap of key findings from literature

Orchestra as a sustainability theme does not seem to feature in the extant literature. However, in addition to the inherent sustainability complication from the broad classification of the related domains (Eslami, et al., 2018), the literature does acknowledge the added sustainability complexity which is presumed to be stemming from the lack of proper integration of the many moving parts in the ecosystem as well as the lack of alignment of the intentions of all stakeholders in the ecosystem (Kurucz et al., 2017). The added complication of sustainability is that the said ecosystems do not necessarily have a central leader, they are self-organising (Kinder et al., 2021) and yet dependent on other system for sustainability success. The UN 2030 agenda through SDG 17, also acknowledged this intricacy by explicitly emphasising a need for collaboration between government, business and civil society for the successful achievement of sustainability goals (Haywood et al., 2019).

Recap of key research findings

The Orchestra theme emerged when the participants were describing the importance of leadership in addressing sustainability issues which resulted in a claim that because sustainability requires a wide range of skills, it could be viewed as an orchestra, which requires a leader or conductor to guide people in a particular direction. However, this is to be done with the appreciation that such a leader is only there to integrate and guide but not to provide answers because there is no one individual who has answers for everything pertaining to different disciplines. Therefore, sustainability as an orchestra requires a leader who has the ability to integrate, remove obstacles and enable stakeholders to perform at their best towards tackling the issues of sustainability.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

Due to Orchestra being perceived as a new theme and not having appeared in Chapter 2 of this paper, the 3-step process was applied to verify if this theme could indeed be claimed as new to the literature.

Step 1: Key words such as “sustainability as a concert”, “broad skills”, “wide range of skills” were used to re-examine the reviewed literature. Sustainability appeared but not within the context of it being likened to a concert or orchestra. “Broad” also appeared in relation to the sustainability domain classification but not within the context of this search. Step 2 then kicked in.

Step 2: The similar process was followed but in this step the search was done on the journal articles related to sustainability, but the same results as that found in step 1 emerged. In this step words such as “wide” and “skills” appeared but again not in the context that the search was intended for. This result led to step 3.

Step 3: In this step, the researcher selected 3 additional articles that were not used in the literature review chapter to search for the key words identified in step 1 as well as the theme word “orchestra”. Again, there were no matches found. Therefore, this observation supports the suggestion to highlight Orchestra as a potential different theme in the literature.

However, whilst this result still does not confirm the suggested likening of an orchestra to sustainability, the existing literature does support the thinking on which the concept was founded, that sustainability requires an integration of the various stakeholders from a variety of domains, which indirectly supports the assertion from the participants that sustainability due to its complexities that require various skills and abilities could be viewed as an orchestra concert.

Interpretation and conclusion

Based on the analysis conducted, Orchestra does not seem to feature in the extant literature as a theme linked to sustainability as was asserted by the participants. Therefore, it appears as if Orchestra could be potentially suggested as a new theme in the sustainability literature.

6.3.3 Conclusion of research sub-question 1

The research sub-question 1, through various supporting question sought to gather information to get insight on how would adding care assist practitioners to understand relational leadership better. Table 33 presents a summary of theoretical similarities and differences noted when comparing emergent themes from research sub-question 1 and existing literature.

Table 33. Key theoretical similarities and differences from research sub-question 1

Section	Construct	Theme	Theory from literature	Research findings
Similarities				
6.3.1	Sustainability	Unconventional approach	Sustainability is a complex phenomenon, demanding unconventional thinking and management practices (Fry & Egel, 2021; Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).	Organisations struggle to respond to the evolving issues of sustainability because most organisational leaders, from the board level at the top, are from the old generation, with traditional approaches of leadership and do not understand sustainability.
Differences				
6.3.2	Sustainability	Orchestra (New theme)	Sustainability complexity is presumed to be stemming from a lack of proper integration of the many moving parts in the ecosystem as well as the lack of alignment of the intentions of all stakeholders in the ecosystem (Kurucz et al., 2017).	Because sustainability requires a wide range of skills, it could be viewed as an orchestra, which requires a leader or conductor to guide people in a particular direction

(Source: Author)

6.4 Discussion of results for research sub-question 2

Research sub-question 2: What is the problem of not having care in relational leadership?

This research sub-question was also intended to support the key research question with a focus on the practical implications of not having a care infused relational leadership style in addressing the complex issues of sustainability. The discussion of results to this research sub-question are also presented based on the key themes that were constructed from the data analysis in Chapter 5.

6.4.1 Sustainability theme 3: Social, ecological and economic problem

Recap of key findings from literature

Sustainability is a concept with a variety of interpretations (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) and context specific uses (Purvis et al., 2019), with no single agreed-upon definition (Eslami et al., 2019). Some refer to it as a set of social-ecological criteria which are meant to guide human beings in their interaction with the ecosystem elements (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019) others define it as a vision that unites human actions towards the achievement of environmental, social and economic goals (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019). This interdependence is also recognised by the SDGs, which encourage the social trust amongst all stakeholders in the ecosystem, in pursuit for the delicate balance (Eslami et al., 2019) of the interwoven tripartite pillars of sustainability, which are economic growth for social development, though ecological exploitation (Eslami et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2020). Essentially, sustainability could be viewed as a reflection of ecological and social issues, (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Wang et al., 2017) as well as the exploitation of limited resources for the benefit of all humanity (Fry & Egel, 2021; Kurucz et al., 2017).

Recap of key research findings

The participants posited that sustainability is concerned with social, economic and ecological issues which a sustainability leader would need to consider. They further suggested that of the 3 elements, social issues should be prioritised, especially in SA which has a high issue of poverty and unemployment. This claim led to the assertion that the environment could be exploited responsibly for the better good, but it should also be allowed the opportunity to rejuvenate itself. Following this process with the appreciation of interdependence of ecosystem elements, the participants asserted would lead to a win-win solution for all.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The extant literature presents a number of different definitions for sustainability. However, whilst they appear to be different, they all recognise the interconnectedness of the social, ecological and economic elements that define sustainability. This is in line

with the claim from participants that sustainability is a 3-part problem, which requires that all parts be considered when tackling sustainability challenges.

Interpretation and conclusion

The research findings in relation to social, ecological and economic as a theme for the sustainability construct is consistent with what is in the reviewed literature, which defines sustainability as a vision that unites human actions towards the achievement of environmental, social and economic goals.

