How does responsible leadership emerge? An emergentist perspective

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Abstract

Increasing academic and practitioner conversations regarding corporate responsibility, have led some leadership scholars to question the possibilities to accomplish responsible leadership. Drawing on an emergentist perspective, through an empirical study in three organizations, the article develops the responsible leadership literature by offering a critical analysis of the emergence of responsible leadership. Our key finding is that responsible leadership emerges as participants' 'shared concerns', namely: 'environmental and communal concerns', 'professional concerns', 'employment concerns', and 'commercial concerns', which constitute social arrangements that give meaning to what is responsible and possible. The theoretical perspective we develop highlights the conditioning role of shared and nested concerns of the study participants and unpack how the social context variously shapes responsible leadership.

Keywords: emergence, relationality, responsibility, responsible leadership, shared concerns, social context

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the emergence of responsible leadership. We consider 'leadership as socially constructed through actors beginning to "see" a set of activities as leadership' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 372), occurring 'inside and outside of formal leadership roles' (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012:1044). Tracing developments within the leadership literature, it is possible to observe a surging interest in the ethical and moral aspects of leadership (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Ciulla and Forsyth, 2011). This growing body of research impels leadership actors to exercise positive, humanistic behaviours for the betterment

of their followers, organizations and society (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). Responsible leadership, thus, offers alternative insights into the possibilities for promoting ethical conduct and environmental stewardship in organizations (Miska and Mendehall, 2018), and researchers and practitioners alike ask what responsible leadership is and how it can be accomplished.

An important feature of the ethical and responsible leadership literature is the multiplicity of theoretical framings through which responsible leadership has been studied. Some focus on leaders' personal values and virtues (e.g., Siegel, 2014). Others view leadership as relational and tend to consider stakeholders, both within and outside organizations (Pless and Maak, 2011). In some cases, scholars promote an understanding of leadership as relational, which favours an 'examination of how we come to know the world and ourselves, the nature of our experience and what it means to *be* in the world' (Cunliffe, 2009: 90, *emphasis in original*). Leadership is not seen as solely located within individuals, but also in the myriad of ways people interact, engage and negotiate with each other (De Gama et al, 2012, Knights and O'Leary, 2006). The relational perspectives, in particular, contain a promise of accomplishing responsible leadership through emphasizing 'moral considerations in relation to others' (Grandy and Sliwa, 2017: 423) providing a basis for organizational action.

In seeking, however, to decipher the possibility of accomplishing responsible leadership, scholars have argued that organizational tools and structures 'limit the ethical imagination and the possibility of a response to the Other that is not framed around the self' (Zueva-Owens, 2020: 623). Responsible leadership is constituted by particular organizational relational systems (Maak, 2007) which preclude an openness to the other, inside or outside the organization, because 'responsibility can only be approached through stepping outside relational structures […] that sustain them severing relationship ties that make up the leadership' (Zueva-Owens, 2020:625).

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In this article, we specifically seek to contribute to the development of responsible leadership, through an exploration of the emergence (Elder-Vass, 2005, 2008) of responsible leadership embedded *within* the organizing structures and relations, and thus of the possibility of its accomplishment (Edwards and Meliou, 2015). Such a relational approach draws attention to the social context as analytically stratified and multi-layered, constituted by social processes which do not reduce social structures to individual level phenomena (Elder-Vass, 2017: 92; Mutch et al, 2006). This view of social reality assumes that different entities, such as people, institutions, embedded practices, and related material elements that pre-exist, or simply the holding position of 'context', have emergent properties or powers, which they exert causal effects on the world in their own right, rather than acting as a mere sum of their parts (Elder-Vass, 2005). This points to the need to analyse the patterns of relations between the parts in order to understand how they give rise to certain responsible leadership actions and make others unlikely or difficult (Mussell, 2016). We draw on Elder-Vass's (2005, 2010) approach to emergence to theorize how social context truncates responsible leadership providing a blueprint of how leadership experience is to be structured (Smircich and Morgan, 1982: 259). Based on the above positioning, our guiding research question is 'how does responsible leadership emerge from its *social* context?' We investigate responsible leadership through a qualitative study, using observational and interview data, from three organizations in the UK that adopted an ecologically and socially responsible approach to business.

Building from our data, we extend the responsible leadership literature by showing the conditioning role of leadership actors' 'shared concerns', embedded over time in existing relations of conformity and difference (i.e. diachronic emergence), which shape what is responsible and possible. Our analysis reveals four distinct types of shared concerns that constitute social arrangements and shape responsible leadership: environmental and communal concerns, professional concerns, employment concerns, and commercial concerns. In turn,

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examining the way shared concerns are related to each other in one of the case organizations at a single point of time (i.e. synchronic emergence), we demonstrate how the "joint effect" (Elder-Vass, 2005:321) that they have stimulates responsible leadership. This conceptualization allows us to take a critical stance to approaches that conceive of responsible leadership as abstract moral duty, and suggest that it is this relationality, which has importance for creating structures of meaning around responsible leadership. To proceed, we first give an overview of how responsible leadership is understood. To extend existing understanding of responsible leadership we then present our emergentist perspective. Next, describing our case study methods and analytical strategy, we explore how responsible leadership emerges from its social context. We discuss the theoretical relevance of these findings and conclude with a reflection about our contributions, and future research.

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Responsible Leadership: an overview

The focus on responsibility in the leadership literature is varied and often polarized. One influential perspective sees responsible leadership as emanating from an individual leader's motives, as, for example, to 'avoid harm' or 'do good' (Stahl and Sully de Luque, 2014). Within the relational literature, other researchers explore leadership in relation to the interests of various stakeholder groups. Distinctions in how responsibility might feature in the leadership literature differs according to the extent to which leadership references the needs of owners as their focus, as with agent perspectives (e.g., Friedman, 2007), or whether leadership looks beyond the organization (rejecting purely economic cost-benefit logics) and involves external stakeholders concerning societal and environmental issues (e.g. Doh and Quigley, 2014, Pless et al, 2012).

