

RSCL onto-epistemology and practice approach to reconceptualise responsible leadership theory



Authors:

Stanley S. Ntakumba¹ 
Derick de Jongh¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Business Management: Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria,

Corresponding author:

Stanley Ntakumba,
sntakumba@gmail.com

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Purpose: This article explores how the relational social constructionist leadership (RSCL) ontology and epistemology, as well as the practice approach, could be employed to reconceptualise the responsible leadership theory.

Design: This paper presents a literature review on the responsible leadership and relational leadership theories. It also reviews literature on the RSCL onto-epistemology as its theoretical framework and the practice approach as its methodology. The empirical analysis that is underlined by the abductive mode of enquiry is based on nine interviews with leaders from the Twende Mbele (TM) African Partnership for Monitoring and Evaluation.

Findings: The findings comprise one main theme (relational leadership practice of interest) called identifying. Identifying constitutes five sub-themes (intersecting relational leadership practices): context identity, gender identity, government identity, language identity and champions identity. Recommendations to reconceptualise responsible leadership theory are based on the discussion of the findings.

Practical implications: The findings could enhance the quality, intentionality and practicality of inter-organisational leadership stakeholder engagement strategies. The social construction of leaders as role models, in the form of cultivating their identity as champions beyond the internal positional leaders, could be practiced by business leaders in other organisational settings to champion social-relationality and ethics-orientation in society in line with the core tenets of responsible leadership theory.

Originality/value: The RSCL onto-epistemology and the practice approach methodology provide conceptual tools to advance responsible leadership theory from a leader-centric focus to the collective domain of leadership research by using leadership practices as the unit of analysis.

Keywords: relational leadership theory; responsible leadership theory; social constructionism; practice approach; relational leadership practices; identifying.

Introduction

From an ethical and moral perspective, business leaders have an obligation to reframe their 'social contract with stakeholders' (Pless et al., 2011), as supported through the responsible leadership movement (Blakeley, 2016; Marques et al., 2018). However, the global scourge of irresponsible practices in all sectors of society remains unabated, which calls for a reconceptualisation of the ways of addressing these practices (Patzer et al., 2018).

Furthermore, at a theoretical level, the responsible leadership scholarship has advanced our understanding of what it means to be a responsible leader in a global environment facing many socio-economic and environmental risks (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). However, facing these risks has heretofore been individual-centric on leaders as part of the classical leadership ethos characterised as heroic leadership (Day et al., 2014).

Consequently, this paper draws from the post-heroic discourse in leadership studies, particularly the 'relationality' and 'practice' turns accentuated by social constructionism and practice theory (Wolfram Cox & Hassard, 2018), to reconceptualise responsible leadership theory. Paying attention to the relational leadership practices will benefit responsible leadership scholarship and practice in terms of incorporating such relational leadership practices as an onto-epistemological preoccupation and a methodological avenue (Cunliffe, 2011; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and not

merely as a question of the characteristics of individual leaders (Raelin, 2020).

Research question and scope

This paper explores how the relational social constructionist leadership (RSCL) onto-epistemology and the practice approach could be used to reconceptualise responsible leadership theory.

In terms of scope, this paper reviews literature on responsible leadership theory, relational leadership theory, the RSCL theoretical framework and the practice approach. The empirical findings are based on the case study of an international inter-organisational partnership known as the Twende Mbele (TM) African Partnership for Monitoring and Evaluation. As an inter-organisational partnership, TM comprises six countries, two evaluation capacity development agencies and a South African university. TM serves as a community of practice on monitoring and evaluation in relation to its effective use for public sector performance and accountability (see Goldman et al., 2018).

Literature review

This paper presents the literature review in two parts. The first part reviews responsible leadership and relational

leadership theories. The second part reviews literature that deals with the elements of the RSCL lens and the practice approach.

Responsible leadership versus relational leadership theories

Table 1 discusses the literature review on the responsible leadership and relational leadership theories.