6.4.2 Sustainability theme 4: Improve quality of life

Recap of key findings from literature

Sustainability is essentially aimed at improving quality of life for all (Marchese et al., 2018), through a feedback loop process of environmental degradation for poverty reduction resulting in economic growth (Purvis, et al., 2019). The social dimension of sustainability implores business, in pursuit for profit, to consider the welfare of their immediate stakeholders such as the community where they operate (Martins et al., 2019).

Recap of key research findings

The participants posited that the ultimate goal of sustainability is to improve quality of life, even suggesting that, while the environment should also be cared for, people- especially the poor - should be prioritised over all the ecosystem elements. This assertion was founded on the suggestion that when given the opportunity the environment is likely to recover, businesses could also recover when the correct strategies are implemented. However, the same cannot be claimed with life, because once it is lost, there is no recovery. This, it is alleged, is mostly true for the poor individuals, because the rich are presumed to have the necessary resources to mitigate the negative impacts related to sustainability issues.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

The reviewed literature recognises that sustainability success should be aimed at improving quality of life, through initiatives such as poverty eradication. This is in line with the claim from participants that sustainability's ultimate goal is to improve quality of life, especially for the poor.

Interpretation and conclusion

Whilst the literature refers to promote as opposed to improve, the research findings in relation to improve quality of life theme for the sustainability construct is similar to what is in the reviewed literature, which asserts that sustainability is concerned with promoting the quality of life for all.

6.4.3 Care theme 4: Unmeasurable

Recap of key findings from literature

The reviewed literature refers to care or caring as feelings of sympathy and compassion that propels one to selflessly act with an intent to protect or nurture something or someone (Enqvist et al., 2018) so as to preserve its wellbeing (West et al., 2018) for the benefit of all humans and non-humans in the current and future generation (Fry & Egel, 2021; Jax et al., 2018; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). On these and other definitions in the reviewed literature, there seems to be no reference made to care being either measurable or unmeasurable. Therefore, Unmeasurable as a theme associated with care does not seem to feature in the reviewed literature.

Recap of key research findings

The Unmeasurable theme emerged participants when suggesting that adding genuine care to relational leadership would benefit business, otherwise the benefits of that care will not be sustainable. Then a complication related to care was raised in that because care is an inherent emotional characteristic of humans and therefore unmeasurable, it would be difficult to ascertain or advise stakeholders on the relevant amount of care needed for sustainability success or to identify a caring leader that is fit for sustainability.

Analysis: comparison of findings with literature

Due to Unmeasurable being perceived as a new theme and not having appeared in Chapter 2 of this paper, the 3-step process was applied to verify if this theme could indeed be claimed as new to the literature.

Step 1: Key words such as “measuring feeling”, “measuring care”, “measuring character” were used to re-examine the reviewed literature. Care and feeling appeared but were not associated with being measured. Character and measuring did not appear in the search. This result led to Step 2.

Step 2: The similar process was followed but in this step the search was done on the journal articles related to care and ethics of care, the results showed care as being

described as a feeling. However, this definition did not extend to explain its measurability or lack thereof. This result then led to step 3.

Step 3: In this step, the researcher selected three additional articles that were not used in the literature review chapter to search for the key words identified in step 1 as well as the theme word “unmeasurable”. Again, there were no direct matches found. Therefore, this observation supports the suggestion to highlight Unmeasurable as a potential different theme in the literature.

The results therefore confirmed that the Unmeasurable theme seem to not feature in the extant literature, thus supporting an assertion that this theme could potentially be a new contribution to the literature.

Interpretation and conclusion

Based on the analysis conducted, Unmeasurable does not seem to feature in the extant literature as a theme linked to care as was asserted by the participants. Therefore, it appears as if Unmeasurable could potentially be suggested as a new theme in the sustainability literature.

6.4.4 Conclusion of research sub-question 2

The research sub-question 2, through various supporting question sought to gather answers to the question of what is the problem of not having care in relational leadership. Table 34 presents a summary of key theoretical similarities and differences that were noted in research sub-question 2.

Table 34. Key theoretical similarities and differences from research sub-question 2

Section	Construct	Theme	Theory from literature	Research findings
Similarities				
6.4.1	Sustainability	Social, ecological and economic problem	The SDGs encourage the social trust amongst all stakeholders in the eco-system, in pursuit for the delicate balance of the interwoven tripartite pillars of	Sustainability is concerned with social, economic and ecological issues which a sustainability

Section	Construct	Theme	Theory from literature	Research findings
			sustainability, which are economic growth for social development, though ecological exploitation (Eslami et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2020).	leader would need to consider.
6.4.2		Improve quality of life	Sustainability is essentially aimed at improving quality of life for all (Marchese et al., 2018).	The ultimate goal of sustainability is to improve quality of life.
Differences				
6.4.3	Care	Unmeasurable (New theme)	Care or caring are defined as feelings of sympathy and compassion (Fry & Egel, 2021) that propel one to selflessly (Jax et al., 2018) act with an intent to protect or nurture something or someone (Enqvist et al., 2018).	Care is an inherent emotional characteristic of humans and therefore unmeasurable.

(Source: Author)

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the discussions of the study results that were presented in Chapter 5, with an added emphasis on comparing and interpreting the results against the insights uprooted from the reviewed literature, also highlighting the relevance of the key findings towards the literature and arguing for or against its relevance. Figure 8 presents an updated conceptual framework with potential new themes, highlighted in red, that were identified in Chapter 5 and confirmed in this chapter after the 3-step verification process.



Figure 8. Updated conceptual framework (Source: Author)

Another key update to be noted is the additional themes that have been bolded, to indicate that post the discussion in this chapter, they have also been confirmed as existing in the extant literature. The next Chapter presents the proposed framework, which emerged from the results of reviewed literature in Chapter 2 combined with the findings and discussions of the findings in Chapters 5 and 6. It further outlines study conclusions and limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

7 CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

The world as we know it is continuously evolving, thereby propelling humanity to take a pause and ask if their way of life is aligned with the demands of the modern world. The population continues to grow despite the continuous depletion of scarce resources, exasperating climate changes and many other related conditions, which are fast converging in an unprecedented fashion to create a complex mix of issues of sustainability (Kurucz et al., 2017), threatening human survival and endangering environmental preservation for future generations. Such concerns support the assertions that modern leaders' conventional approaches to the wicked and intricate issues of sustainability (Etzion et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) are inefficient (Bhattacharya & Polman, 2017), and should be revamped if any progress is to be made towards tackling the issues of sustainability. Centred around sustainability focused organisations within SA, this research aimed to get a deeper understanding of the influence of care in relational leadership, as a potential new and unconventional style of leadership that could be useful in addressing the complex challenges of sustainability and create a sustainable environment for the benefit of current and future generations.