Such integrative responsible leaders are expected to show a broad sense of accountability toward different stakeholder groups whose interests they try to balance, as satisfying one group of stakeholders comes at the price of dissatisfying another stakeholder group. Clearly, this understanding of responsible leadership has the potential to give guidance on moral issues in the business world, as many frame responsible leadership along the lines of 'good ethics is good business' (Schwartz and Carroll, 2003: 516). Responsible leadership is understood as an individual moral duty (Knights and O'Leary, 2006), offering the standards to choose among alternative actions. However, even when there is some consideration of a leader's relationship with others (e.g., Pless, Maak and Waldman, 2012) the emphasis remains upon the individual leader's orientation. The common point of these approaches is primarily that leaders are able to engage in responsible behaviour as a result of absolute judgements of right and wrong regarding stakeholder groups (Tourish, 2014). They do not explain, as a result, *why* some leadership actors accept their moral duty by engaging in responsible behaviour while others do not. Conceived as a higher principle, responsibility is thought to act as the glue that keeps society together and enables leadership to avoid social detachment and the social and economic sanctions that follow irresponsible action. In other words, our contention is that these approaches pay little attention to the way the motives of the leadership actors are actualized in contextual realities that would shape their evaluations regarding various stakeholder groups (Edwards and Meliou, 2015).

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Considering the interplay with the relational context some writers within the relational leadership literature encourage a conceptualisation of leadership as occurring in '*embedded experience and relationships*' (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1429, original emphasis), emerging through the complex interactions of multiple actors which might 'inform a concern for the other' (Grandy and Sliwa, 2017:428, see also Zueva-Owens, 2020; De Gama et al, 2012; Knights and O'Leary, 2006). However, Zueva-Owens (2020) in her study of responsible,

relational leadership reveals the tensions of responsible leadership being framed as a response to the Other, enacted within relational organizational structures. She highlights the need for leadership actors to 'step outside' these structures in order to make responsible leadership possible, and argues, consequently, for the impossibility of accomplishing responsible leadership.

Acknowledging the difficulty and imperfection of accomplishing responsible leadership, our study is different in that we consider the enactment of responsible leadership, not 'outside' but *within* the organizing structures and relations leadership actors reside (Edwards and Meliou, 2015; Mutch et al, 2006). An emergentist perspective (Elder-Vass, 2005, 2008), we will now argue, enables us to explain how responsible leadership is rooted in a meaningful context and emerges from pre-existing relationships.

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Emergence of Responsible Leadership

Emergence is well studied in social theory and has been discussed from a variety of disciplinary and philosophical standpoints (see Elder-Vass, 2005 for a contrastive theorisation). Emergence is based on complex adaptive systems in Juarrero's (1999) conceptualization. It is framed as structuration in Giddens's (1979) work or as morphogenetic approach in Archer's (1995) work. In parallel with the work of such theorists as Bhaskar (1979), Bourdieu (1977), and Silverman (1970) emergence refers to the social conditioning of human action in its specific context (Akram, 2013). Each of these approaches is different. Yet, they all share a focus on both observable actions and the deeper structures that guide actions. They recognize that, in the study of social reality, understanding individual actors' meaning is constructed, sustained and changed through social interactions based on shared concerns and priorities (Heracleous and Hendry, 2000).

We propose that action manifests through *emergence*, which is an outcome of *pre-existing configurations* of people and related social and material elements which when ordered in a particular way situates the emergence of responsible leadership. In a social reality of interdependence, different entities, such as people, institutions, as well as actors' interconnections and interdependencies have emergent properties or powers that enable or constrain human activities and are in turn causally efficacious in the social world (Elder-Vass, 2008). That is, actors begin their interactions in a context which they did not create but which enables certain outcomes and makes others unlikely or difficult (Mutch et al, 2013: 615).

Emergence frames how we conceive relationality and by implication how the concept of responsibility is exercised. For Elder-Vass (2005: 316) emergence 'occurs when an entity possesses one or more "emergent properties": An "emergent property" is one that is not possessed by any of the parts of the entity individually, nor when they are aggregated, without a structuring set of relations between them'. It is the particular relations that exist between the parts when they are organized into a sort of 'whole' that lead to the whole being more than the sum of its parts. This view enables the analysis of complex relations including the effects of higher-level entities on lower-level entities, as well as the way phenomena emerge from lower-level properties (Elder-Vass, 2010). Our interest is in the patterns of relationships because they tend to be 'durable, historically continuous and capable of exerting influence on other entities, including those from which they emerged' (Smith, 2010: 328); that is, they are causally significant because the whole has properties that the parts would not have if they were not arranged into this sort of whole.

To be clear, Elder-Vass (2005) distinguishes between synchronic and diachronic conceptions of emergence. Diachronic emergence explains how different entities influence one another over time. He complements diachronic emergence with a model of synchronic, relational emergence, which is concerned with the relationship between the emergent

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properties of a whole and its parts at any single instant in time; it is defined as 'synchronic relation amongst the parts of an entity that gives the entity as a whole the ability to have a particular (diachronic) causal impact' (Elder-Vass, 2005: 321).