The relational social constructionist leadership theoretical framework

The RSCL lens adopted for this paper aligns closely with the notion of 'leadership as essentially a question of interpersonal influence' (Clifton et al., 2020, p. 514). According to Cunliffe (2008, p. 131), the intersubjectivism inherent in the RSCL onto-epistemology encourages an open mind to research in order to capture leadership emergence. This is in line with Ospina and Foldy's (2010, p. 294) assertion that RSCL could be used as 'a way to characterise the [leadership] phenomenon in all its forms, whether hierarchical, shared or networked' as long as attention is paid to the emerging processes and practices of leadership. Connelly (2007, p. 1245) adopts a similar position when he asserts that 'our more historical person- and qualities-based leadership models are not to be discarded as wrong but rather understood in a broader context of possible descriptions of leadership'. Sánchez et al.

TABLE 1: Review of literature on responsible leadership and relational leadership theories.

Aspect	Responsible leadership theory	Relational leadership theory
Main arguments	This study highlights the reviews of responsible leadership theory undertaken by Pless and Maak (2011), Miska and Mendenhall (2018) and Marques et al. (2018). The main thrust of responsible leadership theory is, firstly, to advance the leadership scholarship by defining the roles, motivational drivers and responsibilities of leaders in organisations towards their internal and external stakeholders. To do this, the theory incorporates concerns of external stakeholders based on the influence of stakeholder theory and corporate social responsibility movement (Blakeley, 2016; Cameron, 2011; Doh & Quigley, 2014; Maak & Pless, 2006; Mirvis et al., 2010; Pless, 2007; Pless & Maak, 2011). Secondly, the theory pays attention to moral values and ethics as important qualities of responsible leaders (Kempster & Carroll, 2016; Maak, 2007; Waldman, 2011; Waldman & Balven, 2014). In sum, relationality and ethical orientations are the core tenets of responsible leadership theory, irrespective of its application and theorisations. Further, as it serves as a response to practical concerns in society regarding irresponsible behaviour and lack of moral values and ethics, responsible leadership is viewed as a purpose-driven leadership theory (Iszatt-White, 2016; Maak & Pless, 2006; Marques et al., 2018; Mirvis et al., 2010; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Pless et al., 2012). Responsible leadership theory integrates competing philosophical perspectives, practical orientations and theoretical frameworks, which creates opportunities for its continuous scholarly advancement and practical utility (Patzner et al., 2018; Pless & Maak, 2011; Pless et al., 2012; Waldman & Siegel, 2008).	Relational leadership concentrates on the relational processes and dynamics of the leadership phenomenon within organisations and in society (Endres & Weibler, 2017; Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Sánchez et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Relational leadership comprises entity and social constructionist paradigms. The entity paradigm focuses on the relationship between individual leaders with their followers and their common goals. As such, it is leader-centric, like responsible leadership theory, but lacks explicit emphasis on moral values and ethics as the purpose of leadership in response to practical socio-economic and organisational challenges (Cunliffe & Ericksen, 2011; Endres & Weibler, 2017; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The social constructionist paradigm focuses on the processes of leadership emergence and enactment, particularly in collective settings (Cunliffe, 2008; Cunliffe & Ericksen, 2011; Endres & Weibler, 2017). It can be employed as an umbrella construct and a lens to study the leadership phenomenon in all its occurrences (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Hence, this study adopts RSCL as the theoretical framework, as discussed separately below. Since the responsible leadership theory has not yet integrated social constructionist thinking into its repertoire, this paper uses RSCL to contribute to the debate about re-imagining responsible leadership theory (Kurucz et al., 2017; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).
Criticism	The first criticism of responsible leadership theory emanates from the fact that it is leader-centric and individualistic since its starting point is individual leaders and organisations (Pless & Maak, 2011). The second criticism is that it lacks theoretical coherence as it serves as an umbrella concept that accommodates elements of other leadership approaches, such as transformational, shared, servant and ethical leadership theories (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Thirdly, responsible leadership research is dominated by conceptual analyses and less empirical research. The limited empirical research is seen as skewed towards single case studies of individual leaders or organisations undertaken in a normative way (Tsuji, 2021, p. 168).	The entity paradigm of relational leadership is criticised for its emphasis on the relationality of individual leaders with followers. The risk of equating all interactional and relational processes to the leadership processes could dilute the understanding of leadership as a distinct construct (Endres & Weibler, 2017; Sánchez et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The social constructionist paradigm is viewed as an umbrella concept, both as a lens and as a trend, which creates challenges regarding its parameters compared to other leadership approaches. It is also criticised for promoting a positive view of leadership, which could be seen as ideological and romantic in nature (Endres & Weibler, 2017). Most RSCL studies are operationalised using standard qualitative research methods, which raises concerns that such empirical research does not distinguish RSCL from mainstream leadership research (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Mainstream leadership studies tend to ignore the contribution of the RSCL perspective as its onto-epistemological assumptions are incompatible with heroic leadership perspectives (Sánchez et al., 2020).
Application in this paper	This study employs the core tenets of responsible leadership theory (Ketola, 2010; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018) to analyse the findings. Then, the study makes recommendations regarding how responsible leadership theorising could be advanced in terms of addressing its limitations. Furthermore, relational leadership theory's strengths are proposed to help improve responsible leadership theory's limitations (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).	This study compares the entity form of relational leadership with responsible leadership and makes recommendations for how each could help strengthen the weaknesses of the other. The review below employs RSCL form as a lens and articulates its principles. Relational social constructionist leadership is further operationalised using the practice approach as a fairly new methodology for leadership research (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