The outcomes of this study in relation to the research question and sub-questions, which were presented in Chapter 3 of this paper are detailed in this chapter. A conceptual framework is presented in support of principal theoretical conclusions as well as recommendations for management and stakeholders. Theoretical contributions and practical implications are also presented in this chapter, ending off with study limitations and recommendations for future research.

7.2 A conceptual framework

Figure 9 below presents a conceptual framework of this study, which emerged from the key highlights of the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 combined with the findings and discussions of Chapters 5 and 6. It highlights key themes that define the three constructs on which the study was based. The combination of these themes as indicated by the blue arrows led to the emergence of themes that characterise and define a care infused relational leadership approach for sustainability, which this study was exploring as a potential new leadership style that could be considered for sustainability. Furthermore, sustainability is placed at the centre of the conceptual framework to indicate that the leadership style that is being studied is centred around sustainability.



Figure 9. Final conceptual framework of a care infused relational leadership for sustainability (Source: Author)

The conceptual framework presents potential contributions resulting from the many similarities that were identified and corroborated through the study. It further highlights those themes that appeared to be potential literature refinements and extensions as indicated by the red highlighted words in the conceptual framework.

The presented conceptual framework indicates what relational leadership and care, or ethics of care mean when viewed independently in relation to sustainability. It then shows a leadership style that resulted from the combination of the two constructs in relation to sustainability, which is a care infused relational leadership for sustainability. This conceptual framework may be utilised as a reference guide by business and other stakeholders in their continuous pursuit for sustainability success. For example, relational leadership is perceived to be promoting partnerships and collaborations. This leadership approach could be applied in business to drive profitability, with no regard for sustainability or the negative impact of business operations on the ecosystem. However, when care is infused into relational leadership, the conversations are elevated and conducted in a respectful manner, thus leading to strengthened and lasting partnerships and meaningful collaborations, because there will be more appreciation of interconnectedness of all parties in the partnership and more respect of stakeholder and of all the elements in the ecosystem, such as the society and the environment. Furthermore, societal considerations aimed at targeting SDGs 1 and 2, within a South

African sustainability context, could even be more impactful when practised in combination with Ubuntu values while practicing a care infused relational leadership for sustainability. Through this conceptual framework, the study also suggests that because a care infused relational leadership is conversational, it will be educational through information sharing from the interdependent elements in the ecosystem. Such education will enable leaders to better understand sustainability issues and be more forward thinking in their approach towards sustainability. That is the essence of what this conceptual framework is insinuating.

7.3 Principal theoretical conclusions

The key theoretical conclusions from the study are structured in line with the research question and sub-questions as presented in Chapter 3 and supported by the conceptual framework that is presented in section [7.2](#) above.

Research question 1: What is the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability?

Relational leadership is posited to be a destructive style that would challenge and reconstruct the conventional leadership styles (McCauley & Palus, 2021), for the achievement of evolving sustainability goals. It is asserted to be a leadership styles that honours humanness and is grounded on ethics and morality (Fry & Egel, 2021), which build successful collaboration and lasting partnership that are needed to for tackling sustainability issues. Care ethics is asserted to elevate relational leadership to one that is required for sustainability and in a case for SA, Terreblanche (2018) posits that through Ubuntu, SA has an ethical solution to resolve the global environmental predicament of sustainability.

Research sub-question 1: How will adding care assist practitioners to understand relational leadership better?

Sustainability is a complex phenomenon, demanding unconventional thinking and management practices (Fry & Egel, 2021; Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Kurucz et al. (2017) Many of the complex issues of sustainability are simply rooted in poor integration systems, due to the inability of traditional leaders to understand and recognise the interdependencies among the variables within the ecosystem as well as the complexity resulting from such connections (Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019). Care ethics is posited to direct individuals' attention to what is happening around them, with

more emphasis on the consideration of interconnectedness of all beings within the universe, and an emotional need for one to recognise their existence in relation to others (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Such an ethic will provide practitioners with a better appreciation of the interdependencies of all the elements in the ecosystem, which is needed for one to successfully practice relational leadership for sustainability.

Research sub-question 2: What is the problem of not having care in relational leadership?

Human's inability to care is due to the lack of wanting (Soto-Rubio & Sinclair, 2018), which promotes humanity's selfish acts of prioritising individual's needs over other beings' which could be translated to businesses' drive for profit at all costs with disregard of their impact on society and the environment at large. However, such an act could be overcome by the infusion of a care ethic in relational leadership. Such an ethic is understood to be a portrayal of "our best selves and relations" (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019, p. 28), which would propel leaders to be mindful of the impact of their actions on all the elements in the ecosystem.

7.4 Research contribution

7.4.1 Theoretical contribution

The study was conducted with the principal aim to contribute to the relational leadership literature as a response to a call by Nicholson & Kurucz's (2019) who asserted that such a study will enable them to validate and corroborate the relational leadership supportive elements in their Logic of Effectiveness Framework. Furthermore, whilst the outcomes presented in this study are largely consistent with the extant literature, there are two potential refinements noted, which the study could potentially claim to have made to the existing literature, these include:

- Firstly, that because the study was conducted through a South African lens, its outcomes could offer valuable insights to the business ethics literature by providing a South African rooted perspective on ethics of care to the relational leadership literature, which is largely dominated by Western philosophical conceptions (Pérezts et al., 2020; Haar et.al., 2017);
- Also, "Orchestra" and "Unmeasurable" are two themes that seemed to not exist in the reviewed literature, which the study is suggesting as a potential contribution to the extant literature; and

- Moreover, another potential refinement to the sustainability literature through this study is in the form of new insights uncovered and triangulated from the multi-sectoral viewpoint on relational leadership with care in sustainability focused organisations in SA. There appeared to be no such study combining all the three sectors in the reviewed literature, as was done in this study

7.4.2 Practical implications

This section outlines key research outcomes that have been translated into recommendations for business and leadership practitioners for consideration in their continuous pursuit of sustainability. The baseline for these recommendations is based on the understanding that sustainability is an all-encompassing complex concept, which includes economic, ecological and societal issues, and requires an integration of various skills and abilities to work together towards the attainment of sustainability success. Therefore, to increase chances of success in this endeavour, the following propositions are made:

- Lead with accentuated care by recognising and honouring the humanness in every being and form sustainable collaborations, which are needed to address the diverse and intricate issues of sustainability;
- Treat sustainability as the core part of the business and have it integrated into the business strategies with a sizable KPI weight that will propel all members of the leadership team to recognise its importance and a need to not only focus on business profits but on the consolidated TBL targets;
- Reimagine the destructive nature of the business by applying forward thinking and innovative solutions that would have less negative impact on the ecosystem;
- Allow the youth to step into leadership positions as they are presumed to be more passionate and knowledgeable about sustainability and have the innovative know-how to address the issues of sustainability;
- Education for all, through immersive experiences, is also suggested as a way to invoke emotions of care and understanding, which are critical for leaders to successfully address sustainability issues;
- Another suggestion is on the contextualisation of sustainability issues for the South African environment, which should also be supported by the application of Ubuntu values as they are purported to hold the solution needed to address sustainability issues in SA.

7.5 Limitations of the research

The following limitations were noted in this study:

- The research was conducted over a limited period, limiting further insights which could have been uncovered if the study had been performed over a longer period;
- The study only focussed on sustainability organisations within the SA borders, which could have yielded a partial view of the results compared to if the study was to look at different organisations across the continent or globally;
- Limiting the study to South African organisations, is likely to provide results which are skewed towards the South African worldview, which may not necessarily be congruent with the rest of the world;
- Access to study participants was an issue, which also limited the number of participants available for the study, thus limiting the results of the study;
- The conclusions of this study were based on data deduced from a small sample, which could be different if the sample size was bigger, perhaps including other organisations that are not necessarily sustainability-focused;
- The subjective nature of a qualitative study opens it up to potential biases stemming from both the participants and the researcher's worldviews; and
- Because the study was conducted by a novice researcher, the results could also be limited by their experience.

7.6 Recommendations for future research

Given that the research was limited to sustainability focused organisations in South Africa, the following recommendations are made for future research:

- Future research may consider duplicating the study on non-sustainability focused organisations;
- Future studies may also be duplicated on a wider geographical area such as on a continent or global level;
- The influence of Ubuntu principles and values on leadership for sustainability in South Africa or the African continent could be another area of interest for future research;
- Future research could also consider exploring the potential of gender bias on a care infused relational leadership for sustainability;
- Future research could also be done on the meaning of "care" in business;
- Also, future research could be considered on the measurability of care as it was alleged from the research findings that it is unmeasurable; also

- Another area of possible interest for future studies would be to explore how feelings could be measured in relation to caring for sustainability.

7.7 Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the influence of care in relational leadership for sustainability as a potential modern approach to advancing efforts aimed at addressing the intricate issues of sustainability, in sustainability focused organisations in SA. Through this endeavour, the study revealed that adding the element of care to relational leadership is likely to promote collaboration and co-creation of solutions towards the achievement of sustainability goals. It also revealed that because sustainability issues are contextual, it would be of benefit if the search for sustainability solutions would be contextualised within an individual country or community setting. From a business perspective, the study revealed that whilst sustainability is meant to be intertwined with business priorities, it is generally not the case, which is mainly due to lack of business understanding of sustainability and their role and impact on it. Thus, raising a need for a collective drive for all humanity in business, government, civil society and communities in general, to join forces in raising awareness on sustainability issues and the existing interdependencies that are crucial for the achievement of sustainability goals.

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9 APPENDICES

9.1 Appendix 1: Research opportunity sources

Research opportunity sources table

Research opportunity sources and rankings				
Research opportunity	Journal	Quality ranking		
“Future empirical research focused on identifying the relational leadership practices, capabilities, methods and tools relevant for strategic sustainability initiatives...” (Kurucz et al., 2017, p. 200)	Journal of Cleaner Production	Scopus (2020): 98%, 7 th	AJG (2021): 2*	ABDC (2019): A
“...our review indicates a need to further develop and refine our understanding of how morality influences leadership” (Lemoine et al., 2019, p. 177)	Academy of Management Annals	Scopus (2020): 99%, 1 st	AJG (2021): 4*	ABDC (2019): A*
“Precisely because our failure in combatting climate change and other sustainability issues is so apparent, it is imperative to thoroughly understand the shortcomings of current management models and, armed with that knowledge, change our approaches accordingly” (Etzion et al., 2017, p. 176)	Journal of Cleaner Production	Scopus (2020): 98%, 7 th	AJG (2021): 2*	ABDC (2019): A

Note: AJG is Academic Journal Guide; ABDC is Australian Business Deans Council (Source: Author)

9.2 Appendix 2: Sample Invitation Letter

Dear [.....]

I hope to find you well.

I am an MPhil (Corporate Strategy) student at the Gordon Institute of Business Science. I am in the process of completing the research part of my degree. My research study is titled "Caring in relational leadership for sustainability". The study aims to explore how "caring" as an added ethical element in relational leadership style, could assist leaders in addressing sustainability issues.

The objectives of this research are two pronged. Firstly, it intends to provide a better understanding of a care infused relational leadership as a potential leadership style for addressing sustainability challenges and whether adding ethics of care will be of benefit to leaders. Lastly, it seeks to explore whether there is a problem in the absence of caring in relational leadership for sustainability and whether adding care to relational leadership is an appropriate action for addressing issues of sustainability

Your participation in this research will be mostly appreciated, as I believe you have the expertise and experience to contribute key insights to my study. The interview will be semi-structured and is estimated to last no more than an hour. For your review, I have included a copy of a consent form which you need to sign prior to the interview. I also wish to inform you that all data collected (including the name of your organisation) and quotations used during the interview will be anonymised.

Kindly indicate your willingness to take part in the research and advise on when it would be convenient for you to meet *virtually or in person*, so I can make the necessary arrangements.

Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you and kind regards,



Cell: 082...

9.3 Appendix 3: Sample Informed Consent Letter

Research Topic: Caring in relational leadership for sustainability

Researcher: [REDACTED], MPhil (Corporate Strategy) Student at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria

I am conducting research on caring in relational leadership for sustainability. The interview is expected to last approximately one hour. The insights and data collected from the interview will assist us to better understand the influence of “care” in relational leadership for sustainability in any sector or industry within South Africa. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Signing this letter is an indication that you have given permission for:

- The interview to be recorded using an audio recording device;
- The recording to be transcribed by a third-party transcriber, who will be subject to a standard non-disclosure agreement;
- Verbatim quotations from the interview to be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation
- The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns or questions, please feel free to contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

[REDACTED]
20820268@myqibs.co.za
082...