Organizing structures and relations situate notions of responsibility – this is not just about the preferred values articulated around the environment for example, it is also about how social relations shape meaning that in turn frames how such meaning emerges. The culturally meaningful cognitive categories that are personally important to actors are in part motivated by shared concerns (Archer, 1995; Smith, 2010). What is deemed important to actors, such as leaders and their stakeholders, is not easily 'read-off' discrete values but is situated in the social context in which they operate. Responsibility reflects how existing relationships manifest in action, through shared projects and concerns, form high-level entities (e.g., community commitments and professional affiliations) that constitute social arrangements transcending actors (Ma Maier and Simsa, 2020; Tuominen and Lehtonen, 2017; Delbridge and Edwards, 2014).

Consequently, responsible leadership makes sense in respect of existing relationships not in terms of abstract moral principles or obligations, but in the way different concerns characterizing the experiences and expectations of individuals relate to others and become significant in the way they are arranged in context. In the next section we outline our study to explore the potential for emergence in framing and explaining responsible leadership.

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Methodology and methods

Case selection

Our study generates insights into the emergence of responsible leadership. We ask: How does responsible leadership emerge from its social context? The data for this study were collected as part of an investigation in three selected organizations in the UK. A qualitative

case study design was used because it allows for a rich understanding of events that have come to exist in a natural setting (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2018) and enables us to locate micro-social interactions into their socio-economic context (Kempster and Parry, 2014). In turn, it allows the exploration of phenomena emerging from the data, while at the same time embracing useful concepts that have been discussed in prior literature (O'Reilly et al, 2014).

We considered the growing 'responsible sector', characterized by investment in the UK (HM Government, 2011), a viable opportunity to identify participant organizations. We deployed the principles of theoretical sampling to select participant companies on the basis of appropriateness, rather than representativeness (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). To identify suitable companies our first source was a UK University's Research and Knowledge Exchange network. The first author initiated contact with exemplary companies with a reputation in responsible business practices. Our second source of participants were professional associations and conferences, such as Business in the Community, and the Eco Technology show 2014. In total we contacted 24 companies, of which five agreed to meet and discuss our study objectives. Following explanation of our research aims, access, confidentiality issues and time frames, we selected three organizations that matched our criteria of theoretical relevance (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), that is to (1) combine environmental, social welfare and commercial goals, (2) operate in a stable environment, and (3) show financial viability . Table 1 provides details of the participant companies. All organization names have been replaced to ensure privacy.

Insert Table 1 about here

Overall, we believe our criteria ensured requisite variation (e.g. age, firm's principal activities) while ensuring our phenomena of interest were transparently observable (Pettigrew, 1990).

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Participant organizations operate in standardised institutional environment as evidenced by UK and European regulations, customers and consumer associations**.** They also have a combination of environmental (e.g. eco design, eco innovation, energy efficiency of premises) as well as socially oriented practices (e.g. flexible working, charity giving, social/ ethical awards) and are financially sustainable, still operating as of 2019.

Data collection

Data from the three companies were derived from a 12 month investigation. Our primary data collection strategy was semi-structured interviews with internal and external stakeholders. We aimed to interview in each company leadership actors from all organizational levels (Edwards et al, 2014), including founders, department directors, team members (e.g. engineers) and interns to better understand a company's engagement with responsibility. Some respondents were interviewed twice, such as, for example, the technical director in Company A, or a manager in Company B providing the opportunity to review questions iteratively based on initial reflections of the insights elicited and a tentative analysis (Kempster and Parry, 2011). In addition, empirical data in organizations were complemented by interviews with varied regional constituents in the field of responsible goods and services, such as government officials, large-scale facility customers, and support providers of small and medium enterprises. We were put in touch with these individuals via the owners and acknowledge that our access was somewhat limited. As set out in Table 2 a total of 31 interviews were conducted. The interviews took place in person and were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. They lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours, amounting to 28 hours of recordings and 591 pages of text.

Our aim was to understand the emergence of responsible leadership by placing responsibility in the wider social context in which leadership actors operate. Our semi-structured interview protocol focused on three broad areas starting from participant's

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biography and earlier work experiences, their current role and engagement with responsibility, and challenges and opportunities they face in their role regarding responsible actions. Interviews were supplemented by observations of formal and informal meetings (e.g. Board meetings or Research and Development team meeting) and discussions in organizations. Observations offered important insights into participants' projects and concerns, their challenges and preferences and how broader decisions are made, allowing us to go beyond empirical recollections, to assume a deeper reality. Field notes typed up immediately after each visit provided detailed accounts of the session attended, amounting to 102 pages of text. Finally, in order to confirm our data, creating insight into responsible leadership, we gathered additional documentation that was either provided directly by organizations (e.g. business plans, marketing documents) or publicly available (e.g. on websites). Taken together, these data provide a rich understanding of leadership actors' negotiations and practices of responsibility in the selected organizations.

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Data analysis

We analysed and interpreted the above-described empirical material using 'critical realist grounded theory' (Kempster and Parry, 2014). This approach is consistent with prior research on leadership emergence (Kempster and Parry, 2011; Kempster, 2009), which allows for analytical categories, relevant to the core issues being observed and grounded in a nested system of interacting entities, to emerge.

We first constructed a database using NVivo qualitative analysis software to bring together field notes, interview transcriptions, and any collected documentation related to participant organizations. Guided by an explicit explanation of a stratified reality and a view of explaining responsible leadership from our participants' lived experiences, we organized our data and delineated units of meanings evolving out of the interview transcript and field

notes that participants described as significant for their own responsible leadership within and beyond the organization.

Consistent with our approach, in the second stage of analysis we read the literature related to responsible leadership, relational leadership, and social and organizational context of responsible business that suggests possible themes. This is an iterative and contrastive process between the data and the literature that allowed us to question initial interpretations looking afresh at the units of meanings to identify what other aspects may be occurring that explain the manifestation of events that form actors' lived experience of responsible leadership, and which supported later the analysis of synchronic emergence (Elder-Vass, 2005, 2010).

