

Title: Cultivating powerlessness in leadership: Vulnerability and relational care through the lens of care ethics

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Abstract

This paper explores an alternative view of vulnerability in leadership, representing a shift from traditional, androcentric models to one that prioritises relationality and care. When it is viewed through the lens of relational care ethics and feminist reflexive collaboration, we argue that vulnerability can function as an empowering catalyst that challenges power and hierarchical structures. We conceptualise vulnerability as a dynamic process of self-reflection, empathy and embodiment, wherein leaders adopt an ethical, other-directed stance. By utilising retrospective data, we illustrate how vulnerability redefines leadership by fostering shared embodied experiences, expanding empathetic imagination and generating embodied knowledge. Our contributions are twofold: first, we theorise vulnerability as a relational, emotional experience that facilitates a deeper understanding of others' emotions and expands notions of moral responsibility to nurture caring relationships with a minimal focus on hierarchical power, and second, we argue that embracing vulnerability along with feminist reflexivity, in this context, not only challenges the power structures of masculine norms and hierarchies but also provides to redefine powerlessness in leadership viewed as ethically engaged and caring activity.

Keywords: vulnerability, leadership, care ethics, relational care, critical feminism, affective solidarity

Introduction

Emerging scholarship on leadership and vulnerability (Ito and Bligh, 2017; Corlett et al., 2021; Satama et al., 2024) had begun to challenge the chronic portrayal of leadership as an exercise of power based on rationality, control and dominance. Instead, it reframes leadership as inherently relational, positioning vulnerability as a productive and transformative force that strengthens connections within leadership communities and broader social contexts (Cutcher et al., 2022). This perspective urges a critical rethinking of the leader-focused androcentric paradigm, which equates effectiveness and heroic charisma, unyielding authority and a carefully constructed veneer of strength (Walls et al., 2021). In stark contrast, emerging feminist and relational scholarly perspectives (see Noddings, 2013; Johansson and Wickström, 2023) advocate for approaching vulnerability in leadership as an ethical condition that fosters mutual responsibility, care and deep relationality in situated contexts.

While vulnerability has been co-opted by some leaders to subtly reinforce hierarchies and consolidate their own influence (Gabriel, 1997; Sims, 2003), it is more often dismissed as a liability associated with fragility, incompetence and identity loss. In such contexts, the notion of vulnerability may be subject to an ideological battle in which traditional notions of masculinity reject emotional openness and embodied relationality as weaknesses that compromise power and authority. Leaders who exhibit vulnerability can thus sometimes be socially evaluated as unfavourable, leading to the destabilisation of normative organisational conditions and the undermining of their authority (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Satama et al., 2024). This dominant framing marginalises the emotional, embodied, and relational dimensions of vulnerability—qualities often associated with feminine forms of leadership—which are either devalued or actively suppressed in practice (Corlett et

al., 2021). Research on leadership identity, crisis mediation and organisational change further perpetuates this bias, reinforcing culturally ingrained ideals of the leader as a heroic figure who must avoid displaying vulnerability to maintain credibility (Collinson, 2014; Corlett et al., 2019; Raelin, 2016). This tension underscores a critical paradox regarding leadership: while vulnerability is increasingly recognised as a valuable trait, it is simultaneously undermined by political and organisational disruptions that reinforce (hyper)masculine ideals of domination and supremacy. To counteract this, there is an urgent need to challenge these reductive narratives and advance a more inclusive understanding of vulnerability – not as a weakness to be concealed, but as a catalyst that fosters relationality, empathy, and care.

Drawing on the conceptual framework advanced by Corlett, Mavin and Beech (2019), who advocate for reimagining leadership through the lens of vulnerability, vulnerability is often seen as a weakness, but previous studies have not approached it from an embodied and relational perspective (see Corlett et al., 2019; Johansson and Wickström, 2023). In this paper, vulnerability is seen as a relational state based on the interconnectedness with others and the environment (Johansson and Wickström, 2023). It is not simply a reaction to harm but, rather, an ethical stance that extends beyond caring for oneself to caring for others. We critique the ‘power over others’ paradigm, suggesting that vulnerability fosters empowering and nurturing relational dynamics and that leadership can become a space in which power and powerlessness is diffused (Levay and Bäck, 2022). Vulnerability, as a relational state, promotes reciprocal interactions and mutual ‘reaching out’ (Liedtka, 1996), challenging hierarchical structures and patriarchal values. Conventional understandings of vulnerability also typically conceive it as a property shared by all (Butler et al., 2016). In this view, all human beings can be considered vulnerable. Grounded in care ethics, it emphasises the self as relational and open to continual revision.