Dr Dorothy Ndletyana
NdletyanaD@qibs.co.za

Participant's name

Signature

Date

Researcher's name

Signature

Date

9.4 Appendix 4: NDA for Professional Services

It is a condition of engagement that students will assist in preserving all confidential information, ideas and plans; any confidential information or any information in respect of any data gathered, captured or analysed in respect of the research work they undertake in fulfilment of GIBS masters or doctoral degree programmes, in this case the research project titled “Caring in relational leadership for sustainability” conducted by [redacted]. The parties under this agreement agree to the following:

1. To apply their best efforts to keep any information confidential which has been acquired or may acquire pursuant to the research work. For the purposes of this clause, confidential information excludes information which:
 - a. is publicly available or becomes publicly available through no act or default of any Party;
 - b. was in the possession of a Party prior to its disclosure otherwise than as a result of a breach by any party of any obligation of confidentiality to which it is subject;
 - c. is disclosed to the student by a person which did not acquire the information under an obligation of confidentiality; and
 - d. is independently acquired by a student and as a result of work carried out by a person to whom no disclosure of such information has been made;
2. No party shall use or disclose confidential information except with the prior written consent of GIBS or in accordance with an order of a court of competent jurisdiction or in order to comply with any law or governmental regulations by which any Party concerned is bound or as may be lawfully requested in writing by any governmental authority.
3. The party undertakes to permanently delete any electronic copies of confidential information received and destroy any confidential printed documentation or similar material in their possession promptly once they are no longer required, usually on completion of the service contracted by the student.
4. On completion of the contracted service on behalf of the student, the party is to confirm to the student that they are not in possession of any confidential information.

Signed at _____ on this ____ day of _____ 20__

On behalf of:

Name _____ Signature _____

duly authorised and warranting such authority

Witness: _____

9.5 Appendix 5: Sample Interview Guide

Interview guide – non-expert participants

Introduction	
No.	Question
1.1.	Tell me about your experience within a sustainability focused environment? ...
1.2.	Please share your journey on what attracted you to this line of business. ...
Body	
No.	Question
1.3.	What is your understanding of relational leadership? ...
1.4.	What is your understanding of care or ethics of care? ...
1.5.	What will happen when adding care to relational leadership? ...
1.6.	How will business benefit from adding care to relational leadership? ...
1.7.	In your opinion, would you say relational leadership with care is appropriate for sustainability? Why? ...
Conclusion	
No.	Question
1.8.	Please share your thoughts on what should be done differently to improve leadership attitudes and actions towards sustainability ...

Interview guide - sustainability experts

Introduction	
No.	Question
2.1.	Please share with me your experience and involvement in the sustainability area of business ...
2.2.	From your experience, what would you credit the success of organisations that have shown positive progress towards sustainability? ...
2.3.	From your experience, would you say leadership has a role to play in tackling issues of sustainability? Please elaborate. ...
Body	
No.	Question
2.4.	What is your understanding of relational leadership? ...
2.5.	What will happen when adding ethics of care to relational leadership? ...
2.6.	In your opinion, would you say relational leadership with care is appropriate for sustainability? Why? ...
2.7.	How will business benefit from adding ethics of care to relational leadership? ...
2.8.	How will leadership practitioners benefit from adding care to relational leadership? ...
Conclusion	
No.	Question
2.9.	Please share your thoughts on what should be done differently to improve leadership attitudes and actions towards sustainability ...

9.6 Appendix 6: Ethical Clearance Approval

The image shows a screenshot of an email approval. The header is a dark blue bar with the Gordon Institute of Business Science logo on the left and the text 'Ethical Clearance Approved' on the right. The main body of the email is white and contains a personalized greeting, a message of approval, and a link to the Ethical Clearance Form. The footer is a dark blue bar with a disclaimer.

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance
Approved**

Dear [REDACTED]

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

9.7 Appendix 7: Compressed code and theme file

Themes from sustainability experts		
Codes	Category / Construct	Themes
Business and everyone else will benefit from adding care to relational leadership	Ethics of Care	Benefits all
Relational leaders are encouraging to bring the best from their teams	Relational leadership	Brings the best from others
Bureaucratic constraints in big organisations	Sustainability	Bureaucracy in big corporates
Business are the main culprits of environmental degradation	Sustainability	Business contribute mostly to environmental degradation
Care cannot be forced	Ethics of Care	Cannot be forced
Care and wisdom are needed to change attitudes towards sustainability	Sustainability	Care and wisdom
Care for the poor is critical in the context of sustainability	Sustainability	Care for the poor
Achieving sustainability is complex and challenging	Sustainability	Complex and challenging
Care is a characteristic	Ethics of Care	Characteristic
Business, environment and society are co-dependent	Sustainability	Co-dependency between business, environment and society
Compromise requires authentic caring	Ethics of Care	Compromise
Connection with the environment is critical for sustainability	Sustainability	Connection with the environment
Care should be context specific	Ethics of Care	Contextual
Contextual leadership is needed for integrating diverse skills and modalities	Relational leadership	Contextual
Context is important when addressing sustainability issues	Sustainability	Contextual
Business could contribute positively just for box ticking	Sustainability	Corporate greenwashing
Care is difficult to learn	Ethics of Care	Difficult to learn

Themes from sustainability experts		
Codes	Category / Construct	Themes
Care is difficult to teach	Ethics of Care	Difficult to teach
Diverse set of skills are needed for sustainability issues	Sustainability	Orchestra conductor qualities
Lack of educational background of senior leadership in most companies is contributing to sustainability challenges	Sustainability	Education
Environmental pressures will force behavioural change	Sustainability	Environmental pressures will force behavioural change
Relational leadership is about forming collaborations	Relational leadership	Partnerships and collaborations
Relational leadership is about forming linkages	Relational leadership	Partnerships and collaborations
Relational leadership is about forming networks	Relational leadership	Partnerships and collaborations
Relational leadership is about forming partnerships	Relational leadership	Partnerships and collaborations
Relational leadership is about forming relationships	Relational leadership	Forming relationships
Genuine care for your partners is intrinsic in relational leadership success	Ethics of Care	Genuine
Sustainability is a global issue	Sustainability	Global issue
Both caring leaders and greenwashers could contribute positively towards sustainability	Ethics of Care	Greenwashing contributes to sustainability
Genuinely caring businesses' bottom lines will improve	Ethics of Care	Improves bottom line
Sustainability is also about ensuring quality of life for people	Sustainability	Improving quality of life
Care is inherent	Ethics of Care	Inherent
Contextual leadership is needed for integrating diverse skills and modalities	Relational leadership	Integrating