This process resulted in creating clusters of meaning in the third stage of analysis that account for the ideas, thoughts and internal relations and that inform actors' proclivities for responsibility. The analysis also suggested how various societal, institutional relations were connected with actors' responsible practices, and therefore provided a partial explanation for the diachronic emergence of responsible leadership. Finally, a set of dominant themes or "shared concerns" emerged as central features shaping responsible leadership. Shared concerns illustrate how the specific case context conditions the diachronic emergence of responsible leadership. Taken together, the analysis provides an empirical explanation for the emergence of responsible leadership.

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FINDINGS

Diachronic emergence of responsible leadership: The conditioning influence of 'shared concerns'.

We begin the section by describing how context conditions responsible leadership via participants' 'shared concerns'. We identified four overarching shared concerns, which encapsulate pre-existing configurations of people and related social and material elements. In each section we analyse the clusters of meaning around the shared concerns and underlying links to better understand the diachronic emergence of responsible leadership. Table 2 summarizes our findings. We then describe how "shared concerns" are organized in Company A to provide insights into the synchronic emergence of responsible leadership.

Insert Table 2 about here

Environmental and Communal Concerns

Our findings suggest that the physical world and community, which constitute an organization's immediate institutional environment, are characterized by a high degree of social and economic interdependence among leadership actors. Environmental and communal concerns emerge from two main clusters of meaning representing different sets of existing relations shaping responsible leadership: *regulatory engagement* and *local engagement*. Table 3 provides an overview of our analysis to better highlight leadership actors environmental and communal concerns.

Insert Table 3 about here

Regulatory engagement, such as government mandates and local policies, create higher level entities, structures and norms that foster socially and environmentally responsible activity (Elder-Vass, 2005). Our analysis revealed practices in relation to environmental product development (use of material components) or processes (waste collection); rules and codes stemming from UK/ EU laws on environmental protection and local council processes framing how our case study organizations understood regulatory responsibility. Our participants explain that 'everything that we buy has to be ROHS compliant. All of the solder we use is lead free so in that sense obviously we're very careful to follow those guidelines. Other participants referred to 'energy certificates' or 'use of certified supply chain' echoing the priorities of non-governmental bodies to reduce environmental degradation. As the founder of Company C explains 'we have a study of our supply chain which was carried out by the Carbon Trust'.

However, within this context, our participants highlight in their accounts how local ties become significant and frame responsibility. *Local engagement* explicates how these ties represent a different set of relations because they are derived from shared understandings, parts of local culture and norms, which say something particular about the local context, situating responsible leadership in ways that are not just a reflection of regulatory obligation (Marquis and Battilana, 2009). Such engagement is notable because it indicates the importance of community relations. Participants in their accounts reveal how they see themselves meeting other members regularly 'because if there's a problem you can drive down to the factory or you can go and speak to people if there's a quality issue" (Purchase officer, Company A). Participants made also reference to local organizational projects, such as supplier engagement 'It's all made locally…We have like a mutual working relationship with them' (graduate trainee, company B), and support of charities, sporting teams and local activities, such as 'we

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support the local theatre group. We support the local golf course' (co-founder and MD, Company A). Community solidarity roots responsibility because founders recognized the need to pull together to overcome shared interests and difficulties including for example, those experienced during the economic recession:

> I think that it's taken through the recession and the impact of the recession for people to realize that it's really important to make sure that as well as thinking about supply chains overseas we keep an eye on the UK and our local communities (Co-founder, Company C).

Participants also revealed the importance of activism. In their accounts, they explain how they see themselves as political players participating in professional meetings and engaging in lobbying efforts, such as engagement with the local council 'I got involved with the council on deciding on recycling' (co-founder, Company A) and Local Enterprise partnerships 'We sat in the LEP Board and we said this is what you should do about sustainability in the island' (co-founder, Company C). Given such local engagement it is perhaps not unsurprising community activism pertained to leadership actors' environmental awareness, moving from everyday actions such as 'we're very conscious of recycling and not wasting', 'we're not throwing anything away' (office manager, Company B) to formal environmental engagement. As shown below with the founder of Company C many were proactive towards environmental protection:

> we built these traceability maps that show people exactly where our products come from and how they're made, and also …we developed and launched the A to G rating symbol system (Co-founder, Company C).

In this respect, we see in the case of environmental and communal concerns, how regulatory and local engagement underpins shared social expectations of responsibility to each other. This is not simply a question 'following the rules' but also reveals an 'ethic of care'

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(Mussell, 2016) that is self-reinforcing because the structuring of community and regulative relations generates expectations around community and environmental responsibility.

Professional Concerns

The findings further suggest that the diachronic emergence of responsible leadership is influenced by leadership actors' professional concerns, nested in participants' involvement with professional associations and industry bodies. They emerge through structures of *'professional standards*', as well as from participants' professional histories and biographies because they *'value professional practice'* adhering to various normative and cognitive templates and experiences. Table 4 summarizes participants' professional concerns.

Insert Table 4 about here

Professional standards indicate the broader regulative and normative professional context in which organizations operate shapes responsible leadership (Suddaby et al, 2007). Participants talked about their relations with professional associations' codes of conducts that provide resources, principles and benchmarks that guide responsible leadership in particular situations. The following example is characteristic of this structural engagement 'We're a member of BSI, British Standards Institute so we can get access to international and British standards… We tend to be active participants in LIFT, Lighting Industry Federation and the DALI trade body…we participate in their working groups' (sales officer, Company B). In turn, compliance with the industry's unwritten rules of conduct was also common, exposing organizations to various forms of control (Suddaby et al, 2007). As the co-founder of Company B, which operates in the green building industry, explains:

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> They delivered a new set of equipment and then we picked up the flat…they flat-packed our cartons, gave them back to us so we reuse the same cartons to go to site, because they don't want you wasting the cardboard boxes (Co-founder, Company B).