With our paper, we aim to expand the theoretical debate on vulnerability in leadership in two ways. First, by theorising vulnerability as a shared embodied experience, we show how the emotions of others are sensed in leadership, expanding empathetic imagination and reciprocally generating embodied knowledge between individuals. To illustrate our arguments, we discuss how this process cultivates a sense of moral responsibility toward others—including all beings and the environment—which is a fundamental principle of care ethics. Through care and the emotive resources of moral responsibility, we illustrate how caring relationships can be cultivated with little or no emphasis on hierarchical power dynamics. Second, through developing the debate on vulnerability in leadership, we contribute to a divergent leadership discourse that shifts the focus away from a power-centric view, proposing that a focus on powerlessness in leadership and care in leading activities resonates with vulnerability. In doing so, we expand the conceptualisation of vulnerability by incorporating care ethics, offering a critique of the androcentric, binary framework that sustains the illusion of fixed power dynamics in leadership.

Embracing vulnerability for empowering leadership dynamics

Mainstream leadership studies frequently construct vulnerability as a liability, associating it with fragility, insecurity and diminished authority (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Knights and Clarke, 2014). In the conventional leadership discourse, expressing vulnerability is often framed as a calculated risk to which leaders selectively expose themselves to enhance their credibility without relinquishing control (Raelin and Raelin, 2011; Mavin, 2022). This body of work illustrates vulnerability as a performative and instrumental resource deployed to enhance a leader’s power and reinforce their authority (Gabriel, 1997). This instrumental framing

positions vulnerability as a performative resource strategically deployed to bolster a leader's emotional and symbolic power. While this perspective helps us understand vulnerability's role in leadership authenticity and efficacy, it simultaneously risks reducing vulnerability to an individualised tactic of control, reinforcing, rather than challenging, hierarchical power relations. This often-adopted view treats vulnerability as a performative tool, with leaders using it selectively to reinforce their authority rather than embracing its potential to foster relational connection—an approach that should be critically questioned.

The leadership literature has long linked vulnerability to trust-building (Scandura and Pellegrini, 2008). It is frequently framed as a means by which leaders cultivate trust within dyadic leader–follower relationships (Lapidot et al., 2007; Meyer et al., 2017) or as a rhetorical device via which to humanise leaders by having them admit their failures (Ito and Bligh, 2017). The concept of ‘epistemic vulnerability’ is particularly relevant here, as it encompasses a leader's willingness to be honest and open to learning through accepting their fallibility (Meyer et al., 2017). Ito and Bligh (2017) frame vulnerability as a form of sharing whereby leaders communicate their emotional, physical or spiritual hardships to foster strong emotional connections and a collective vision with followers. This perspective assumes that leaders who expose their own fallibility enhance their authenticity, fostering deep team cohesion (Meyer et al., 2017; Ito and Bligh, 2017). However, the agential control over vulnerability remains firmly in the leader's hands, ensuring that exposure is always on their terms. Leaders choose when and how to be vulnerable, positioning themselves as gatekeepers of openness, while followers remain in a subordinate role of response and reception. Vulnerability, for leaders, can also involve the fear that expressing humility may be perceived as a lack of competence by others (O'c et al., 2020, p. 21). This approach inadvertently upholds the top-down power structures that vulnerability has the potential to challenge.

Drawing on the feminist ethics of care (Noddings, 2013; Johansson and Wickström, 2023), we seek to explore how vulnerability should be understood as a relational and ontological condition, emerging through reciprocal engagement, rather than an individual leader's voluntary exposure of fragility. This perspective critically reevaluates the prevailing instrumentalist view of vulnerability as a tool for leaders to use in manipulating trust, influence or authenticity among their followers, urging a departure from reducing vulnerability to a performative act aimed at consolidating power. Instead, we propose an understanding of vulnerability that resists being instrumentalised, recognising it as ethically embodied and fundamentally co-constructed within relational dynamics. By grounding vulnerability in relational ethics, we can transcend the limitations of current leadership paradigms and draw on critical feminist insights regarding how leaders and followers co-construct environments of trust, care and moral accountability (Noddings, 2013; Johansson and Wickström, 2023). This shift promises to provide an ethically attuned approach to leadership that views vulnerability not as a weakness to be exploited but, rather, as a fundamental human condition that has the potential to empower genuine relational connections and care.