Themes from sustainability experts		
Codes	Category / Construct	Themes
Care is an intrinsic part of relational leadership	Ethics of Care	Intrinsic part of relational leadership
Not enough is known about sustainability	Sustainability	Education
Legislation could force behavioural change	Sustainability	Legislation could force behavioural change
Care like respect cannot be demanded	Ethics of Care	Like Respect
Caring is a natural response to human nature	Ethics of Care	Inherent
Care is needed to achieve sustainability goals	Ethics of Care	Needed for sustainability success
NGOs are closer to communities	Sustainability	NGOs are closer to communities
NGOs have a sense of vocation	Sustainability	NGOs are vocational
NGO contribution to sustainability success	Sustainability	NGOs contribute positively
Orchestra conductor leadership qualities are needed	Relational leadership	Orchestra conductor qualities
Relational leadership is person-based	Relational leadership	Person based
Personal connection with disadvantaged communities is essential for sustainability	Sustainability	Personal connection with disadvantaged communities
Sustainability is regeneration	Sustainability	Regeneration
Sustainability requires caring leaders	Sustainability	Requires caring leaders
Feeling and understanding interconnectedness between individuals and with the environment	Sustainability	Requires feeling and understanding of interconnectedness
Sustainability issues require innovative solutions	Sustainability	Requires innovative solutions

Themes from sustainability experts

Codes	Category / Construct	Themes
New connection to other people in different context is needed to achieve sustainable development	Sustainability	Requires new connection with other people in different context
Sustainability issues require new thinking from the youth	Sustainability	Requires new thinking from the youth
Sustainability success is due to forward thinking and proactive leaders	Sustainability	Requires proactive leaders
Importance of stakeholder diversity in addressing sustainability issues	Sustainability	Orchestra
Sustainability is resilience	Sustainability	Resilience
Leaders must teach their followers to care	Relational leadership	Teach others to care
Relational leadership is about teaming to address a specific problem	Relational leadership	Teaming for address a problem
Understanding of shared goals of all in the eco-system	Sustainability	Understanding of shared goals in the eco-system
Caring is unmeasurable	Ethics of Care	Unmeasurable
Care comes from a young age	Ethics of Care	Inherent

Themes from the Gov sector		
Codes	Category / Construct	Themes
Defining care in a business context is crucial	Ethics of care	Business definition is required
Care could be equated to support	Ethics of care	Support
Business conducted with caring, and understanding will result in win-win solutions	Ethics of care	Caring and understanding
Caring means doing something with passion	Ethics of care	Passion
Caring for something means doing what's best for it	Ethics of care	Doing the best
Care is about empathy	Ethics of care	Empathy
Care is about interconnectedness	Ethics of care	Interconnectedness
Ethics of care meaning should be within the SA context	Ethics of care	Requires definition for SA
Relational leadership is against working in silos	Relational leadership	Against working in silos
Relational leadership makes decision making to be structured around relationships	Relational leadership	Partnerships and collaboration
Works need to be done to articulate benefits of a relational view to development	Relational leadership	Education
Relational leadership is about leading as you wish to be led	Relational leadership	Leading as you wish to be led
Relational leadership requires empathy and caring	Relational leadership	Requires empathy and caring
Relational leadership with care shift focus from pure finance to the Triple Bottom Line (TBL)	Relational leadership	TBL
Relational leadership is about using networks for goal achievement	Relational leadership	Partnerships and collaboration
Business do not fully understand what sustainability entails	Sustainability	Education
Environmental sustainability cannot be greenwashed	Sustainability	Greenwashing
Need to contextualise western developed sustainability concepts within the SA context	Sustainability	Contextual
Sustainability could be about botany, zoology, geology	Sustainability	Orchestra

Themes from the Gov sector		
Codes	Category / Construct	Themes
Sustainability should be driven by an intention to make a different	Sustainability	Driven by intention to make a difference
All leaders and employees to be educated about how sustainability integrates in life	Sustainability	Education
Leaders should be educated on how sustainability impacts the Triple Bottom Line	Sustainability	Education
Environmental sustainability is about food security in the context of farmers	Sustainability	Food security
Greenwashing sustainability will backfire	Sustainability	Greenwashing
Human lives cannot be rehabilitated	Sustainability	Humanity
Environmental sustainability is about eradicating hunger in the country	Sustainability	Improving lives
Leadership, Exco, Board members do not understand what sustainability entails	Sustainability	Education
Business benefits will be longer-term not short-term	Sustainability	Long-term benefit
Sustainability should not be a tick boxing exercise	Sustainability	Not a tick boxing exercise
Sustainability is not included in key business decisions	Sustainability	Not included in business decisions
Environmental sustainability is about eradicating poverty in the country	Sustainability	Improving lives
Sustainable development activities are regulated for compliance	Sustainability	Regulation
Works need to be done to remove the "business vs sustainability" thinking	Sustainability	Education
Sustainability requires the appreciation of interdependence of all elements in the eco-system	Sustainability	Interconnectedness
Sustainability requires commitment	Sustainability	Requires commitment
Sustainability requires the understanding of interconnectedness of all elements in the eco-system	Sustainability	Understanding
Environmental sustainability is linked to SDG 1 & 2	Sustainability	SDG 1&2

Themes from the Gov sector		
Codes	Category / Construct	Themes
Sustainable development and traditional business are of the same thing	Sustainability	Should be viewed the same as business
Every company to introduce a sustainability course	Sustainability	Education
Sustainability is three dimensional	Sustainability	Three dimensional
Triple Bottom Line requires a new worldview	Sustainability	Triple Bottom Line
Triple Bottom Line requires a shift from old leadership styles	Sustainability	Triple Bottom Line
Sustainability is very broad	Sustainability	Orchestra