RSCL, relational social constructionist leadership.

(2020, p. 7) caution that, 'while the theory of social constructionism is robust, a consolidated body of relational leadership knowledge (grounded in constructionism) is still in its early stages'. In the context of inter-organisational partnerships, and in line with Endres and Weibler (2020, p. 275), the RSCL perspective provides opportunities to experience this micro-level process of leading without judgement and to engage in a mutual dialogue with actors in the emerging socially constructed meaning-making process.

Relational social constructionist leadership onto-epistemology focuses on social relations where leadership is known from within as a micro-level process through which meaning-making is socially constructed through narration, dialogue and reflection in an intersubjective way, taking into consideration the impact of context in a relational manner (Cunliffe, 2011; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Endres & Weibler, 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wolfram Cox & Hassard, 2018). Sánchez et al. (2020, p. 6) posit that the RSCL 'epistemology is grounded on the ontological assumption that individuals are interdependent; hence, a sense of self and of each other is constructed through on-going interactions'. Likewise, according to Cunliffe (2008, p. 131), inherent in RSCL are the 'dialectics of intersubjectivity' ('we are who we are because of others') and the 'dialectics of existence', which imply that through our interactions we constitute our reality, which is already constituted. Therefore, 'meaning emerges through the dialectical inter-relationships of speakers and listeners, body or language, speech or silence' (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 131). This intersubjective meaning-making process plays a crucial role in the interpretation of the results of this study, as demonstrated later through applying the RSCL analytical model as shown in Figure 1.

According to Figure 1, firstly, the mechanism of leadership refers to 'social construction', which is about the continuous construction of 'social realities through ongoing interpretation and interaction'. Secondly, the content of leadership refers to 'high-quality relating and communicating', which is about the explicit and implicit connections among people. Thirdly, the manifestation of leadership refers to influence that takes place at dyadic and collective leadership domains (Endres & Weibler, 2017, p. 214). The three elements of the RSCL model, namely leadership mechanism, content and manifestation, are used to discuss the findings of this research in the form of the identified relational leadership practices.

Operationalising relational social constructionist leadership via the practice approach methodology

Ospina and Foldy (2010, p. 303) argue that the practice approach is a better way of operationalising 'social construction of leadership since ... it provides a way to break down the joint work they [*leaders*] engage in to accomplish their mission'. Furthermore, Nicolini and Monteiro (2017, p. 15) assert that a 'practice-based study does not investigate practices as abstract entities but rather it "praxeologises" phenomena, turning the study of decision-making into the



Adapted from 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>

FIGURE 1: The three-component model for relational social constructionist leadership.

study of decision-making practices ...'. Correspondingly, Raelin (2020) praxeologises leadership research in what he frames as 'praxis-oriented research as a methodological basis for leadership-as-practice' (L-A-P). This methodology operationalises 'relationality' (Feldman & Worline, 2016) as it focuses on how leadership is socially constructed in day-to-day practices (Ospina & Foldy, 2010, p. 303). Furthermore, Ospina and Foldy (2010, p. 295), as well as Feldman and Worline (2016, p. 308), concur that leading practice theorists contend that 'practices represent the basic unit of analysis in the social world'; hence, relational leadership practices serve as the unit of analysis for this article.

