




# Collective leadership practices in plural organisations: Insights from state-owned entities in South Africa



## Authors:

Khathutshelo M.  
Ramukumba<sup>1</sup>   
Derick de Jongh<sup>1</sup>   
Sumari O'Neil<sup>2</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Khathutshelo Ramukumba,  
khathu@afrowealth.co.za

## Dates:

Received: 27 June 2025  
Accepted: 12 Dec. 2025  
Published: 20 Feb. 2026

## How to cite this article:

Ramukumba, K.M., De Jongh, D., & O'Neil, S. (2026). Collective leadership practices in plural organisations: Insights from state-owned entities in South Africa. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 57(1), a5469. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v57i1.5469>

## Copyright:

© 2026. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

**Purpose:** This study examined the social construction of collective leadership in plural organisations with South African state-owned entities (SOEs) as its setting. Adopting the social construction lens, this autoethnographic study investigated how affiliation-driven appointments and personal relationships affected leadership practice, team composition and organisational outcomes.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study adopted a qualitative approach and analysed collective leadership through multiple datasets collected from reflexive journals, self-interviews and media reports at three SOEs where the researcher occupied executive leadership roles. In-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 11 participants who held senior positions in SOEs.

**Findings/results:** Thematic analysis revealed that affiliation-driven appointments shaped team dynamics through perceived biases, hostility and rivalries, which influenced collective leadership in SOEs. Furthermore, unresolved tensions undermined collective leadership and accountability and highlighted the interplay of micro-relational dynamics in shaping collective leadership outcomes.

**Practical implications:** The implications of the study highlights the need for merit-based and transparent appointment process, inclusive team practices and aligned leadership. It emphasises structured onboarding, conflict resolution and clear accountability mechanisms as key to fostering effective, collaborative leadership and improved organisational performance.

**Originality/value:** The study proposed three emergent strategies to address the challenges of affiliation-driven appointments: (1) strengthening merit-based appointments through transparent criteria and independent oversight, (2) fostering inclusive onboarding and conflict resolution mechanisms to build trust and team cohesion and (3) enhancing shared accountability through clear role definitions, common purpose alignment and rigorous oversight. These strategies aim to leverage collaboration and trust to promote effective collective leadership within SOEs.

**Keywords:** affiliation; accountability; appointments; collective leadership; South Africa; state-owned entities; performance.

## Introduction

In an era characterised by increased interdependence and shared accountability, leadership is no longer viewed solely as an individual endeavour but rather as a collaborative, collective effort shaped by relationships and social networks (Bolden et al., 2023, p. 46). The collective nature of leadership is even more pronounced in plural organisations. Plural organisations are described as organisations with complex multiple leadership structures both inside and outside the organisation (Denis et al., 2001, p. 15).

The concept of collective leadership underscores the importance of shared responsibility, emphasising the alignment of goals, values and relational connections to navigate the intricacies of decision-making and organisational performance (Foldy & Ospina, 2023, p. 547). This article delves into the relational dimensions of collective leadership with a specific focus on the people aspect. This is related to how individuals impact and shape collective leadership in leadership constellations (Abson et al., 2024, p. 2). Because people are at the centre of the leadership phenomenon, it is critical to understand the role of individuals and how they influence the nature and characteristics of the type of collective leadership that emerges. In this regard, this article aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on the dynamics of the social construction of leadership by examining factors such as affiliation-driven appointments, the complexities of shared responsibility and the role of alignment and common purpose in collective leadership structures. As such, this article offers insights into how effective collaboration and accountability

can be fostered in collective leadership structures with a focus on South African state-owned entities (SOEs) as plural organisations.

In South Africa, SOEs are led by a multilayer leadership structure comprising a Board of Directors, a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), a Chief Operating Officer (COO), a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and other executives under the leadership of a Minister and Deputy Minister as political heads and shareholder representatives. In this context, SOEs are established by the State through an enabling legislation under various Ministries that are led by political office bearers who are the Minister and Deputy Minister who represent the State as the shareholder in these entities. However, as political heads of these entities, Ministers and Deputy Ministers are only responsible for policy and legislative direction. The Minister and the Deputy Minister, with the support of Cabinet, appoint the Board of Directors as delegated shareholder representatives. The Board of Directors is responsible for the strategic direction of an SOE and for exercising oversight over the executive director and management who are responsible for the day-to-day operations. Because of the complexities of these leadership constellations and the dual mandate of social and economic development, these entities carry relational dynamics that are especially pronounced. Given the dual mandate that SOEs have in South Africa, leadership in SOEs often involves navigating diverse stakeholder expectations, which can exacerbate tensions and complicate collaboration (Mpete & Maier, 2024, p. 3). However, there is limited empirical evidence on how these factors influence leadership practice, team composition and the overall effectiveness of collective leadership in such organisations.

Existing studies on collective leadership have predominantly focused on its structural and procedural aspects (Ervits, 2023, p. 55; Gichuhi, 2021, p. 69), often neglecting the nuanced relational dynamics that underpin its success or failure. While research has explored themes such as shared accountability and team collaboration (Zeier et al., 2021, p. 564), less attention has been given to the influence of personal relationships and social interactions among members of the leadership constellation in shaping collective leadership. This is particularly true in complex organisational contexts such as plural organisations.

The literature overview in the next section unpacks current collective leadership research. It particularly explores the interplay between structural and relational factors that shape collective leadership.

## Literature review

Collective leadership research significantly benefits from the integration of social constructionism, as it emphasises the relational and contextual dynamics that shape leadership practices within groups (Endres & Weibler, 2017, p. 279). Social constructionism posits that reality is constructed through social interactions and shared meanings, which

aligns with the collective leadership framework that views leadership as a distributed process rather than a fixed attribute of individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 2023, p. 65). For instance, studies by Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012, p. 275) highlight how collective leadership emerges from the interactions among team members, influenced by their shared experiences and social contexts. The emergence of collective leadership in social constructionist contexts is founded on the understanding that 'leadership is co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through complex interplay among leadership actors' (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p. 172). Originating from Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 26), it has been established that 'reality is both revealed and concealed, created and destroyed by our actions' (Martin, 2017, p. 03). Consequently, the individual characteristics of the leaders involved in the leadership constellation shape the nature and character of the type of collective leadership that emerges. Furthermore, research by Conger and Pearce (2023, p. 293) illustrates how the meanings attributed to leadership roles are co-created within teams, thereby affecting group performance and cohesion. By applying social constructionism, scholars can better understand how collective leadership is not merely a function of individual traits but is instead shaped by the ongoing social processes and narratives that evolve within organisations. This perspective encourages a more nuanced exploration of how leadership is enacted and perceived in collaborative environments, ultimately enriching the discourse on leadership practices in contemporary organisational settings.

## Collective leadership in plural organisations

Collective leadership, as a concept, has gained traction in recent years, particularly in plural organisations such as the South African SOEs, where decision-making authority and responsibilities are dispersed among multiple stakeholders (Bolden et al., 2023, p. 56; Raelin, 2023, p. 19). Collective leadership challenges the traditional, hierarchical view of leadership, emphasising collaboration, shared responsibility and inclusivity (Le Fevre et al., 2021, p. 02). As much as collective leadership offers a compelling vision for more equitable and participatory governance, its application in plural organisations is fraught with complexities that warrant critical examination.

The literature (Berraies et al., 2021, p. 1368; Bolden et al., 2023, p. 56) suggests that by distributing leadership roles across a group, collective leadership encourages a diversity and inclusivity of perspectives. This inclusivity fosters innovation and holistic decision-making, as multiple viewpoints are considered and integrated into strategies and solutions (Ospina et al., 2020, p. 170). Collective leadership reduces the reliance on a single leader by distributing responsibility across the organisation (Brown et al., 2021, p. 35; Gichuhi, 2021, p. 69). The distribution of responsibilities across the organisation can mitigate risks associated with over-dependence on individual leadership and create a culture of mutual accountability.