Themes from the Bus sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Care in relational leadership is critical for sustainability	Ethics of care	Critical for sustainability
Care is about giving support	Ethics of care	Support
Care is about showing sensitivity towards the other	Ethics of care	Sensitivity
Care is at the centre of relational leadership	Ethics of care	Intrinsic to relational leadership
Care means treating people with respect	Ethics of care	Respect
Care will make businesses be sensitive to community needs	Ethics of care	Makes business Sensitivity
Caring and leadership combined requires emotional maturity	Ethics of care	Emotional maturity
Caring for someone requires that you recognise the humanness in them	Ethics of care	Humanness
Caring goes against corporate expectations of pushing targets	Ethics of care	Opposition to corporate
Caring goes against corporate expectations of selfishness	Ethics of care	Opposition to corporate
Caring has softness that is in opposition to corporate	Ethics of care	Opposition to corporate; Soft
Caring in relational leadership adds a layer of softness	Ethics of care	Soft
Caring in relational leadership for business would require teaching people to chase humanness instead of other things	Ethics of care	Education; humanness
Caring in relational leadership is about bringing in what is currently lacking in business	Ethics of care	Lacking in business
Caring in relational leadership will elevate business	Ethics of care	Elevate business
Caring in this context is about seeing others as you want to be seen	Ethics of care	About seeing others as you want to be seen
Caring is a subset of relational leadership	Ethics of care	Subset of relational leadership

Themes from the Bus sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Caring is about prioritising other than self	Ethics of care	Prioritising other
Caring is about prioritising other than the bottom line	Ethics of care	Prioritising other
Caring is about prioritising other than the KPI	Ethics of care	Prioritising other
Caring is about recognising that we are all human beings before we are bosses	Ethics of care	Humanity
Caring is an ethical thing to do	Ethics of care	Ethical thing to do
Caring is humaneness	Ethics of care	Humaneness
Caring is not being coercive	Ethics of care	Not being coercive
Caring is not being manipulative	Ethics of care	Not being manipulative
Caring is something you do because you have to not because you feel like it	Ethics of care	Ethical duty
Caring means treating other humans with integrity	Ethics of care	Integrity
Caring precludes other values tied to relational leadership	Ethics of care	Precludes other values
Caring stretches you	Ethics of care	Stretches you
Caring will encourage psychological engagement between business and employees	Ethics of care	Encourage psychological engagement
Caring will strengthen the psychological contract between business and employees	Ethics of care	Strengthen psychological contract
Corporate leaders are primed to not care	Ethics of care	Opposition to corporate
Ethics of care is about leading with care for the people you work with	Ethics of care	Leading with care
Ethics of care is about leading with integrity	Ethics of care	Leading with integrity
Genuine care is sustainable care	Ethics of care	Genuine care

Themes from the Bus sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Sustainable caring means you don't only care today, you care always	Ethics of care	Care always
Caring and integrity are subset of relational leadership	Relational leadership	Care and integrity
If caring for communities is driven from the top, it'll become a culture thing	Relational leadership	Driven from the top
Relational leadership is a conversational style of leadership	Relational leadership	Conversational
Relational leadership is a give-and-take type of leadership	Relational leadership	Give and take
Relational leadership is about listening as much as you want to be heard	Relational leadership	Listen as much as you want to be heard
Relational leadership is about talking less and listening more	Relational leadership	Talk less and listen more
Relational leadership is about understanding the importance of relating between things and people	Relational leadership	Understanding; humanity
Relational leadership is not authoritarian	Relational leadership	Not authoritarian
Relational leadership recognises interconnectedness of everyone and everything	Relational leadership	Interconnectedness
Relational leadership with care highlights the interdependencies in the eco-system	Relational leadership	Interdependencies
Relational leadership with care implies treating people equally	Relational leadership	Fairness and equality
Relational leadership with care is about leading from behind	Relational leadership	Leading from behind
Relational leadership with care will improve quality of life in communities	Relational leadership	Improve quality of life
Business and community partnership is crucial for business and sustainability success	Sustainability	Partnership
Businesses limit their contributions to what is prescribed in BEE codes	Sustainability	Legislation
Change is needed	Sustainability	Requires change

Themes from the Bus sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Clarity is needed on the link between sustainability and business	Sustainability	Education
Community development is about creating a self-sustaining family structure	Sustainability	Community development
Current old generation of leaders do not understand sustainability	Sustainability	Education
Education is needed on how sustainability benefits business	Sustainability	Education
Education is needed on what to do to increase sustainability in society	Sustainability	Education
Environmental sustainability and financial sustainability are interdependent	Sustainability	Interdependency
Environmental sustainability is about food security in the context of people	Sustainability	Poverty eradication
Immersive experience will unlock leaders' eyes to real challenges in communities	Sustainability	Education; Immersive experience
Lack of understanding of ESG issues risks business survival	Sustainability	
Leaders need immersive experience to understand sustainability issues better	Sustainability	Education; Immersive experience
Passion for community development	Sustainability	Community development
Promoting sustainability in corporate requires change management	Sustainability	Requires change management
Promoting sustainability in corporate requires integrated approach	Sustainability	Orchestra

Themes from the Bus sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Sustainability challenges businesses to be innovative	Sustainability	Unconventional approach
Sustainability challenges businesses to think different	Sustainability	Unconventional approach
Sustainability goals to be engrained in business strategies	Sustainability	Engrained in business strategies
Sustainability initiatives are linked to ESG in corporate	Sustainability	Linked to ESG initiatives
Sustainability is a long journey	Sustainability	Long-term gain
Sustainability is a long-term gain, difficult to pursue against short-term priorities	Sustainability	Long-term gain
Sustainability is about environmental stewardship	Sustainability	Environmental stewardship
Sustainability requires changes in attitudes and belief systems	Sustainability	Requires change management
Sustainability requires changes in mind sets	Sustainability	Requires change management
Sustainability requires leaders with a courage to learn	Sustainability	Bravery
Sustainability requires patience	Sustainability	Requires patience
Sustainable development is part of organisational values	Sustainability	Organisational values
There are no quick wins in sustainability	Sustainability	No quick wins
True sustainability means making communities resilient	Sustainability	Community development
True sustainability means solving inequality challenges	Sustainability	Solves inequality
True sustainability means solving unemployment challenges	Sustainability	Solves unemployment
Understanding sustainability is what distinguishes modern great leaders from mediocre leaders	Sustainability	Understanding