Alpenberg and Scarbrough (2021, p. 417) distinguish between integrative practices and dispersed practices based on the work of Schatzki (1996). Dispersed practices occur without a clear purpose whereas integrative practices have a clear goal and 'higher level of complexity' ('teleo-affective structure'). As such, in the context of this study, the construct of leadership is an integrative practice as it has 'a goal structure' and 'higher level of complexity' (Alpenberg & Scarbrough, 2021; Schatzki, 1996).

The dispersed practices 'are shared patterns of how to carry out and perform an action, or how to explain something appropriately ... such as describing, reporting and examining' (Alpenberg & Scarbrough, 2021, p. 417). The emphasis here is on action or doing. Hence, some RSCL scholars who study leadership practices prefer to use the construct of 'leading' instead of the familiar constructs of 'leadership' or 'leaders' and 'followers' (Reitz, 2017, p. 517) in order to avoid being leader-centric or heroic and to demonstrate process-in-practice. For instance, Hersted and Gergen (2013) posit that:

... the term 'leadership' is largely tied to the view of an individual leader, whilst 'relational leading' refers to the ability of persons in relationship to move with engagement and efficacy into the future. (p. 30)

As such, in this study, the notion of 'relational leadership practices' shares similar meaning to 'relational leading' (Hersted & Gergen, 2013), which is conceptualised as a 'dispersive practice' when contrasted with the construct of 'leadership' *per se* as an 'integrative practice' (Alpenberg & Scarbrough, 2021; Schatzki, 1996). Lastly, the paper presents the findings using the typology of 'practice of interest' (main theme) versus 'intersecting practices' (sub-themes) (Heidenstrøm, 2022).

Research methods

Themes from existing literature, such as the relational leadership practices identified by Ospina and Foldy (2010, p. 295) and Connelly (2007, p. 1248), informed the design of the qualitative interview schedule. Online interviews were conducted via the Google Teams platform with a purposive sample of nine research participants who were involved in TM's inter-organisational partnership programmes and governance structures. The interviews were carried out in January and February 2022. They were conducted in a 'dialogical intersubjective' manner (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 659; Hersted & Gergen, 2013, p. 30), typical for a RSCL onto-epistemology and practice methodological approach (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Cunliffe (2011, p. 658) defines dialogic intersubjective interviewing as 'conversations in which participants jointly reflect and discuss insights ...'.

Data analysis was done in a stepwise manner that adapted the Grounded Theory (GT) coding approach put forward by Charmaz (2006, p. 42). The coding process led to the identification of the sub-themes that are presented in the research findings, as well as the classification of such themes according to the three elements of the RSCL model presented in Figure 1. It must be noted, however, that the adaptation of the GT coding approach does not make this research a GT study in terms of its design, but an RSCL study that is operationalised through the practice approach.

In the Atlas.ti 22 Windows software, each quotation is accompanied by three index numbers, namely two identification numbers and a reference number. In this research, such numbers are put in brackets as follows [9:36, 12]. In this example, the identification numbers 9:36 mean that the quotation was taken from document number 9, and it is the 36th quotation that was generated in that document. The reference number 12 refers to the location of the quotation within the document, namely paragraph 12. These indices are put before each quotation in the presentation of the research findings.

The next section discusses the mode of enquiry employed by this research.

Modes of leadership enquiry

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, p. 17) argue that researchers normally adopt two different modes of enquiry, namely inductive logic and deductive logic. Sánchez et al. (2020) posit that entity relational leadership scholars tend to apply deductive logic, while RSCL scholars use inductive logic, which perpetuates a lack of complementarity between the two paradigms within the relational leadership theory. Sánchez et al. (2020, p. 7) propose 'paradigm interplay' to mediate the situation via the abductive logic of enquiry.