Some scholars (Gichuhi, 2021, p. 69; Wang et al., 2023, p. 380) are of the view that in plural organisations, where power is distributed among various stakeholders, collective leadership provides a buffer against leadership disruptions caused by internal or external factors. The collective nature of decision-making ensures continuity and stability, even in times of change or crisis. As organisations increasingly emphasise equity, diversity and inclusion, collective leadership aligns with these values, promoting a more democratic and participatory leadership model (Hendy et al., 2024, p. 2).

One of the most significant criticisms of collective leadership is the potential for ambiguity in roles (Ziegert & Dust, 2021, p. 969). In plural organisations, where decision-making authority is already dispersed, unclear boundaries can lead to inefficiency and conflict (Riggio & Newstead, 2023, p. 21). Similarly, the inclusion of diverse perspectives, while a strength, can also become a hindrance (ibid). The need to achieve consensus or accommodate multiple viewpoints may slow decision-making processes, leading to delays in critical actions.

While collective leadership aims to promote shared accountability, it can inadvertently lead to a diffusion of responsibility (Rodriguez & Crawford, 2023, p. 347). This creates challenges in holding individuals or groups accountable for outcomes, particularly in cases of failure or underperformance. Despite its emphasis on equality, collective leadership is also not immune to power struggles (Garton & Wawrzynski, 2021, p. 90). In plural organisations, these power struggles manifest through leveraging political influence or personal agendas and undermining the collective ethos. Collective leadership, however, demands a high level of relational competence, including communication, conflict resolution and emotional intelligence (Badarai et al., 2023, p. 1). These demands can strain inexperienced and incompetent leaders and teams, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Understanding the dynamics of collective leadership requires a nuanced examination of collaborative and social factors, which is why social constructionism was adopted for this article.

## Social construction theory

Social constructionism has evolved significantly since its inception, primarily through the works of Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 65) in their seminal text, 'The Social Construction of Reality'. The theory asserts that knowledge and meaning are not inherent in objects or events but are created through social interactions and cultural contexts. At its core, social constructionism makes several key claims, for example, that reality is socially constructed. In this sense, the theory firstly posits that what we perceive as reality is shaped by social processes (Rapp & Corral-Grandos, 2024, p. 430). This claim suggests that knowledge is not objective but rather a product of social interactions (Gergen, 2019, p. 145). Secondly, the theory claims that language as a constructive tool plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of reality. In this regard, the meanings we attribute to words

and concepts are socially negotiated and can vary across different cultures and contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 2023, p. 49). Thirdly, the theory claims that knowledge is context-dependent, influenced by the social, historical and cultural contexts in which it is produced. This claim challenges the notion of universal truths and emphasises the importance of local contexts (Gergen, 2019, p. 145). Lastly, the theory highlights the role of power in shaping knowledge and reality as it suggests that those in positions of power often have greater influence over the construction of social norms and meanings (O'Connor & Cormican, 2022, p. 345). In the current article, social construction is adopted as an epistemological position that posits that reality is shaped through social and relational processes and that it is an outcome of social negotiations. In this perspective, leadership is seen as socially constructed.

In recognising that social realities are constructed, researchers can better understand the complexities of social phenomena, such as group dynamics (Stephenson, 2024, p. 41). In this article, social constructionism is used to critically analyse social interactions and the impact of relationships on team cohesion and collective leadership in plural organisations. It shifts the focus from individual traits and behaviours to the relationships between leaders and followers, emphasising trust, mutual influence and collaboration (Jian, 2022, p. 931). This approach is particularly suited to studies of collective leadership, where shared responsibility and alignment are central themes. Furthermore, the theory is well-suited for exploring the complexities of collective leadership by focusing on the interplay of social interactions, personal relationships and alignment among the team in shaping leadership.

Critics argue that social constructionism can lead to extreme relativism, where all perspectives are seen as equally valid, potentially undermining the pursuit of objective knowledge (Brown, 2020, p. 123). Some scholars contend that it downplays the role of material realities and biological factors in shaping human behaviour (Romaioli & McNamee, 2021, p. 317). They argue that while social factors are significant, they do not account for the influence of physical and biological constraints (Romaioli & McNamee, 2021). The theory's focus on language as a primary means of constructing reality has been criticised for neglecting non-verbal forms of communication and the embodied experiences that also shape our understanding of the world (Ao, Wang, Chen, 2024, p. 56900). Critics further argue that social constructionism often lacks predictive power, making it challenging to apply in empirical research (Taylor, 2018, p. 218). While acknowledging these criticisms, it has been argued that social constructionism embraces the principles of objective knowledge and material realities and also recognises non-verbal communications (Berger & Luckmann, 2023, p. 31).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how collective leadership is socially constructed in plural organisations with a specific focus on the people aspect of collective leadership. As a result, the study adopts social constructionism

as its theoretical framework in its investigation of collective leadership practice in South African SOEs. This study adopts an autoethnographic design and primarily draws its data from the personal experiences of the first author, which were supplemented by the experiences of other leaders who held leadership roles in South African SOEs.

## Methodology

### Research approach and design

A qualitative approach allowed a nuanced and in-depth exploration of the people aspect of collective leadership that is context-bound (Lim, 2025, p. 199). An analytic autoethnography was chosen as the design because of the complex nature of the people aspect in collective leadership and the wealth of insider knowledge from the first author, who served more than 17 years in executive positions in various SOEs in South Africa (Day, 2024, p. 2). Analytic autoethnography is defined as an autoethnographic method where the emphasis is on the analysis or interpretation of data with purposeful attempts at scientific analysis (Poerwandari, 2021, p. 312).

Autoethnography has been criticised for being narcissistic, individualised, self-indulgent and introspective (Chang & Bilgen, 2020, p. 93). However, Ellis et al. (2011, p. 274) demonstrate that the strength of autoethnography is that it recognises and embraces subjectivity and emotionality. In this study, multiple datasets were collected from the first author's experiences, as well as external sources. These sources are described in the next section.

### Data collection methods

The use of multiple methods of data collection provides a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon, while also providing rich and unbiased data that can be analysed with a high degree of assurance (Ahmed & Ishtiaq, 2021, p. 2402). The use of multiple data sources also increases validity and credibility (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021, p. 2). In this study, data from the first author included reflexive journals and self-interviews. Data from external sources included in-depth semi-structured interviews and media articles. Given that this is an autoethnographic study, the reflexive journals and self-interviews ensured depth to the study by providing a longitudinal perspective on leadership experiences at executive levels within SOEs.

### Reflexive journals

Reflexive journals were constructed based on meeting notes that the first author kept throughout his career in the SOEs. The journals were recorded events and notes on various issues during his leadership roles while working at three different SOEs. It documented his personal reflections on leadership and decision-making processes and also offered an opportunity for rich analysis of his personal experiences of collective leadership in plural organisations through a self-reflexive process.

The use of reflexive journals provided qualitative data that captured the complexities and nuances of collective leadership as experienced in real time when the first author lived through those experiences, making it possible to observe how leaders adapt their leadership styles and decision-making processes within their teams. It also helped understand the individual leader's role within the collective leadership framework, thereby providing depth to the study.

### Self-interviews

To capture deeper self-reflection and personal insights, three self-interviews were conducted in July 2024. By employing self-interviews, the first author delved into the complexities and nuances of collective leadership, offering an authentic, insider perspective on how leadership is practised and perceived within plural organisations (Sun et al., 2022, p. 299). The self-interviews covered various leadership roles in different SOEs, including CEO, CFO and group chief financial officer (GCFO). These interviews provided an opportunity to articulate the first author's personal experiences, challenges and perceptions on collective leadership in plural organisations in an introspective manner. This method allowed the first author to critically explore and reflect on their experiences and roles within the organisational context, providing rich, first-person insights that are difficult to capture through external observations alone (Allett et al., 2011, p. 4). The same questions used in the semi-structured interviews section were also applied in the self-interviews. The self-interviews lasted about 30 min on average. They were recorded on the Microsoft Teams platform and were also transcribed using the Microsoft Teams platform functionality.