Notwithstanding the centrality of these institutional dynamics on participants' projects, our participants suggest how responsible leadership is also rooted in the ways they *value their professional practice.* Here, decisions reflect their personal biographies and experiences that stimulated deliberations to negotiate the structural dynamics and open up space for their expertise and passion. During the interview, one senior engineer explains how expertise roots responsibility 'as part of being an engineer you need to be aware of what you're designing is not going to be detrimental to the environment at the end of that product's life' (senior engineer, Company B). Another example comes from the designer in Company A who explains how professional knowledge and expertise underpin efficiency and responsibility:

> In initial stages this was a bit of a Lego build. We had bits of it and we had to latch on…We've chucked in other things so it kind of off-sets the environmental goodness of the product but as we move along that's something that we would rethink and reduce that again (designer, Company A).

Further, professional passion that participants exhibit in their work situates notions of responsible leadership. This is evident, for instance, in this interview remark by the founder of the Company A, who illustrates how his passion for invention influences the design of sustainable health products 'When you start on something like that, you actually don't make any money out of it for several years but you do that as a sort of passion that fills in the time' (Founder, Company A). Likewise, our participants associated responsibility with the quality of product and service. One example comes from the co-founder of the company B who clarifies

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'what I want to do is a really good job. I want to provide a product that works in all the buildings that we provide and do a really good reliable product, and that's the main thing and that's what I want to keep maintaining that'.

The analysis indicates how participants' professional considerations condition responsible leadership . They involve various relations with the structural norms and templates of professional bodies but also indicate participants' deliberations stemming from their experiences within the standardized environment in which they find themselves. Responsible leadership emerges, thus, as a negotiated settlement from the interactions between different leadership actors and institutions pursuing their projects and trying to satisfy their concerns within the context they reside.

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Employment Concerns

In considering the cumulative and nested effects of responsibility we found that an organization's employment considerations were particularly important in our data, influencing responsible leadership. A skilled workforce is essential for addressing social and economic problems and developments in the workplace and labour market shape the qualities demanded (Leitch, 2006). As indicated in Table 5 participants' employment concerns were constituted by *labour force dynamics* and *labour force inclusion* reflecting clusters of meanings of responsibility based on employment needs, as well as on how the organization valued existing relations and adopted practices to resolve labour market imperfections.

Insert Table 5 about here

Participants in the study explain how labour force dynamics, associated with the structural constraints and norms of the organization, reflect labour skill shortage. For a senior engineer in Company B, due to the specialized nature of the work 'there is a lack of skills… we are struggling to employ some younger software people'. In another example during his interview, the co-founder of Company C explains how in an area with high youth unemployment he experienced a skills gap 'We've got one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in the country and quite seasonal work as well… the skills base is predominantly retirees, the change-makers are non-existent, they're not here… or can't afford to move'. Such situations are intensified by staff turnover which in some cases 'can be up to fifty percent a year' (graduate trainee, Company B).

Under these circumstances, where there are significant gaps in the labour market revealing gaps in the necessary social capital to support the short-to-long term survival of the business (Edwards et al, 2006), we observed that it was necessary for participants to take action around labour force inclusion to rectify this feature of the economic landscape. In particular, participants' accounts indicated a strong focus on employees' training and development, including investment in the development of graduate skills, apprenticeship programmes, external training of employees, as well as retention and promotion of employees to different positions in the organization. One of the founders of Company A explains that 'since the graduates have come and we take more apprentices, there's continual training'. Another telling example comes from the co-founder of Company C who explains how they harnessed the staff need by training staff:

> All of the members of staff that we have, have been through our apprenticeship programme… our first apprentice was Luke and he started cleaning and making tea and we trained him up how to do customer service and then some finance and stuff and now he's our financial director (Co-founder, Company C).

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In turn, in some cases meanings of responsibility involved practices of work-life balance, such as 'use of flexi-time' and staff diversity 'employing people with mental health problems' (Company A). These direct organization's attention toward responsibility as they respond to labour market needs and value existing relations to create an environment that enable all individuals to fully participate in the organization. One of the most poignant expressions of employment considerations, and work-life balance in particularly, is contained in the following interview reflection by the R&D director of the Company A:

> Because certainly, I'm married and have a son and always things happen… your son is ill or something like that. You need to able to get away to sort those things out and having that flexibility to be able to do that it makes a great deal of difference to your home personal life (R&D Director, Company A).

As our analysis amply demonstrates the idea of responsibility is multi-faceted with different concerns that not just reflect broad environmental issues but also involve immediate issues that are local in terms of structural conditions not directly in the control of the organization, such as educational provision. This is the ripple effect of emergence, as we experience the structuring (but not determining) effect of practices beyond the view and control of the local and the organization. Responsible leadership, thus, emerges in the way participants engage and satisfy their employment considerations.

Commercial Concerns

Existing theorizing has demonstrated the centrality of commercial considerations and has revealed the widely perceived tension between environmental, ecological and social welfare goals for organizational activities and responsible leadership (Goworek et al, 2018). Our findings demonstrate two main clusters of meaning, as shown in table 6, that constitute participants' commercial considerations: *market viability* and *operational viability*.

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Insert Table 6 about here

Market viability was associated with profit, effectiveness and efficiency, reflecting structural market pressures and financial trade-offs that organizations need to navigate. Participants in their accounts explain how they engage in competitive relations and emphasize the significance of the search for financial gains, reputation and legitimacy in the situation they find themselves. A telling example comes from the quality manager of Company A who during his interview explains how competition around price influences decisions:

> There may be two components and one of them is built to completely sustainable standard… If I have to then sell this to the NHS, they may not have the budget, then they won't buy it of me. They will go somewhere else or they won't introduce it.