Cunliffe (2011, p. 664) reasons that abductive logic refers to a process whereby RSCL researchers 'move between theory (neutralising, reframing, dialectics) and practice (participants' accounts), each informing the other'. One of the benefits of using the abductive logic is that it 'demands attention to cumulative knowledge' (Sánchez et al., 2020, p. 6). For instance, Sklaveniti (2020, p. 552) used abductive logic to analyse leadership practices 'abductively from the empirical material to the empirically grounded constructs'. Furthermore, Sánchez et al. (2020, p. 6) argue that abduction motivates RSCL researchers to begin from empirical data and discover surprising situations where data does not align to the theoretical expectations. Hence, in this research, the abductive logic was applied through iteratively starting from the data and then moving to the adaptation of the RSCL analytical framework to explain the observed axially-coded findings (Charmaz, 2006) while refining aspects of the RSCL model based on empirical analysis. Consequently, both the literature-based insights and empirical findings informed the reconceptualisation of the responsible leadership theory.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences of the University of Pretoria (Protocol Number: EMS053/21).

Research findings

This paper is based on a broader research project that contains many themes and sub-themes as its findings. The findings that are presented below focus on 'identifying' as the relational leadership practice of interest (main theme) and its five intersecting relational leadership practices (sub-themes), as depicted in Figure 2.

Main theme: Relational leadership practices of identifying

Relational leadership practices of identifying refer to those situations in which research participants talked about how leadership identities emerged and were formed in the context of TM as an inter-organisational partnership. The relational leadership practices of identifying had the following intersecting relational leadership practices: context identity, gender identity, government identity, language identity and champions identity.

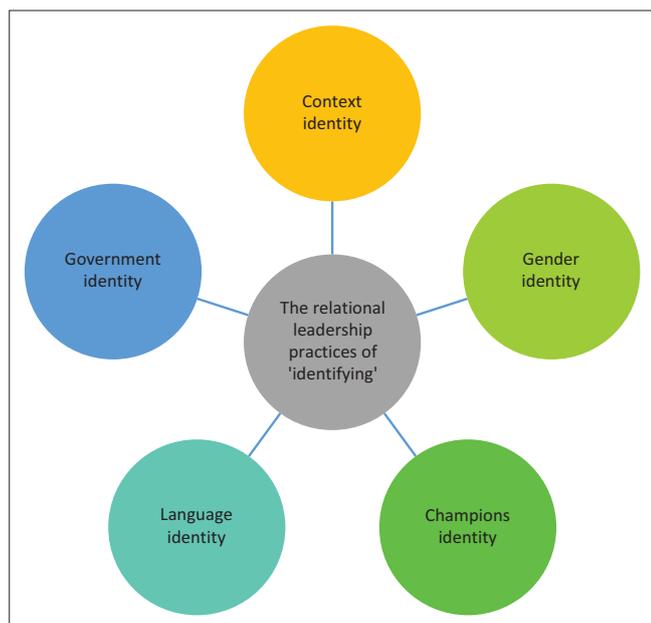


FIGURE 2: The relational leadership practices of identifying.

Sub-theme 1: Context identity

The relational leadership practice of the context identity refers to instances in which the participants emphasised uniqueness of the partnership context and its brand. A first participant's account stated:

'[8:30, 26] TM's identity is on its name, which means "moving forward together" as Africans. It's about promoting greatness and pride amongst Africans. It's about building Africa as Africans. The recognition of Africanness is what defines TM for me and building each other as Africans.' (Respondent 4, Female, 18 January 2022)

A second participant's account indicated:

'[5:16, 22] The collective identity of TM is that, if Africans can own their own development agenda and work through their challenges, and learn along the way, and make corrective actions, then Africa can achieve its own development results.' (Respondent 6, Male, 19 January 2022)

A third participant's account observed: '[4:25, 53] The whole peer-learning approach in TM is very unique' (Respondent 7, Male, 20 January 2022).

Sub-theme 2: Gender identity

The relational leadership practice of gender identity refers to instances in which participants mentioned gender as an identity issue. One participant's account noted:

'[2:26, 58] Unintentionally, there is an identity around African men, and it is very manly.'

The participant further argued:

'[2:30, 61] I think within masculine identities, I do think there is a role for how leadership is practised ...'