### Documents and media reports

Media reports served as an external source to contextualise leadership dynamics within broader organisational and societal frameworks. News is often seen as an output of journalism, which provides a reliable, trustworthy, accurate and comprehensive account of events that significantly affect society (Ansar & Goswami, 2021, p. 1). Eight media articles covering reports on leadership-related issues were selected for this study. As a form of publicly available documentation, media reports captured external perceptions, narratives and discourses surrounding the SOEs. These provided a window into how collective leadership is framed, interpreted and critiqued by external stakeholders, such as the public, analysts and policymakers.

### Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 participants, representing various leadership roles in various SOEs as depicted in Table 1.

Informed consent was obtained from all research participants. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' personal experiences, challenges and perceptions of collective leadership. Questions asked of participants in the semi-structured interviews included questions regarding their understanding of

**TABLE 1:** Semi-structured interviews sample.

Pseudonym	Gender	Job role	Number of subordinates	Years of experience	Highest educational qualification	Political position	Political affiliation
Rp1-Participant 1	Male	Chief Financial Officer	33	5	Master's	Member	Yes
Rp1-Participant 2	Female	Board Member	28	3	Master's	N/A	No
Rp1-Participant 3	Male	Board Member	6233	5	Degree	Member	Yes
Rp1-Participant 4	Male	Chief Financial Officer	123	7	Honours	Member	Yes
Rp1-Participant 5	Female	Chief Operating Officer	354	5	Master's	N/A	No
Rp1-Participant 6	Female	Board Member	4200	7	Master's	Member	Yes
Rp1-Participant 7	Male	Board Chairperson	386	3	Diploma	NEC Member	Yes
Rp1-Participant 8	female	Board Chairperson	218	5	Master's	N/A	No
Rp1-Participant 9	Male	Board Member	4200	4	Master's	Member	Yes
Rp1-Participant 10	female	Board Member	788	3	Master's	Member	Yes
Rp1-Participant 11	Male	Chief Executive Officer	386	9	Master's	Member	Yes

N/A, not applicable.

**TABLE 2:** Emergent themes.

Relational leadership dynamics	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Affiliation-driven appointments	1.1: Leadership Quality and Team Composition 1.2: Influence of Political and Ideological Orientations 1.3: Political Appointments and Personal Relationships 1.4: Competence of Affiliated Appointments
Theme 2: Appointment consequences on team dynamics	2.1: Preparing for Collective Leadership 2.2: Perceived Bias and Judgements 2.3: Hostility and Relational Dynamics 2.4: Unresolved Tensions and Professional Rivalries
Theme 3: Shared responsibility and accountability	3.1: The Complexities of Shared Responsibility and Accountability 3.2: The Role of Alignment and Common Purpose 3.3: Overreach to Other Roles 3.4: Collaboration and Relationship Building 3.5: Oversight and Monitoring

collective leadership, its application in the particular organisation in which they were seated, as well as details regarding the interaction and relationships between members of the collective leadership constellations they were part of. The interviews lasted around 45 min on average. These interviews were held through the Microsoft Teams platform for convenience purposes and were recorded and transcribed using the application's functionality. Using semi-structured interviews allowed for different probing techniques, thereby enhancing the richness of the data obtained (Ruslin et al., 2022, p. 22). This format was particularly valuable in understanding the complex and nuanced perspectives of the research participants, which made it easier to explore their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1363).

## Participants and sampling

Sampling for autoethnographic data implies a sample of experiences (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 198). The experiences sampled from the first author's own life included the times that he served in leadership positions as CEO (2013–2020), CFO (2011–2013) and GCFO (2020–2020) at three different SOEs. At the time of the study, the first author had more than 17 years' experience in leadership roles within South African

**TABLE 3:** Data extracts.

Data source	Extract
Interview data	<p>'Hmm, when I think about it, that's actually interesting because I had a discussion with a view to volunteer advising the then Minister on aspects of the SOE3 business that needed to be carried through and needed to be championed in order to improve that set up ... Then before I know it, the Minister asked for my profile for my CV, which I duly provided, and I suspect in looking at it she got the sense that no man, instead of giving me informal advice I could come bring this man into the Board of SOE3 since there are vacancies because some board members, for whatever reason had either resigned or left the SOE ... She called me one morning on a very bad line and I couldn't hear her properly and said she was getting into a meeting and indicated that she wanted to appoint me to the board of SOE3 but she couldn't because of something, I couldn't hear properly. ....later that day I learned about my appointment on the radio, I was listening to SA FM and they were talking about the Cabinet statement that had just been released in which my name was listed as one of the individuals who had just been appointed to the board of SOE3' (RP1-Participant 6).</p> <p>'When the administrator was appointed, he appointed a capable team of executives, and when he left, the new board appointed an immature CEO, and that impacted on the quality of the leadership' (RP1-Participant 5).</p> <p>'It's a clear indication that the entity is being led properly by both Board of Directors, and of course executives' (RP1-Participant 9).</p>
Self-interviews data	<p>'Decisions and positions that leaders will take ... were largely informed by the political and ideological orientation of the political formations that they came from... decision-making processes were largely informed by the political standings or policy positions of the political organisations which the Board of Directors came from' (RP2- Self-interview 1).</p>
Reflexive journal entries	<p>'The deputy chair of the board advised me that... she wrote to the Minister advising her to overrule the board recommendations... when the Minister... proceeded to appoint me with the support of cabinet, she was very unhappy about it, and she went around telling people that I am a political deployee and that the Minister ignored her advice because me and her are comrades ...' (RP4-[SOE3]).</p> <p>'The members of the Board of Directors were appointed through a parliamentary process led by an ad-hoc committee with majority from one political party ... consequently, majority of those appointed into the Board were current leaders of the ... the dominant political party ... as a result of lack of senior leadership and governance experience at such high-level by the majority of the members of the Board of Directors, the entity hopped from crisis to the next on issues of financial mismanagement and alleged corruption which was widely covered by the media' (RP4-[SOE1]).</p> <p>'The political deployee that was preferred did not have executive management experience, the highest organisational roles he had held where a member of the Board of Directors being yet the Minister preferred him The Minister preferred him because they came from the same political organisation and they had served together in the leadership structures of that organisation' (RP4-[SOE2]).</p>

CV, curriculum vitae; SEO, state-owned entities.

SOEs. These experiences were documented in meeting notebooks.

The media articles selected for this study were limited to articles about the SOEs in which the first researcher had held executive positions. Furthermore, only articles published on

TABLE 4: Data extracts.

Data source	Extract
Interview data	'A process like this and the kind of accountability and the kind of transparency that comes with it... prepares you for a conversation or conduct that would make it easier for you to buy into the concept of collective leadership' (RP1-Participant 2).  'When I was appointed COO... it felt like I needed to justify why I should be the COO... I felt like I'm being judged even before I start... because I'm a black person, I will not be able to do it. That's exactly how I felt' (RP1-Participant 5).
Self-interviews data	'As soon as I had my first engagement with the chair of the board, it became apparent that she was not excited to be receiving me as her CEO ... she put an offer of a salary package which was lower than my previous salary ... I read her body language to be one of saying "take it or leave it" ... in my first meeting with the full board, it also was apparent that some Directors harboured hostilities towards me...' (RP2-Self-interview 2).
Reflexive journal entries	'She had been in that acting role for a year and a half when the role was eventually advertised... she applied for the position ... and the board did not shortlist her ... she was very upset about [it] to the extent that she was ... challenging the board decision through her lawyers and ... the whole process that led to my appointment' (RP4-[SOE2])

COO, Chief Operating Officer; CEO, Chief Executive Officer.

the SOEs during the period when he was part of those SOEs were selected for this study. These articles were found by means of a Google search using the names of the SOEs as keywords. Only articles about leadership issues within these SOEs were selected for this study.