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In turn, consumption patterns and preferences involve relations with consumers and shape whether or not consumers find value in buying and endorsing products and services from businesses that operate in environmentally sound ways. One of the employees in Company C explains how responsibility is rooted in consumer demand as 'people want to buy stuff that's sustainable', while the founder of Company B describes the concrete consumer pressures faced because 'users of buildings are concerned with energy efficiency. Constructors have pressure from the public…. we try to build in sustainable methods of constructing buildings, but as you can imagine that's quite difficult from a construction point of view' (Field notes, 11/07/2014). Within this context, our participants also described how organizations can be resource-dependant as access to raw material may be marginal reflecting structural challenges and shaping what is possible. As the procurement officer of Company A explains 'If you're buying a capacitor or an electronic component, they're going to be from the same source originally…from the far reaches of China. You don't have a great deal of choice to specify if it's been sustainably produced'.

Under these circumstances where there are significant pressures from competitors, consumers, and material resources participants explained how *operational viability,* pertaining to organizations' financial sustainability and long-term success and survival, is particularly important and shapes responsible leadership. Adopting a balanced growth approach, as a counterpoint to market viability, is evident in this reflexive remark by the purchase officer of Company A who explains how existing relations of care and cooperation create the conditions that shape their connectivity to responsibility and accrue to well-being vis- a-vis others ' The caring for those people, the passion that they have for individuals and their ideas it's not something that's ever lost or diminished by an idea to make loads of money'. (purchase officer, Company A). Likewise, one of the most powerful expressions comes from the founder of Company B who suggests how a balanced growth approach is grounded in relations of care expressed in mutual dependency, and common vulnerability with employees:

> the most important thing is making money to make sure you can pay all your staff…because we've got ninety staff here, there are quite a lot of them married, they've got kids, families, so I don't want to be responsible for putting a load of people out of work, so the main important thing is a job comes in (founder, Company B).

Finally, our participants developed and used technology to sustain their business and survive. The use of technological artefacts enabled them to enhance the scope of their responsible pursuits and address the uncertainty that underlies various demands from competitions, customers and consumers (Kallinikos et al, 2013). As the following example indicates 'with technology, we try and compete with the high street…we've used the technology to connect our printing system, like API" (Co-founder, Company C). Investing in new ideas resulted in some organizations becoming market leaders because 'we got a whole

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European patent on how we do the search algorithm to sub-address the equipment on the site (Senior Engineer, Company B). As the founder of Company B reveals:

> We've invested a lot of money in R&D bringing out new products all the time…you've got to keep developing and you've got to keep investing money in that because without that your company will be dead in the water.

In sum, commercial concerns demonstrate how responsibility is rooted in organizations' economic resources and needs, and it is not simply the outcome of autonomous deliberation. Our analysis also highlights the tensions associated with commercial concerns and how responsible leadership emerges as a negotiated process from participants' decisions embedded in existing relations.

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Case Vignette: The synchronic emergence of responsible leadership in Company A

Company A was founded in 2010 by Howard, an 'inventor' with a background in electronics, and Sue, Managing Director of the company, who has studied science. The company specializes in developing innovative medical devices that are later manufactured and distributed in partnership with other strategic collaborators at home and overseas.

The sustainable development agenda has heralded significant changes in the medical *industry's standards*, environmental *regulations*, and in the expectations ascribed to product and practices themselves. As a manufacturer, the company has to conform to waste regulation under Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive (EC, 2015) and the Restriction of the Use of Certain Hazardous Substances (RoHS) in Electrical and Electronic Equipment (EEE) Directive (NMO EA, 2013). Conforming to the *medical industry's norms and codes of practice*, Company A is accredited to high standards with ISO 9001-2008 and ISO 13485 and they are also an FDA registered manufacturing site. In turn, market pressures stem from *customers*, such as the National Health Service (NHS), which has adopted carbon

reduction commitments and waste minimization strategies among other sustainable development policies (see NHS SDU, 2009, 2012).

In this context, while *environmental awareness* and ecological *consumption patterns* hold a specific value, decisions are mediated by resources, such as *raw material* availability because Company A needs to ensure *operational viability*. James, the R&D director explains that while lithium batteries offer disposal challenges, they are 'the only one that we can get small enough otherwise the individual who's having the treatment will be carrying around far too much weight'. This relationality is a feature of the structural conditions in which Company A operates and confirms how responsible leadership reflects different organizational concerns that unfold in the local context, revealing how *product quality* shapes the emergence of responsible leadership. To accommodate these concerns in the product design, Sue offers evidence of the company's *environmental awareness* as 'before we even place the order, I'd agree with the supplier how we would recycle [the lithium battery] and how we would get it back to him, but it's not formalized'.

This alternate arrangement is possible because the company's business transactions, reflect a strong *local engagement*. For example, Howard has been involved in lobbying efforts with the local council and collaborates with the local university to combine academic thinking with industry expertise to satisfy his *passion* for inventions and accelerate the development of new medical *technology* to compete in the market. These local ties with other employers reveal *community* as a feature of unity within this context, allowing the company to satisfy both the *environmental concerns* and mitigate its *professional needs*. Attracting and retaining a skilled *labour force* is, however, critical due to the company's remote geographical location in an industrial rural area, and its specialized nature. To mitigate their employment considerations, decisions in the company reflect a culture of *inclusion* with the adoption of training practices, flexible working arrangements *'like the 4-day weekly work',* and diverse workforce.