Another participant's account stated:

'[3:49, 40] In the first instance, I think it is about the values that are held by the individual leaders in the partner organisations. The partnership consists of people who are professionals,

people who have worked in development, people who understand issues around race and power and class and gender dynamics, who will speak up in defence of those issues in their workplaces. For example, TM has done a lot of work on gender equity and has done some knowledge production around that subject. So, it is part of its DNA in terms of what it seeks to change in the evaluation capacity development space.' (Respondent 5, Female, 18 January 2022)

Sub-theme 3: Government identity

The relational practice of government identity refers to instances in which participants emphasised the importance of governmental stakeholders within the partnership as well as governments being the main clients for the partnership projects. A first participant's account stated:

'[2:87, 121] TM needed to prove its value and to help governments step outside the bureaucracy and be able to try things and get going and move the ball a little bit.' (Respondent 7, Male, 20 January 2022).

A second participant said: '[7:105, 104] It is critical that the TM is experienced as country-driven in terms of setting the agenda'. A third participant reported:

'[2:85, 121] TM is set up to be able to help country governments perhaps to experiment, innovate, or run projects that they cannot be able to set up themselves, such as proof-of-concepts.' (Respondent 1, Female, 11 January 2022)

Sub-theme 4: Language identity

The relational leadership practice of language identity was about instances in which language was mentioned as a significant identity issue. A first participant's account: '[6:30, 37] There are language differences. There are Francophone and Anglophone countries within the TM partnership' (Respondent 3, Female, 14 January 2022). A second participant said:

'[9:47, 43] We have had training on French and English in respective countries. TM supported participation of members at each other's evaluation events.' (Respondent 9, Male, 05 February 2022)

A third participant's account stated:

'[2:47, 70] We try to operate bilingually as much as we can.' (Respondent 1, Female, 11 January 2022)

Sub-theme 5: Champions identity

The relational leadership practice of champions identity denotes a situation in which the participants highlighted the use of champions to achieve common objectives of the partnership or identified certain people explicitly as the champions. One participant's account argued: '[2:56, 82] In the TM theory of change, implicitly and explicitly, there is this idea of champions' (Respondent 1, Female, 11 January). Another participant's account defined champions as:

'[2:62, 85] In my conversations with people, champions are regarded as leaders of a sort. They can be positional such as the Prime Minister of Uganda as a champion for evaluations.' (Respondent 1, Female, 11 January)

Another participant's account stated:

[7:31, 28] Champions would be like individuals who were movers and shakers within their countries and were in the limelight of their own media and were a thorn on the backside of the legislature in terms of wanting to see better legislation being put in place to make use of evaluation evidence in law. Not just a nice to have, but a legal requirement. They were pushing the drafting of legislation to advance their countries' laws around this. So that it was not just depending on the political whims of who was in power at the time.' (Respondent 8, Female, 21 January 2022)

Discussion of the findings

The discussion of the findings is based on the sub-themes determined from the interviews. The discussion is presented in two parts. The first part uses the core tenets of responsible leadership theory to explore the purpose of leadership in terms of moral values and ethics and incorporation of external stakeholders. The second part discusses social construction of leadership in inter-organisational partnership contexts based on the three elements of the RSLC model presented in Figure 1, namely leadership mechanism, content and manifestation.

Discussion of findings using responsible leadership theory

The context identity of the partnership, *Twende Mbele*, which translates from Swahili to English as 'moving forward together', as a unique brand embodies the collective aspirations and relational ethos of the members within this inter-organisational partnership. Togetherness resonates with the stakeholder focus of responsible leadership theory (Maak & Pless, 2006), which incorporates interests and concerns of various stakeholders in how an organisation is run. In this regard, the concern is not merely for the internal partners, but for the entire continent of Africa, as denoted by 'Africanness', not in terms of skin colour but in an inclusive form, which is a responsible leadership aspiration.

The gender identity came more as a concern for lack of consideration for women leaders as most of the representatives from the member countries were males. While the examination of gender is not common in responsible leadership theory, it is implicit in the notion of consideration of multiple stakeholder interests (Doh & Quigley, 2014). In this regard, women are viewed as important stakeholders whose presence would enhance the diversity of views and inputs into leading the inter-organisational partnership. Madsen (2016) puts forward a responsible leadership model of a woman's calling, against an observation that:

[B]ecause of the 'leader is male' assumption that still exists in most contexts, there is misguided perception by many women that being a leader is a prideful and arrogant role. (p. 98)

The recognition of the 'masculine identities' that are 'very manly' is a gendered view that seeks to challenge the often taken-for-granted lack of gender diversity in terms of representation of various partners in inter-organisational partnerships. One research participant's free expression of such views could be enabled by the fact that 'TM has done a

lot of work on gender equity and has done some knowledge production around that subject'.