For the interviews with other leaders, participants were purposively sampled to ensure representation of diverse leadership roles, gender and political affiliations. The sample included both males and females who served in executive and board positions within SOEs in South Africa. Participants' political affiliations were also considered, with a mix of members and non-members of political organisations. The selection of participants followed a judgemental and a snowballing method. Firstly, the first author recruited participants from his network of former colleagues within the SOE sector in South Africa. The individuals selected for participation also referred their own contacts to the first researcher, who then approached them for recruitment into the sample of the study.

Snowball sampling was not initially part of the study design; it was later included after several unsuccessful efforts to secure suitable participants from CEOs. While acknowledging the inherent selection bias and potential distortion in snowball sampling, it is the necessary trade-off for gaining insight into hard-to-reach populations (Woodley & Lockard, 2016, p. 326). A common critique of snowball sampling is that it is inherently biased and that the results cannot be generalised to the larger population (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 426). Despite the qualitative nature of this study and generalisability not being of primary concern, bias threatens the quality of the sample selection and must be addressed as far as possible. To do this, the researchers firstly ensured variation in the sample by including diverse leadership roles, gender and political affiliations (Parker et al., 2019, p. 4). Secondly, triangulation of data was employed by gathering data from the first researcher's own experiences through various autoethnographic methods, the interviews with the participants and the media reports (Fusch et al., 2018, p. 20). Furthermore, it was also important throughout the research

TABLE 5: Data extracts.

Data source	Extract
Interview data	'... sometimes it's easy to hide failure behind collective leadership... if something goes wrong you know we all bear equal responsibility for it, we shoulder the burden of it... you almost make everyone take responsibility for that failure... you may not have got to the bottom of where that failure was occurring in the organisation and as a result, you allow poor performance to thrive, right, because you're not getting to the root of the problem ...' (RP1-Participant 11).  '...we had disagreements... in our engagements. But ultimately, the one common purpose which was that of maintaining a stable organisation always came out a winner ...' (RP1-Participant 9).  'So an example would be the CEO recruitment process. So, under normal circumstances you know that would be a process that the board runs ... But what happened during my tenure was that in the Minister became more hands-on and involved. I could say operationally involved in terms of specifically getting involved from the point of short listing, you know ... she was more involved from the time of the short listing with specific candidates and specific, you know, requirements that she had at some point in time. She was also calling board members about her preference' (RP1-Participant 2).
Self-interviews data	'I understand collective leadership to be about a leadership practice which is practiced by more than one person, where all the people involved take collective responsibility and accountability for the leadership role of that particular entity or company or an organisation, and in collective leadership, people share in the varied responsibilities to lead an institution or a company' (RP2-Self-interview 1).  'This included the quarterly monitoring of the spending of the approved budgets by myself as the Chief Executive Officer and the entire team of my executive management as well as the entire staff complement of [SOE2]. So, theirs was more of an oversight role on the work that we did as management once they've approved the strategy of [SOE2]' (RP2- Self-interview 2).  'I would say that I had very good relationships with all of my colleagues in the executive management team except for the acting group chief executive largely when I arrived as indicated earlier. In the beginning, I also had very good relationships with the members of the board and I had a good relationship with the Minister and the Deputy Minister, although we only met them on two occasions formally during my time at SOE2' (RP2- Self-interview 3).
Reflexive journal entries	'The rest of the week turned out to be an abnormal week for me where I was spending a minimum of 18 hours a day in the office with the finance management team, attending to the finalisation of the new set of the annual financial statements and addressing the audit queries. Suffice to say that, by the end of the week, we had found a path to save the audit which was acceptable to the AGSA [Auditor-General South Africa]. As a result, the manager and his team recommitted to carrying out the audit, although under extreme time pressures, with my assurance that they would get the information they requested within the agreed timelines. To make this commitment work, I had to go and introduce myself to my fellow executives and plead with them for support to save the audit' (RP4-[SOE1]).  'After submitting my application, I learned through some of the returning board members that the new Minister gave a mandate to the chairperson of the Board of Directors on a candidate that was to be appointed as CEO to replace me who was said to be a political employee. Because of this deployment instruction given to the Board of Directors which I was advised that the Board chairperson had accepted on behalf of the board I decided that I was not going to be part of a process which already had predetermined outcomes' (RP4-[SOE2]).  'The Minister issued a directives to all entities in the portfolio that only two representatives per organisation should travel to the conference to accompany the delegation representing South Africa...' (RP4-[SOE2]).  'What made matters worse for me was that even in meetings of Exco, the GM would be invited to these meetings without my knowledge despite him reporting to me and be requested to make presentations on behalf of my portfolio while I am there. Even when questions were being asked on finance matters, the acting GCEO would ask him instead of me despite being present in the meetings' (RP4-[SOE3]).

CEO, Chief Executive Officer; SOE, state-owned enterprise; GM, General Manager; GCEO, Group Chief Executive Officer.

process to take a reflexive stance on one's positionality and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research context (i.e. the first author's perspectives and relationship with the participants) and the effect it may have on the participants. This allowed the researchers to constantly monitor their impact and biases during the research study (Berger, 2015, p. 221). The reflexive stance was mainly facilitated through continuous discussion between the three authors, of whom only one was an insider researcher.

This process of discussions among the authors is referred to as social perspective taking (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017, p. 2), which aids the process of reflection and increases the credibility of the research.

## Data analysis

Data from the reflexive journals, self-interviews, media reports and semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78) with Atlas.ti 24. Although all the data were analysed simultaneously, ATLAS.ti 24 allowed comparison of the coding and thematising between the different datasets. In this way, it was easy to see if the codes and themes occurred across the different datasets. The data were handled in this manner to decrease the likelihood of cherry-picking during analysis. Transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes related to leadership, social relations, interpersonal interactions and organisational dynamics.

Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of common patterns and unique insights across different datasets. Thematic analysis was managed using a qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, which helped to deepen the analysis.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS008/21) prior to data collection, ensuring adherence to principles of confidentiality and informed consent. Participants and the SOEs they worked for were anonymised using pseudonyms (i.e. participants and SOEs were referred to by number, e.g. Participant 1 or SOE 1) to protect their identities. All data were securely stored and accessible only to authorised researchers. All participants were informed of the nature of the study and the purposes of the interview, as well as the reasons for collecting the data. All participants in the study signed an informed consent form.

## Results

The findings are organised into three key themes: (1) affiliation-driven appointments, (2) appointment consequences on team dynamics and (3) shared responsibility and accountability. Data sources were critically analysed through the lens of an organisational leader. Emergent meanings were identified from the data to deepen our understanding of how interpersonal, relational and organisational factors shape collective leadership in plural organisations.

The emergent relational leadership dynamics as highlighted in Table 2 reflects the interconnectedness of affiliation-driven appointments, the impact of these appointments on team dynamics and their implications on shared responsibility and accountability within collective leadership settings. The findings highlight the relational and collaborative nature of

collective leadership. This amplifies the interplay between personal and relational factors that influence leadership practice, team composition, collaboration and accountability in a collective leadership framework. The findings highlight the complexity of relationships and alignments, and the challenges posed by bias, rivalries and oversight in collective leadership settings. The next section of this article unpacks the three major themes that emerged from the data analysis process, namely, affiliation-driven appointments, appointments consequences on team dynamics and shared responsibility and accountability.

### Theme 1: Affiliation-driven appointments

Affiliation-driven appointments refer to leadership appointments influenced by personal, political or organisational affiliations rather than solely on merit or competence. These appointments often reflect broader socio-political dynamics, aligning leaders with specific networks or ideologies, which can impact perceptions of legitimacy, trust and cohesion within the leadership collective. The findings from the extracts provide valuable insights, specifically highlighting how leadership dynamics, relationships and decision-making processes are influenced by individual, organisational and political factors.

Participant 6 from the interview data as per Table 3, reflects on his experience of being appointed by a Minister into the Board of an SOE when he did not apply for it. He had known the Minister as they both belonged to the same political organisation. Based on an informal discussion, and without following any competitive process, the Minister decided to appoint him to a board for which he had not applied. Interview Participant 5's data unveil the appointment of a capable team of executives by an administrator and the subsequent impact of an immature CEO on leadership quality. Referring to the immaturity of the CEO, Participant 5 suggests that the individual was not competent to lead such a big national entity. Similarly, reflexive journal entries (Reflexive Journal Entries RP4 in Table 3) highlight the challenge of incompetent and underqualified individuals being appointed to leadership roles on the basis of political affiliation and personal relationships.