Themes from the NGO sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Adding an element of care to leadership will ensure business sustainability	Ethics of care	Ensures business sustainability
Business must instil culture of putting people first	Ethics of care	Prioritise other
Business need to care for their customers to achieve their bottom-line targets	Ethics of care	Triple Bottom Line
Businesses have a duty to care for their employees	Ethics of care	Duty to care
Care is about ensuring ecological sustainability	Ethics of care	Ensures ecological sustainability
Care is about love for all	Ethics of care	Love and respect
Care is about respecting others in order to be respected	Ethics of care	Reciprocal
Care is about understanding to be understood	Ethics of care	Understanding
Care is contextual	Ethics of care	Contextual
Care is not about personal salvation	Ethics of care	Not about personal salvation
Care is what is needed to coexist	Ethics of care	Needed to coexist
Care means "do unto others as you would want them to do unto you"	Ethics of care	"Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you"
Caring for all was inherent from childhood	Ethics of care	Inherent
Caring for the environment is going to disrupt business	Ethics of care	Disrupt business
Caring is a calling	Ethics of care	A calling
Caring is about creating an equitable society between the rich and the poor	Ethics of care	Equality
Caring is about maintaining good relationships which is crucial for business success	Ethics of care	Relationships
Caring is about maintaining good relationships which is crucial for collaboration	Ethics of care	Collaboration
Caring is done through Ubuntu principles	Ethics of care	Ubuntu
Caring is essential for survival	Ethics of care	Essential for survival
Caring is important for business success	Ethics of care	Essential for survival

Themes from the NGO sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Developed countries' definition of ethics differ from underdeveloped countries	Ethics of care	Western definitions
Ethics is doing the right thing	Ethics of care	Doing the right thing
Ethics of care comes naturally to some communities	Ethics of care	Inherent
Ethics of care could be defined differently by different races	Ethics of care	Different meaning
Ethics of care could be defined through one's cultural practices	Ethics of care	Ubuntu
Ethics of care could be defined through Ubuntu by South Africans	Ethics of care	Ubuntu
Ethics of care could differ from a tribal viewpoint	Ethics of care	Different meaning
Ethics of care is embedded in some communities' culture	Ethics of care	Inherent
Ethics of care is embedded in some people's way of life	Ethics of care	Inherent
Ethics of care is something new to other communities	Ethics of care	New to some people
Humans are emotional beings	Ethics of care	Humanity
Love means care for all	Ethics of care	Love and respect
People need to learn the meanings of ethics of care from different worldviews	Ethics of care	Understanding
Respect is done through Ubuntu principles	Ethics of care	Ubuntu
Relational leadership is about investing to improve the livelihoods of people	Relational leadership	Improve quality of life
Relational leadership is about honouring employees as humans not just some means to the success of a company	Relational leadership	Humanity
Relational leadership with care will enrich leadership	Relational leadership	Adding care will enrich leadership
Leaders who bring out the best in people	Relational leadership	Brings out the best in people
Relational leadership should be about building relationships with people mostly negatively impacted by your business	Relational leadership	Relationships

Themes from the NGO sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Companies to co-create solutions with the community	Relational leadership	Cocreation of solutions
Change needs to start at the highest leadership	Relational leadership	Change must start at the top
Leadership must have a will to forge a culture of caring	Relational leadership	Change management
Relational leadership is about honouring all individuals as a whole human being	Relational leadership	Humanity
Relational leadership is about honouring our common humanity	Relational leadership	Humanity
Instilling a change in attitudes does not come easy	Relational leadership	Change management
Leaders who lead from behind are needed	Relational leadership	Lead from behind
Communal governance is leadership through consensus	Relational leadership	Leadership through consensus
Leadership must not be authoritarian	Relational leadership	Not authoritarian
Ancient leadership style is about being super expert, smart, control, mastery	Relational leadership	Unconventional
People interaction is done through Ubuntu principles	Relational leadership	Ubuntu
Ethics of care and relational leadership require combining the new and old way of thinking	Relational leadership	Requires a new and old way of thinking
Leadership must have a will	Relational leadership	Change management
True leadership is about recognising solutions emerge when we collaborate	Relational leadership	Collaboration
Relational leadership with care will change current understanding of leadership	Relational leadership	Understanding
Ethics of care and relational leadership require a new way of thinking	Relational leadership	Unconventional
African culture values are needed for sustainability in Africa	Sustainability	Ubuntu
Business has got to reimagine itself	Sustainability	Re-imagine business
Business is focussed on the bottom line	Sustainability	Bottom Line
Business must exploit the environment responsibly	Sustainability	Exploit the environment responsibly

Themes from the NGO sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Business to understand the different between environmental sustainability and business sustainability	Sustainability	Understanding
Collaborative leaders are needed	Sustainability	Collaboration
Companies confuse sustainability with profitability	Sustainability	Education
Companies need policies to direct their sustainability efforts	Sustainability	Regulation
Companies need to change the way they operate	Sustainability	Change management
Deep understanding of the dependency on the land	Sustainability	Understanding; interdependencies
Different ways are needed to learn to manage with less	Sustainability	Education
Different ways are needed to make people aware of the impact of their taking	Sustainability	Education
It is complex because humanity is dependent on extracted resources at a cost to the environment	Sustainability	Complex
Lack of understanding of delicate and intricate human dependency on the eco-system	Sustainability	Education
Living with less could mean a healthier society	Sustainability	Education
Modern humans have forgotten about their dependency on the planet	Sustainability	Interdependency
Need to educate the young about the history of their origin	Sustainability	Education
New style of leadership is needed	Sustainability	Unconventional approach
Personal commitment to fighting climate injustice	Sustainability	Personal commitment
Personal commitment to fighting for vulnerable people to climate change	Sustainability	Requires commitment
Sustainability is about the eco-system itself	Sustainability	Eco-system
Sustainability is new to businesses	Sustainability	New
Sustainability is rooted in the ecology	Sustainability	Rooted in the ecology

Themes from the NGO sector		
Code	Category / Construct	Theme
Sustainability success is dependent on business understanding all the interdependencies	Sustainability	Understanding; Interdependencies
Sustainability success is dependent on understanding a need for protecting the eco-system	Sustainability	Understanding
Sustainability success is dependent on understanding the economy is dependent on a functioning eco-system	Sustainability	Understanding
The environment is a living eco-system	Sustainability	Understanding
This is a global issue	Sustainability	Global issue
Ubuntu values are needed for sustainability in Africa	Sustainability	Ubuntu
Westerners have forgotten about their dependency on the planet	Sustainability	Western influence