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Nonetheless, employment decisions are tempered by commercial concerns, centred around *competition,* as Sue, the managing director explains:

> There's a couple here with mental problems. My senior staff don't always agree with that but those people need a job and maybe they don't work quite as efficient, but I feel I have an obligation to those people and they will have a job here. And so we look after them, Andrew [Financial Director] backs me on it, so he compromises too.

Employment concerns are therefore understood in terms of mutually negotiated and dependent arrangements that shape the process by which labor force dynamics, inclusion and market viability principles are negotiated and established within the context participants reside. The presentation in Company A at the time of the study illustrates how responsible leadership emerges synchronically from the way configurations of "shared concerns" are arranged and become significant in a given point in time.

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DISCUSSION

The Emergence of Responsible Leadership

In this article, we explored the emergence of responsible leadership. With our conceptual and empirical work, we have aimed to shed light on the role of shared concerns, represented in various configurations of people and related social and material elements. Our study exposes the tensions of leadership and shows how analyses of diachronic and synchronic emergence can clarify the relations between context and responsible leadership. Theoretically, our study advances responsible leadership research by showing how pre-existing structures and relations situate shared concerns, unearthing *emergence* (Elder- Vass, 2005, 2008) as a necessary mechanism through which responsible leadership manifests. Empirically, our findings first pay attention to how context influences individual properties from which

responsible leadership emerges and second how responsible leadership practices emerge from the situated combination of these properties, as shown in the vignette of the Company A. While our study analytically separated different phases in the emergence of responsible leadership, our findings indicate that the diachronic and synchronic emergence of responsible leadership are intertwined.

In particular, our study demonstrates how “shared concerns” *diachronically* shape leadership actors’ tendencies, deliberations and resources towards responsibility in a given context. In the studied organizations, we observed how environmental and communal concerns, professional concerns, employment concerns and commercial concerns form higher-level entities from which responsible leadership emerges. Through the illustrative vignette of the Company A, our findings also suggest that responsible leadership emerges *synchronically* from the interplay between shared concerns, organisation’s and individuals’ personal histories, which variously influences leadership actors’ possibilities for the enactment of responsible leadership. For example, as we observed in our study, while practices of responsible leadership pertain to structural norms and templates of professional bodies, they also reveal leadership actors’ reflexive struggles to resolve these contradictions and accommodate their knowledge and expertise, their passion or issues of product quality, which situate how responsible leadership is challenged and negotiated. This shows that responsible leadership emerges diachronically in conjunction with structural configurations of the context within which actors reside, but also depends on the negotiations and social interactions between leadership actors in a given organization (Elder-Vass, 2005, 2008).

We advance research on relational perspectives on responsible leadership by illustrating that responsible leadership is not abstract or an obligation regarding ‘following the rules’, prioritizing specific stakeholder groups (e.g., Pless et al, 2012). Analysing relations

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between properties in a reality of interdependence, our study provides contextual explanations of responsible leadership and highlights how relationality manifests in action and shapes responsible leadership practice. For instance, our study showed how labour market structures have a ripple effect on the employment and development practices of organizations, as participants felt it necessary to take action around inclusion to remedy this issue of the economic landscape and maintain valued relationships with employees. In this context, what is 'right' and 'wrong' in organizations is not permanently fixed (Ladkin, 2006), but contextual and contingent (Edwards and Meliou, 2015).

In turn, these findings advance studies of responsible leadership that argue for the impossibility of responsible leadership in organizational structures that preclude an openness to the other (e.g., Zueva-Owens, 2020). Rather, we argue that enacting responsible leadership such as for example, activism, reveals an 'ethic of care' (Mussell, 2016), which transforms understandings of responsibility, and it is self-reinforcing because the structuring of relations generates expectations and norms that frame the emergence of responsible leadership. These are key theoretical insights that extend existing understanding of responsible leadership and explain how moral agency is nested in pre-existing arrangements.

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From a practice and policy perspective our study offers implications for alternative considerations when investing in the successful implementation of corporate responsibility programmes. In turn, organisations which design responsible leadership training programmes should consider involvement of a wider range of actors and responsibility should be framed in its unique setting. According to our research, better understanding of shared concerns allows for identifying the existence (and absence) of opportunities to extend the scope and potential of existing organizing structures and relations to inform the practice of responsible leadership.

This study, as with most, has some limitations but through identifying them we can also identify interesting avenues for future research. More specifically, our study of three organizations is relatively small. However, we note that our intention, and the intention of most qualitative research, is not to capture a population but rather to seek out cases that are aligned with the phenomenon of interest. As we were interested in how responsible leadership emerges, a relatively small sample is justifiable for the development of our initial theorizing (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010). Moreover, our study took place in a specific context. More research is needed in different institutional and organizational contexts from which different "shared concerns" may emerge. Longitudinal studies could extend this multilevel analysis to explore responsible leadership over time in conjunction with institutional and organizational contexts.