Reflexive Journal Entries RP4 further highlight the challenges of financial mismanagement and alleged corruption linked to the competency levels of some members of a Board of Directors at the level of a national entity. This underscores the importance of the individual competency and experience of leaders. It emerges that leadership effectiveness in collective contexts is closely tied to the team composition, indicating that socially constructed leadership relies on the synergistic capability of individuals within the collective. In a similar vein, Participant 9's statement reflects that leadership is perceived as proper when both the board and executives have the competence and experience for the leadership task. This highlights the role of collaboration and mutual accountability among leadership tiers in fostering trust and stability in collective leadership frameworks.

From the self-interview data (Self-interviews Data RP2) as per Table 3, it emerged that leadership decisions and positions are shown to be heavily influenced by political and ideological affiliations. This demonstrates how collective leadership is socially constructed within a political context, where individual identities and organisational policies intersect to shape leadership teams and decision-making processes. The reference to political formations illustrates the role of external factors (e.g. political ideologies) in defining leadership priorities, suggesting that collective leadership in such settings is not purely organisational but deeply interwoven with broader socio-political frameworks.

Data from the reflexive journal entries (Reflexive Journal Entries RP4) as reflected in Table 3, reveal a conflict between an acting CEO and the board-appointed leader, and the perceived favouritism stemming from political ties. This highlights the challenges of political interference in collective leadership. There are tensions between formal authority (board recommendations) and informal influence (political connections). These tensions impact trust and cohesion within the leadership collective, indicating that socially constructed leadership is subject to negotiation and contestation among stakeholders.

Considering the above findings, it can be said that leadership in collective settings is influenced by the competence of individual members, particularly those in executive and board positions. Immature or politically driven appointments can destabilise the collective leadership framework. Furthermore, political affiliations and ideological orientations significantly inform leadership behaviours, decisions and alignment. This interdependence between politics and leadership indicates a broader socio-political construction of collective leadership. Similarly, personal relationships, perceived political deployments and Ministerial interventions create fractures within the leadership collective, challenging its cohesiveness and legitimacy. Hence, effective collective leadership is characterised by synergy and alignment between executives and boards.

These findings illustrate that socially constructed collective leadership is deeply affected by individual competence, political affiliations and interpersonal dynamics. Leadership in such contexts relies on balancing professional expertise with the socio-political realities shaping organisational governance. Managing these influences is critical to fostering trust, alignment and sustainable leadership within the collective framework.

## Theme 2: Appointment consequences on team dynamics

Appointment consequences on team dynamics refers to the effect that leadership appointments have on interpersonal relationships, trust and collaboration within the team. These consequences can include tensions from perceived bias, power imbalances, or unresolved rivalries, which influence cohesion, alignment and the effectiveness of collective

leadership and decision-making. The findings illustrate critical insights into the people dynamics within the framework of socially constructed collective leadership, particularly regarding how interpersonal perceptions, biases and relational tensions impact leadership functioning and collaboration.

In the interview, Participant 2 from the interview data as per Table 4 drew attention to the process of cultivating accountability and transparency, both of which are seen as foundational to fostering collective leadership (Melo et al., 2019, p. 290). These elements build trust and facilitate open conversations, making it easier for individuals to adopt a collective mindset (Sososutiksno, 2023, p. 180). Collective leadership thrives when transparency and accountability are integral to organisational culture, enabling leaders to collaborate effectively. On the other hand, Participant 5 from the interview data as reflected in Table 4 drew attention to her experience of feeling that because of her racial identity, her expertise and capabilities were being predetermined negatively and questioned without her being granted an objective opportunity to perform her duties. The prejudgement highlights how perceived biases and stereotypes can undermine confidence and trust in collective leadership settings. Such dynamics create an unequal starting point for leaders within the collective, impacting their ability to contribute fully and reinforcing barriers to inclusivity within leadership teams.

Self-interview 2 (Table 4) reveals the CEO's encounter with a hostile chairperson and an unwelcoming Board of Directors. The hostility and rejection are demonstrated by the experience of being given an offer that the chairperson knew was below the previous salary with no discussion on its acceptability and the experience of ill-treatment from some Directors. This experience underscores the importance of relational acceptance in collective leadership. A lack of support or visible hostility diminishes the leader's ability to integrate effectively into the collective framework. This finding suggests that collective leadership requires not only professional alignment but also relational inclusivity to foster collaboration and cohesion. Data from the reflexive journals (Reflexive Journal Entry, SOE2) drew attention to the anger of an acting leader who felt bypassed for a permanent appointment, given that she had acted on the post for at least a year and a half. As the Board of Directors gave no reasons for not shortlisting her, the fact that she had acted on the role for such a long time suggests that their conduct was unfair to her. Her anger, which was also directed at the new CEO, illustrates how unresolved professional rivalries and perceptions of unfairness can create relational fractures within a leadership team. These dynamics can undermine trust in the collective and disrupt organisational focus, as demonstrated by her seeking recourse from external stakeholders (lawyers).

Considering these findings, transparency and fairness in processes and decision-making, coupled with shared accountability, are essential for fostering trust and engagement in collective leadership. These elements prepare individuals for open dialogue and collaboration within the collective. Furthermore, perceptions of bias, whether based

on race, gender, unfair treatment or other factors, must be addressed to ensure that all members of the leadership team feel valued and respected. Collective leadership would benefit greatly from transparent and fair recruitment processes where reasons for decisions taken are explained and justified to all affected to foster a culture of unity. Had the Board of Directors explained in a transparent manner their reasons for not shortlisting the individual who felt bypassed, she would probably have understood, which could have prevented the legal battles and hostilities between the affected parties. Inclusive practices are critical to dismantling barriers that hinder the equitable participation of leaders. Hostility or relational exclusion undermines the effectiveness of collective leadership. Leaders must actively work to create a culture of mutual respect, fairness, acceptance and inclusivity, where differences are addressed constructively to avoid exacerbating divides. Professional rivalries and dissatisfaction with leadership appointments can create lasting tensions that disrupt collective functioning. Clear and fair processes for role assignments, combined with proactive conflict resolution mechanisms, are essential for maintaining unity within leadership collectives.

### Theme 3: Shared responsibility and accountability

Shared responsibility and accountability refer to the collective ownership of decisions, actions and outcomes by the leadership team. It emphasises mutual accountability, where successes and failures are collectively addressed, fostering collaboration while requiring mechanisms to ensure individual contributions and accountability are transparent and equitable. The findings reflect key aspects of how socially collective leadership is constructed, especially concerning responsibility, accountability, collaboration, role separation and conflict management.

Participant 11 (Table 5) highlighted a potential drawback of collective leadership through diffused accountability. When responsibility is shared, failures can be masked, as everyone shoulders the burden equally. This creates a challenge in identifying root causes of underperformance and may allow poor practices to persist. This emphasises that while collective leadership can foster shared responsibility, it requires mechanisms for identifying individual contributions to ensure accountability and continuous improvement. Similarly, data from Self-interview 1 affirm the concept of shared accountability, with the idea that collective leadership involves individuals taking joint responsibility for decisions and leadership functions. While this approach distributes leadership roles, it also necessitates clear structures to avoid confusion or the dilution of accountability. In this regard, collective leadership should benefit from the effective application of accountability, where mechanisms such as individual performance contracts and team targets are developed to clearly determine where responsibilities lie both at an individual and a team level.

For Participant 9 (Interview Data), despite disagreements within the leadership team, a shared commitment to

maintaining organisational stability emerged as a unifying force. This demonstrates the importance of having a common purpose in collective leadership, which can transcend individual differences and foster collaboration. This suggests that collective leadership thrives when the group is guided by shared goals, even in the face of interpersonal or ideological conflicts. From Self-interview 3, strong interpersonal relationships among leadership members are emphasised as critical for effective collaboration in collective leadership. Good relationships with the board, executive management and political stakeholders (e.g. Ministers) facilitated smoother operations and decision-making processes.