Government identity comes from the view that this inter-organisational partnership sought to 'help governments step outside the bureaucracy and ... try things and get going', which is about innovation and exploration of new frontiers. The notion of the partnership being 'country-driven' was clearly a call for governmental stakeholders to prioritise how the partnership operates in the implicit sense that governments represent their countries in international relations terms. Most responsible leadership studies focus on business enterprises, and the issue of government identity is an uncharted terrain in so far as existing responsible leadership literature is concerned. The extent to which government identity is used to assert one stakeholder role above others is also something worth exploring in responsible leadership theory from the multiple levels of analysis perspective (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018).

Language identity was intentionally recognised as an important stakeholder management issue within the inter-organisational partnership. The fact that training is conducted in both Anglophone and Francophone African countries demonstrates proactive consideration of stakeholder interests. Similarly, the fact that the partnership also 'operates bilingually as much [as possible]' is a good indicator of moral values and ethics of inclusivity and care for others (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).

The idea of leaders-as-champions is clearly something that was socially constructed as an important issue in the context of this inter-organisational partnership as part of its 'theory of change' (Morra Imas & Rist, 2009). Such leaders-as-champions were believed to be prominent personalities in society who actively used their influence to support the common agenda of the inter-organisational partnership in terms of use of evidence for policy and decision-making. Partners intentionally cultivated champions as the TM members '[9:21, 20] took a deliberate decision to send champions to countries that were in a very progressive state'. The external stakeholder consideration aspect of responsible leadership theory could take on board this notion of cultivating champions. Responsible leadership scholarship sees platforms such as the United Nations Global Compact as presenting opportunities to identify 'ethical role models' who could champion the responsible leadership agenda (Voegtlin & Pless, 2014, p. 190).

Responsible leadership theory started by conceptualising 'role identity' of responsible leaders, as demonstrated in studies conducted by Maak and Pless (2006) and Pless (2007). While Maak and Pless's (2006) 'roles model of responsible leadership' is cited extensively in responsible leadership literature, such studies have not yet examined the question of identity in inter-organisational partnership contexts.

Furthermore, in terms of the body of research known as identity theory, leadership researchers are beginning to appreciate the value of 'identity-based processes for leadership-related outcomes', as one study found that 'individuals who see themselves as leaders are more likely to obtain central positions' and consequently 'emerge as leaders' (Kwok et al., 2018, p. 660). As such, relational leadership practices of identifying signify the power of socially constructed identities such as government, uniqueness of the brand identity and champions identity. For example, one participant argued: '[4:53, 111] Even when we met in conferences there was this sense that we were the A-team'. The special or context identity of being the 'A-team' served as a motivational factor for the partners to assert themselves among their peers.

Discussion of findings using the relational social constructionist leadership model

The three elements of the RSCL model (leadership mechanism, content and manifestation), as per Figure 1, were used to classify each of the sub-themes that are presented as research findings.

The relational leadership practice of champions identity was the only practice that was categorised as leadership content as it was about 'high-quality relating and communicating' by leaders (Endres & Weibler, 2017). The 'decision to send champions' denotes the intentionality to influence change in the targeted environments through the champions. The rest of the relational leadership practices of identifying were categorised as leadership mechanisms, as they are 'social construction processes ... through which potentially leadership is produced' (Endres & Weibler, 2017, p. 225). None of the relational leadership practices of identifying were classified as leadership manifestation as none were explicitly about influencing. However, from the intersubjectivity point of view of the RSCL lens, it could be argued that influencing (leadership manifestation) and high-quality relating and communicating (leadership content) are intertwined as two sides of the same coin (mutually constituted dualities) (Feldman & Worline, 2016, p. 309).