Conclusion

This study elaborates an emergentist perspective of responsible leadership (Elder- Vass, 2005, 2008). The findings suggest that we should pay more attention to actors 'shared concerns' that constitute social arrangements embedded in existing relations, shaping what is responsible and possible. The exposition of the emergence of responsible leadership is particularly important in the contemporary complex organizational environment where corporate scandals and violations hit the headlines every day, and where the temptation to develop responsible leadership may be great. According to our research, better understanding of shared concerns allows us to extend the scope and potential of existing organizing structures and relations to inform the enactment of responsible leadership. Yet, understanding leadership actors' concerns in which meanings of responsibility are nested and how responsible leadership emerges remains particularly tense and intriguing.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Case study companies

Company	*Year of establishment of current business*	*Number of employees*	*Product*
Company A	2010	27	Medical devices and equipment
Company B	1990	97	Lighting control
Company C	2008	20	Clothing manufacturer

Table 2: The Emergence of Responsible Leadership – understanding where responsibility is rooted

Socially Responsible Context				
Shared Concerns	Environmental and Communal concerns *Regulatory Engagement* EU/UK environmental laws Local council regulations Credentialing bodies	Professional concerns *Professional Standards* Professional Associations/Institutes Industry unwritten rules	Employment concerns *Labour force dynamics* Skills shortage Staff turnover	Commercial concerns *Market viability* Competition Consumption patterns Raw material resources

Local engagement Community Activism Environmental awareness	*Valuing practice* Knowledge and expertise Passion Product quality	*Labour force inclusion* Staff diversity Training and development Work-life boundary	*Operational viability* Balanced growth Technology-investing in new ideas

Table 3: Illustrative Examples of Data Structure of Environmental and Communal Concerns

Environmental and Communal Concerns	
Clusters of meaning	Units of meaning-Illustrative Quotes
Regulatory Engagement	
• EU/UK laws	*You should not add to the noise, but you should be able to survive in a reasonably noisy environment. And that's the purpose of the EMC directive (graduate trainee, Company B)*
• Local Council regulations	*Because the way the law is written, local councils don't collect from companies although you're paying rate'. (Co-founder, and MD, Company, A)*
• Credentialing bodies	*You will always go with the off-the-shelf, and funnily enough not just because it's cheaper but because it's already certified (designer, Company A)*
Local Engagement	
• Community	*It's all made locally. And that's only because of Marios'relationship with that company and the fact that they're always in here and we're always in there. We have like a mutual working relationship with them (engineer, Company B)*
• Activism	*I sit on the university board. I go out there three times a year to work with the vice chancellor, looking to make students more employable (Founder, Company A)*
• Environmental awareness	*And so things like for example when we moved into this building we spent quite a lot of money on insulating it properly. And that was over and above the minimum required standards (Finance Director, Company A).*

Table 4: Illustrative Examples of Data Structure of Professional Concerns

Professional Concerns	
Clusters of meaning	Units of meaning-Illustrative Quotes

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Clusters of meaning	Units of meaning-Illustrative Quotes
Professional standards	
• Professional Associations/Institutes	*We are also an FDA registered manufacturing site (owner, Company A)*
• Industry unwritten rules	*Within our sector there's quite a lot of consultants have picked up on this sustainability and there are quite a lot of the practices now actually on the engineering side trying to build in environmental methods of constructing buildings, but as you can imagine that's quite difficult from a construction point of view (founder -Company B))*
Valuing Practice	
• Knowledge and Expertise	*I'm the key person that correlates it. I mean from the technical side and the technical department, we'll draw up the documents…And I'm the gatekeeper. I'm the one who compiles the technical file and make sure we have what we need to submit (Rob, Company A)*
• Passion	*I like to design, I get caught up in the idea, I'm very 'let's go and make something and make it beautiful' and all this kind of stuff (Designer, Company A)*
• Product quality	*The ethos of [Company B]is make reliable products, make sure they work and offer full service support to the client, to the customer… we've got a good reputation that, a reliable reputation that yes it works…based on our historical performance rather than there necessarily being the absolute cheapest (Senior engineer, Company B)*

Table 5: Illustrative Examples of Data Structure of Employment Concerns

Employment Concerns	
Clusters of meaning	Units of meaning-Illustrative Quotes
Labour force dynamics	
• Skills shortage	*We work in a specialised industry, a specialised area so trying to find suitable people to come in and hit the ground running it's always difficult. Because we work in a specialised area and the number of people that have got that specialised knowledge is limited (senior engineer, Company B)*
• Staff turnover	*Staff turnover can be up to fifty percent a year' (graduate trainee, Company B).*
Labour force inclusion	
• Staff diversity	*"There's a couple here with mental problems and I carry those… but I feel I have an obligation to those people and unless they commit murder or something, they have a job here" (Founder and MD, Company A)*
• Training and development	*At the minute I'm still technically in my training… they asked me how I wanted to go about learning the product … I said I would quite like to do a year learning in other departments the business (graduate trainee, Company B)*
• Work-life balance	*Flexi-time means staff can come when it's quicker to get to work or works around their children schooling or their partner's work.*

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Table 6: Illustrative Examples of Data Structure of Commercial Concerns

Commercial Concerns	
Clusters of meaning	Units of meaning-Illustrative Quotes
Market viability	
• Competition	*So why that affects us from a sustainability standpoint is because the overheads of our business are incredibly low compared to our competitors, yet our access to the internet is amazing because XXX is close to XXX and so you pay half of what your competitor's doing… that's how we are able to survive.*
• Consumption patterns	*So because we're getting pressurised by clients to bring the unit cost down all the time and be more competitive we've decided to make that one card, get rid of the two cards, get rid of the connectors and make it one board and it does just digital (Co-founder, Company B).*
• Raw material resources	*We have to be very careful obviously… Well it's sort of counterfeit electronic goods really. So they will sand off the surface and put a new layer on and then call it something different. They'll change the serial numbers. There's an awful lot on the market like this (procurement officer, Company A)*
Operational viability	
• Balanced growth	*I just want to scale what we've got because I believe in the product and I believe in the message but I want it to be more refined and more efficient and more profitable because then I use those profits to reinvest in better products (co-founder, company C)*
• Technology-investing in new ideas	*But we've also been investing a lot in technology, whether that is IT to improve efficiency, for example it might cost us twenty five percent more to use sustainable fabrics, but what if IT can make us twenty five percent more efficient. So that's how we try and compete with the high street, not by doing the same thing as them but by trying to do it more efficiently (co-founder, Company C)*

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