However, the highlighted friction with an acting Group CEO points to the challenges posed by interpersonal dynamics and potential power struggles in a collective setting. Such conflicts can disrupt cohesion and effectiveness unless proactively managed. Similarly, data from the Reflexive Journal Entries (RP4-SOE1) underscore the importance of collaborative efforts during crises. The leader's ability to rally the executive team and gain their support to address audit challenges reflects the necessity of fostering teamwork and mutual trust in collective leadership. The hands-on approach, pleading for support and working extensive hours alongside the team, demonstrates how leadership in a collective framework requires personal commitment and relationship-building to mobilise and align efforts effectively in times of crisis, when organisational turnaround strategies become necessary. Self-interview 2 reveals that collective leadership includes oversight responsibilities, as illustrated by the quarterly monitoring of budgets and the execution of approved strategies. This suggests that while leadership responsibilities are shared, there is still a need for defined roles and mechanisms to ensure that management and oversight functions are effectively carried out.

Considering the data, it can be said that the emphasis in collective leadership on shared responsibility can obscure accountability, creating a risk of underperformance. Effective leadership requires systems to clearly delineate roles, identify contributions and address failures without undermining the collective ethos. Furthermore, a shared vision or organisational goal is essential for overcoming disagreements and fostering unity among leadership members. This shared purpose acts as an anchor for collective decision-making and action. Similarly, leadership in collective settings is tested during crises. The ability to galvanise the team, build consensus and lead by example becomes critical in navigating challenges and ensuring organisational resilience and success. While collective leadership involves shared responsibilities, oversight and role clarity remain essential to ensure that accountability is not diluted and that strategic goals are met.

Journal entries (RP4-SOE2) as well as RP1-Participant 2 highlight the challenge of overreach that undermines the segregation of roles as advocated for by the principles of good governance. In this reflexive journal entry and Participant 2's experience, it is highlighted that Ministers

interfered with the appointment process of a CEO, which the Board of Directors should independently execute to make recommendations to the Minister based on a fair and objective process. Reflections from journal entries (RP4-SOE2) further indicate an interference by the Minister on operational matters when he decided how many representatives of the entity should travel with the team to represent the country at an international conference. Matters of travel are operational and are in the domain of the management team. This instruction demonstrates the challenges in collective leadership practice, where members of the leadership constellation disregard governance through undermining the segregation of duties. Journal entries from RP4-SOE2 further demonstrate this challenge of overreach across roles, where a GM who reported to the CFO was invited to Exco meetings by the CEO without engaging the CFO, who was the head of the finance portfolio. The GM should be engaged in portfolio matters while the CFO is present in the Exco meetings.

## Discussion

The discussion focuses on the dynamics of affiliation-driven appointments and their implications for team dynamics, shared responsibility and accountability. Social constructionism emphasises the role of social relations in the selection of individuals for roles, the cultivation of trust and the fostering of genuine collaboration. This perspective underscores the importance of people-centric processes in building team cohesion and shared purpose. By weaving these insights together, the analysis offers a rich understanding of how affiliation-driven appointments affect not just organisational performance but also the lived experiences, motivations and collective dynamics of those involved in collective leadership practice. Furthermore, weaving these insights highlights the profound influence of human connections and shared leadership practices in the construction of collective leadership in plural organisations.

### Theme 1: Affiliation-driven appointments

The findings illustrate critical aspects of collective leadership in South African SOEs, particularly around leadership appointments and the influence of political and social factors. Applying the social construction lens, these insights are unpacked to analyse collective leadership and identify consistencies and contradictions in the existing literature. In relation to the process of appointing leaders and its implications for social interaction dynamics, the study's findings align with the focus of social constructionism on the importance of building relationships and fostering trust to ensure effective leadership (Bolden et al., 2023, p. 16). The quality of leadership teams impacts organisational effectiveness, as strong relational dynamics lead to cohesive and capable leadership teams (De Bode et al., 2024, p. 184). The emphasis on relational competence and trust-building as crucial to leadership is supported by the literature on social constructionism.

In terms of relational trust, the study found that positive collaboration and alignment between boards of directors and

executives and alignment around shared goals foster effective leadership (Schlappa et al., 2021, p. 471). Social constructionism emphasises the importance of alignment and mutual trust in leadership teams, consistent with this observation.

However, there are some contradictions with social constructionism, as evidenced in the findings relating to relational conflict and trust erosion. For example, the study found instances where relational trust was undermined by political interference and affiliation in appointment processes, pre-conceived perceptions where new members entering the collective leadership constellation were not trusted on the basis of their political affiliation. This highlights how political interference and affiliation-based decision-making processes and relational conflicts can erode trust, creating tensions within leadership teams. On the other hand, social constructionism assumes that relational processes can build trust, but in politically charged environments, relationships can also be a source of division rather than cohesion (Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022, p. 359). In this sense, the idealistic social constructionist view of relational trust does not fully account for the complexity of political dynamics that undermine relationships in collective leadership settings. The multiple datasets consistently highlighted instances of political interference on the functioning of SOEs through imposing individuals in leadership positions, thereby affecting organisational performance and relations within the collective leadership setting. Furthermore, Ministers give leaders instructions that are not necessarily in the best interests of the entities, which further strains relations within the leadership collective.

### Theme 2: Appointment consequences on team dynamics

The findings from the data sources on the consequences of appointments on team dynamics provide significant insights into collective leadership. These findings reveal the interplay between relational dynamics and trust, offering opportunities to examine contradictions and consistencies with existing literature through the lenses of social constructionism.

Trust and social dynamics were aligned with the social constructionist literature. For instance, the study's findings highlight that when there is political interference by Ministers on who should be appointed in leadership roles within SOEs, relational trust among the members of the leadership constellation can be undermined. The erosion of trust within the collective as a result of political interference highlights the critical role of trust in relational leadership. The lack of trust and perceived hostility reflects a relational breakdown, consistent with social constructivist literature emphasising the necessity of mutual respect and positive social dynamics for effective collective leadership (Jian, 2022, p. 933) and asserting that trust and mutual engagement are prerequisites for fostering collaborative environments (Schlappa et al., 2021, p. 471). The absence of these elements undermines cohesion and collective leadership practices.

Judgement and relational tensions also emerged as a point of interest. For instance, the study found that racial discrimination was sometimes used to pre-judge the capabilities of certain leaders. It was found that biases and preconceptions within leadership teams can erode relational trust and foster a toxic environment, inhibiting collaboration and relational development. Again, this is consistent with the social constructionist literature when it discusses how unresolved biases and relational inequalities disrupt team cohesion (Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022, p. 359).

The findings drew attention to transparency as a relational facilitator. It supports the social constructionist principle that transparent processes build trust and relational alignment, fostering acceptance of collective leadership practices (Bolden et al., 2023, p. 16). However, the relational tensions observed suggested that transparency alone is insufficient if biases, hostilities or power imbalances exist, complicating the straightforward application of social constructionist principles.

### **Theme 3: Shared responsibility and accountability**

The findings on shared responsibility and accountability revealed important insights into the dynamics of collective leadership, particularly in SOEs. Shared responsibility and accountability that emerged in the findings can be analysed through the lens of social constructionism. The findings showed alignment with its emphasis on shared purpose and mutual engagement. Collective leadership, as described here, reflects the theory's focus on relational processes, where shared accountability fosters a sense of unity and responsibility among leaders (Ospina et al., 2020, p. 441). Social constructionism emphasises the collaborative nature of leadership, where team members contribute to shared goals and responsibilities. This is consistent with the finding that collective leadership involves multiple individuals taking accountability for outcomes.