The next sections present the conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Conclusions and recommendations

Research context

Responsible leadership (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018) and relational leadership (Endres & Weibler, 2017) approaches emerged in the early 2000s as distinct leadership approaches and as parallel leadership scholarships that shared similar orientations in terms of viewing leadership as ethical and social-relational in nature. These approaches built on classical leadership research and added value through their different points of emphasis. On the one hand, responsible leadership drew from corporate social responsibility, sustainability and ethically oriented leadership constructs to pay attention to

how connected leaders and stakeholders 'raise one another to higher levels of motivation and commitment for achieving sustainable values creation and social change' (Pless, 2007, p. 438). On the other hand, relational leadership developed two distinct scholarly traditions within itself, namely leader-centric (entity) and post-heroic (RSCL) perspectives (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The former is more aligned to classical leadership scholarship and the latter is an alternative paradigm based on the assumptions of relational social constructionism, whereby leadership is conceptualised as socially constructed via relational 'processes of intersubjectively creating social realities through ongoing interpretation and interaction ...' (Endres & Weibler, 2020, p. 279). The RSCL lens formed the theoretical foundation of this paper and also informed formulation of empirically grounded ideas towards reconceptualising the responsible leadership theory. The RSCL onto-epistemology and the practice approach methodology provide conceptual tools that could be utilised to advance responsible leadership theory from a leader-centric focus to the collective domain of leadership research, by using leadership practices as the unit of analysis. The time has come for responsible leadership scholarship that pays attention to 'emergence and sociality, and places analytical emphasis on the collective' (Sánchez et al., 2020, p. 6).

Theoretical and practical implications

This paper makes a number of theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, the RSCL onto-epistemology is still developing as a theoretical framework and therefore, by applying this philosophical perspective to leadership studies, this paper helps to deepen the conversation in this regard. Secondly, the methodological choices made in terms of the application of the practice approach methodology have contributed to a limited number of studies that have incorporated such a methodology in leadership studies to operationalise RSCL. The practice approach as a methodology could be employed in responsible leadership research to strengthen its action-orientation by means of investigating 'shared patterns of how to carry out and perform' responsible leadership practices as 'dispersed practices' (Alpenberg & Scarbrough, 2021, p. 417). Responsible-leadership-as-practice (R-L-A-P) could emerge alongside L-A-P studies (Raelin, 2020). Thirdly, by comparing and contrasting relational and responsible leadership approaches, this research has given insights into the complementarity between the two approaches. The abductive logic could be employed to identify responsible leadership practices from literature that could be used to develop research instruments and analytics in the context of RSCL studies. In that way, the 'relationality' of relational leadership theory would be complemented by the 'intentionality' of the responsible leadership theory to achieve a 'paradigm interplay' (Sánchez et al., 2020, p. 7).

The findings of this research present an opportunity for more empirical research to be conducted at the intersection between (responsible and relational) leadership theories and identity theory, as the practice approach made the empirical

findings on the relational leadership practices of 'identifying' to be intelligible and practical. Contextual and meaningful branding is an important consideration for inter-organisational partnerships to collectively drive a common agenda that stakeholders understand upfront. Gender and language are significant dimensions of diversity management in a multi-cultural global environment. In inter-organisational settings, it is important to be conscious of how various stakeholders perceive their role and how their importance could be recognised and leveraged better for the success of the common agenda. The social construction of leaders as role models in the form of cultivating leaders-as-champions beyond the internal positional leaders could be practiced by business leaders in other organisational settings to champion social-relationality and ethics orientation in society in line with responsible leadership theory.

Practical implications include the opportunity to translate the leadership mechanisms and relational leadership practices into practical guidelines for how leaders could be empowered via training and similar measures to strengthen the operation of their inter-organisational partnerships. Such a recommendation is made with the caveat that the RSCL perspective does not aim to generalise beyond the particular context of the research because of the understanding of social reality and meaning as fluid and in a constant process of emergence. The paper recommends empirical application of the RSCL perspective in future research in order to advance responsible leadership theorising.

Research limitations and implications

The empirical aspect of this leadership research is based on a case study of an international inter-organisational partnership, which serves as a community of practice for monitoring and evaluation. This limits the extent to which its findings could be applied to strategic alliances in the for-profit-making business environments. The implications are that other professional communities of practice, public-private partnerships and not-for-profit business chambers might find its results useful.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

S.S.N, doctoral student who conducted the research and wrote the article, as well as addressing comments from the reviewers and editors. D. de J, academic supervisor for the research project who contributed to the writing, review and editing of the article.

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Data availability

Transcripts are confidential and are kept with the University of Pretoria because of ethical commitments made to the interviewees.

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