Relational trust and conflict resolution also emerged from the findings. It reflects how social relational trust and alignment around a common purpose can overcome conflicts, supporting the social constructionist emphasis on fostering positive relationships and alignment to achieve organisational goals. Social constructionist literature asserts that relational trust and a shared sense of purpose are key drivers of effective collaboration, even in the presence of disagreements.

However, some of the findings were in contradiction with the social constructionist literature. Failure attribution and relational accountability challenge the idealistic view of shared accountability in social constructionism, suggesting that collective leadership can obscure individual accountability, leading to a lack of ownership for poor performance. Social constructionism assumes that relational processes naturally lead to accountability and performance improvement, which is contradicted here by the observed tendency to diffuse responsibility in collective settings.

The findings showed that social constructionism underestimates the need for formal oversight mechanisms in politically charged environments. Furthermore, the disregard of segregation of duties among different roles within the leadership constellation and non-adherence to governance principles also emerged as a serious challenge in the process of the social construction of collective leadership in plural organisations. This was demonstrated by the two Ministers' interference in CEO appointment processes. The CEO's bypassing of the CFO in favour of a junior staff highlights the critical factor of role definition, clarification and awareness of good governance principles by individuals involved in collective leadership settings. Literature acknowledges that the area of interface between collective leadership and good governance is understudied and is an area that future research should focus on (Ferkins et al., 2018, p. 221). The findings of this study offer some insights on the direction that can inform future research in this area.

### **Implications and recommendations**

Strategies that emerged to mitigate these effects include strengthening merit-based appointment criteria, enhancing transparency and promoting leadership development to balance political and organisational priorities. Appointment-related consequences on team dynamics highlighted the need for structured onboarding, communication protocols and conflict resolution mechanisms to address biases, hostility and unresolved tensions, ultimately fostering inclusive and collaborative environments. Lastly, the complexities of shared responsibility underscored the importance of aligning leadership around a common purpose, defining clear roles and implementing robust oversight and monitoring systems to enhance accountability and collective success. Strengthening merit-based appointment processes, fostering inclusive team dynamics through structured onboarding and conflict resolution mechanisms and promoting transparency and oversight in leadership practices were also found to be crucial. Additionally, the emphasis on aligning leadership with shared organisational goals and enhancing accountability frameworks provides a roadmap for cultivating effective, collaborative leadership.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore the dynamics of collective leadership in plural organisations, with a specific focus on SOEs in South Africa. The findings revealed the interplay between leadership appointments, team dynamics and shared accountability. Affiliation-driven appointments were identified as a key challenge, impacting leadership and team composition because of political and ideological influences. The findings on leadership appointments and their consequences revealed both consistencies and contradictions with social constructionist literature. The study provided a nuanced understanding of how social relational dynamics influence collective leadership. Applying a social constructionist lens, the study provided a more comprehensive framework for understanding collective leadership, balancing relational and structural dynamics in

the context of SOEs in South Africa as plural organisations. The findings on shared responsibility and accountability highlighted both consistencies and contradictions with social constructionist literature. This article contributes towards understanding and improving the social construction of collective leadership in plural organisations as represented by South African SOEs. Moreover, this article makes a contribution towards equipping policymakers, governance bodies and organisational leaders with practical strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of political interference, improve team cohesion and enhance the overall performance and sustainability of collective leadership in SOEs.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Prof. Chitakunye P who assisted with guidance on how to develop a journal article from a full thesis. His guidance was invaluable to this article.

This article is based on research originally conducted as part of Khathutshelo M. Ramukumba's doctoral thesis titled 'Collective leadership practices in plural organizations: An autoethnographic social constructionist investigation of South African state-owned entities', submitted to the faculty of Economic and Management Studies, University of Pretoria in 2025. The thesis was supervised by Prof. Derick de Jongh and Prof Sumari O'Neil. The thesis was re-worked, revised and adapted into a journal article for publication. The original thesis is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/103639>.

## Competing interests

The author reported that they received funding from the University of South Africa which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated university in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research.

## CRedit authorship contribution

Khathutshelo M. Ramukumba: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Derick de Jongh: Project administration, Supervision. Sumari O'Neil: Project administration, Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

## Funding information

The research received partial funding from the University of South Africa through a form of bursary for 1 year in which the first author, Khathutshelo M. Ramukumba, was employed by the university.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Khathutshelo M. Ramukumba, upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

## References

- Abson, E., Schofield, P., & Kennell, J. (2024). Making shared leadership work: The importance of trust in project-based organisations. *International Journal of Project Management*, 42(2), 102575. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2024.102575>
- Adeoye-Olatunde, O.A., & Olenik, N.L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441>
- Ahmed, I., & Ishtiaq, S. (2021). *Reliability and validity: Importance in medical research. Methods*, 12(1), 2401–2406. <https://doi.org/10.47391/jpma.06-861>
- Allett, N., Keightley, E., & Pickering, M. (2011). Using self-interviews to research memory. *Realities Toolkit*, 6. Retrieved from <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/schools/soas/morgancentre/toolkits/16-toolkit-using-self-interviews.pdf>
- Ansar, W., & Goswami, S. (2021). Combating the menace: A survey on characterization and detection of fake news from a data science perspective. *International Journal of Information Management Data Insights*, 1(2), 100052. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijime.2021.100052>
- Ao, J., Wang, Y., Tian, X., Chen, D., Zhang, J., Lu, L., Wang, Y., Li, H., & Wu, Z. (2024). Sd-eval: A benchmark dataset for spoken dialogue understanding beyond words. *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems*, 37, 56898–56918. [https://proceedings.neurips.cc/paper\\_files/paper/2024/hash/681fe4ec554beabdc9c84a1780cd5a8a-Abstract-Datasets\\_and\\_Benchmarks\\_Track.html](https://proceedings.neurips.cc/paper_files/paper/2024/hash/681fe4ec554beabdc9c84a1780cd5a8a-Abstract-Datasets_and_Benchmarks_Track.html)
- Badarai, E., Kotze, M., & Nel, P. (2023). A leadership-organisational performance model for state-owned enterprises in emerging economies. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 54(1), 3148. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v54i1.3148>
- Bans-Akutey, A., & Tiimub, B.M. (2021). Triangulation in research. *Academia Letters*, 2(3392), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL3392>
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (2023). The social construction of reality. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 92–101). Routledge. Retrieved from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/97811003320609-11/social-construction-reality-peter-berger-thomas-luckmann>
- Berger, P.L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books. Retrieved from [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-658-37354-2\\_11](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-658-37354-2_11)
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Berraies, S., Hamza, K.A., & Chtioui, R. (2021). Distributed leadership and exploratory and exploitative innovations: Mediating roles of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing and organizational trust. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 25(5), 1287–1318. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JKM-04-2020-0311>
- Bolden, R., Kars-Unluoglu, S., Jarvis, C., & Sheffield, R. (2023). Paradoxes of multi-level leadership: Insights from an integrated care system. *Journal of Change Management*, 23(4), 337–357. <https://doi.org/10.1108/hrmid.2012.04420gaa.013>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Brown, A. (2020). Relativism and the challenge of social construction. *Journal of Social Theory*, 15(2), 123–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432x.2021.1914719>
- Brown, S.G., Hill, N.S., & Lorinkova, N.N.M. (2021). Leadership and virtual team performance: A meta-analytic investigation. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 30(5), 672–685. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432x.2021.1914719>
- Chang, H., & Bilgen, W. (2020). Autoethnography in leadership studies: Past, present, and future. *Journal of Autoethnography*, 1(1), 93–98. <https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2020.1.1.93>
- Cohen, N., & Arieli, T. (2011). Field research in conflict environments: Methodological challenges and snowball sampling. *Journal of Peace Research*, 48(4), 423–435. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343311405698>
- Conger, J.A., & Pearce, C.L. (2023). Empowerment's pivotal role in enhancing effective self-and shared leadership. In C.L. Pearce & E.A. Locke (Eds.), *Principles of organizational behavior: The handbook of evidence-based management* (3rd ed., pp. 293–310). John Wiley & Sons.

- Cooper, R., & Liley, B. (2022). I'm interested in autoethnography, but how do I do it. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(1), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5288>
- Day, K. (2024). Analytic autoethnography: A methodological framework for interdisciplinary practice-based research. *The International Journal of Critical Cultural Studies*, 23(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-0055/cgp/v23i01/1-21>
- De Bode, J.D., Fox, C.J., & McSweeney, J.J. (2024). Top management team political polarization and its implications for strategic decision-making. *Small Group Research*, 55(1), 184–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10464964231152234>
- Denis, J.-L., Lamothe, L., & Langley, A. (2001). The dynamics of collective leadership and strategic change in pluralistic organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(4), 809–837. <https://doi.org/10.5465/3069417>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T.E., & Bochner, A.P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research/Historische sozialforschung*, 36(4), 273–290. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.273-290>
- Endres, S., & Weibler, J. (2017). Towards a three-component model of relational social constructionist leadership: A systematic review and critical interpretive synthesis. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 19(2), 214–236. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12095>
- Ervits, I. (2023). CSR reporting in China's private and state-owned enterprises: A mixed methods comparative analysis. *Asian Business & Management*, 22(1), 55–83. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41291-021-00147-1>
- Fairhurst, G.T., & Grant, D. (2010). The social construction of leadership: A sailing guide. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(2), 171–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318909359697>
- Ferkins, L., Shilbury, D., & O'Boyle, I. (2018). Leadership in governance: Exploring collective board leadership in sport governance systems. *Sport Management Review*, 21(3), 221–231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.007>
- Finefetter-Rosenbluh, I. (2017). Incorporating perspective taking in reflexivity: A method to enhance insider qualitative research processes. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1609406917703539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917703539>
- Foldy, E.G., & Ospina, S.M. (2023). 'Contestation, negotiation, and resolution': The relationship between power and collective leadership. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 25(3), 546–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12319>
- Fusch, P., Fusch, G.E., & Ness, L.R. (2018). Denzin's paradigm shift: Revisiting triangulation in qualitative research. *Journal of Social Change*, 10(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.5590/josc.2018.10.1.02>
- Garton, P.M., & Wawrzynski, M.R. (2021). Student engagement and social change: Collective leadership development in South African higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 62(1), 90–106. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0006>
- Gergen, K.J. (2019). *An invitation to social construction*. Sage Publications.
- Gichuhi, J.M. (2021). Shared leadership and organizational resilience: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Organizational Leadership*, 10(1), 67–88. <https://doi.org/10.33844/ijol.2021.60536>
- Hendy, R., Miccelli, M., Blaustein, J., & Hutton Burns, K. (2024). Police sergeants and disaster management during Australia's Black Summer bushfire crisis. *Policing and Society*, 35(6), 733–752. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2024.2405747>
- Jian, G. (2022). From empathic leader to empathic leadership practice: An extension to relational leadership theory. *Human Relations*, 75(5), 931–955. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726721998450>
- Le Fevre, D., Meyer, F., & Bendikson, L. (2021). Navigating the leadership tensions in creating collective responsibility. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 6(3), 253–266. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-03-2020-0014>
- Lim, W.M. (2025). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(2), 199–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
- Martin, T.E. (2017). Framing leadership: The social construction of leadership within the academic field of communication studies. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3(1), 1328794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2017.1328794>
- Melo, P. N., Martins, A., & Pereira, M. (2019). An evidence-based review of the relationship between leadership and accountability. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 15th European Conference on Management, Leadership and Governance, 14 – 15 November 2019, ECMLG.
- Mpete, M., & Maier, C. (2024). Challenges faced by CEOs in executing turnaround strategies in state-owned enterprises in South Africa. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 55(1), 4220. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v55i1.4220>
- O'Connor, D., & Cormican, K. (2022). Leading from the middle: How team leaders implement lean success factors. *International Journal of Lean Six Sigma*, 13(2), 253–275. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLSS-11-2020-0194>
- Ospina, S.M., Foldy, E.G., Fairhurst, G.T., & Jackson, B. (2020). Collective dimensions of leadership: Connecting theory and method. *Human Relations*, 73(4), 441–463. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719899714>
- Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). *Snowball sampling*. SAGE Research Methods Foundations. Retrieved from <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/6781/>
- Poerwandari, E.K. (2021). Minimizing bias and maximizing the potential strengths of autoethnography as a narrative research. *Japanese Psychological Research*, 63(4), 310–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpr.12320>
- Raelin, J.A. (2023). Leadership-as-practice: Its past history, present emergence, and future potential. *Academy of Management Collections*, 2(2), 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amc.2021.0005>
- Rapp, A.C., & Corral-Granados, A. (2024). Understanding inclusive education – A theoretical contribution from system theory and the constructionist perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(4), 423–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1946725>
- Riggio, R.E., & Newstead, T. (2023). Crisis leadership. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behaviour*, 10(1), 201–224. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-120920-044838>
- Rodriguez, S., & Crawford, E.R. (2023). School-based personnel advocacy for undocumented students through collective leadership in urban schools: A comparative case study. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 18(3), 347–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751221081887>
- Romaioli, D., & McNamee, S. (2021). (Mis) constructing social construction: Answering the critiques. *Theory & Psychology*, 31(3), 315–334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354320967757>
- Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, M.S.A., Alhabsyi, F., & Syam, H. (2022). Semi-structured interview: A methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, 12(1), 22–29. Retrieved from <http://repository.iainpalu.ac.id/id/eprint/1247/1/Saepudin%20Mashuri.%20Artkel%20inter.pdf>
- Schlappa, H., Imani, Y., & Nishino, T. (2021). Relational leadership: An analytical lens for the exploration of co-production. In E. Loeffler & T. Bovaird (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of co-production of public services and outcomes* (pp. 471–490). Palgrave Macmillan (an imprint of Springer Nature).
- Sosoutikno, C. (2023). The effect of transparency, Accountability, and leadership on the effectiveness of village fund management. *GEMILANG: Jurnal Manajemen dan Akuntansi*, 3(2), 179–189. <https://doi.org/10.56910/gemilang.v3i2.443>
- Stephenson, P. (2024). *The discursive construction of collective leadership: An exploratory study*. Retrieved from <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/index.php/preview/12085772/Thesis%20Final%20Draft%20Revised.pdf>
- Sun, H., Conrad, F.G., & Kreuter, F. (2022). The carryover effects of preceding interviewer–respondent interaction on responses in audio computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI). *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology*, 10(2), 299–316. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jssam/smaa019>
- Taylor, S.P. (2018). Critical realism vs social constructionism & social constructivism: Application to a social housing research study. *International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research*, 37(2), 216–222. Retrieved from <https://www.gssrr.org/index.php/JournalOfBasicAndApplied/article/download/8701/3934>
- Uhl-Bien, M., & Ospina, S.M. (2012). *Advancing relational leadership research: A dialogue among perspectives*. IAP. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=3gcoDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=+Advancing+relational+leadership+research:+A+dialogue+among+perspectives&ots=cnoMWNzlun&sig=R8eUE3YAqGbdOKo5cGtTnsuDqRtA>
- Wang, L., Wang, X., & Zhu, F. (2023). Toward a theory of resilience governance: insights from megaprojects in China. In *Research Handbook on the Governance of Projects* (pp. 379–392). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Wilson, J.A., & Cunliffe, A.L. (2022). The development and disruption of relationships between leaders and organizational members and the importance of trust. *Leadership*, 18(3), 359–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150211056738>
- Woodley, X.M., & Lockard, M. (2016). Womanism and snowball sampling: Engaging marginalized populations in holistic research. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(2), 321–329. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2198>
- Zeier, K., Plimmer, G., & Franken, E. (2021). Developing shared leadership in a public organisation: Processes, paradoxes and consequences. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 27(3), 564–581. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2018.78>
- Ziegert, J.C., & Dust, S.B. (2021). Integrating formal and shared leadership: The moderating influence of role ambiguity on innovation. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 36(6), 969–984. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-020-09722-3>