Critical feminist insights with affective solidarity

In our work, we employ a provocative, critical approach grounded in reflexive research methodology and feminist caring practices, following qualitative research traditions (Ahonen et al., 2020; Demeyère and Havet-Laurent, 2024; Weatherall et al., 2024). This framework enables us to explore new feminist elements of vulnerability within leadership research through affective solidarity (Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). We recognise the transformative potential

inherent in the conflicts among those advocating for change. Through our embodied research collaboration, we seek to co-investigate embodied living experiences and engage in reflexive, collaborative dialogues (Helin, 2019; 2023) that do justice to the complexity, inconsistencies and intersubjective character of ongoing interpretations of those experiences (Johansson et al., 2023). Our academic partnerships are not merely tools for collaboration; they represent the essence of our identities and inform how we navigate our professional lives.

Hemmings (2012) emphasises that affective solidarity encompasses a rich array of emotions, including frustration and the desire for connection that are essential in sustainable feminist politics and challenging established hierarchies and knowledge production systems. Instead of anchoring these feelings in identity politics, we propose that affective solidarity arises from the inherent dissonance within feminist politics. Our methodological stance builds upon Elspeth Probyn's (2003) insights regarding feminist reflexivity which emerge from critiques of objectivity and an exploration of intersubjectivity. This methodological framework not only integrates feminist perspectives into existing research methods but also rethinks knowledge production's purposes, urging researchers to critically assess their positionality and the ramifications of their work for the communities involved.

Informed by Sara Ahmed's work, we also contend that our emotional experiences shape our perceptions: 'What we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 36). This perspective highlights the fact that even shared emotions can carry different meanings based on the personal contexts and relationships associated with them (Ahmed, 2004, p. 10). Understanding vulnerability in leadership through this lens emphasises the fact that affect is partial and contextual, influencing shared perceptions (Ahmed, 2014, p. 208). By centring care and justice, our approach to feminist solidarity is intended to dismantle oppressive structures in research while promoting social transformation. This involves recognising how experiences of gender intersect with various sociocultures and identities, thereby ensuring that our solidarity practices acknowledge and address these rich complexities.

Our methodology is grounded in feminist care ethics, prioritising critical reflexivity, collaboration and care. We engage in reflexive dialogues to explore our diverse experiences, striving to maintain and repair our collaborative academic environment and allow for ethical accountability to participants (Tronto, 2015, p. 265). Feminist research traditions advocate for ethical accountability to participants and prioritise reciprocal relationships in the research process. In addition, the retrospective perspective is also applied within this methodology. We regenerate the previous research by applying a new theoretical lens to provoke a new understanding of (deconstruct and reconstruct) leadership phenomena. Solidarity building has long preoccupied feminist academics and practitioners invested in the notion that significant social change can only be achieved collectively (Hemmings, 2012). The value of this approach is the interpellation of feminist care ethics into the research process, ensuring that our methodological stance is grounded in empathy, mutual respect and a commitment to social justice.

Three organisational scientists have developed a theoretical perspective intended to help deconstruct and reconstruct the power dynamics of leadership from a feminist perspective. This approach contributes to vulnerability in leadership that emphasises caring, relationality and justice. Our methodological approach is iterative and temporal, and it is grounded in a feminist ethic of care, embodiment and dialogue. Participants with diverse backgrounds engage in iterative discussions, testing and shaping ideas over time. The process is a living, constantly evolving one based on a shared document in which previous ideas are reviewed and

reconstructed through feminist and vulnerable leadership theoretical perspectives. The research process's open and collaborative nature creates space for ethical and collective intellectual growth. By regenerating earlier studies, we aim to deconstruct the existing leadership ideology. We then reconstruct to reflect the principles of vulnerability with powerlessness in leadership.

Cultivating powerlessness in leadership through vulnerability and care ethics

Vulnerability, derived from the Latin word 'vulnus' (wound or injury), highlights our interdependence with other people and our exposure to harm (Butler et al., 2016). Traditionally, vulnerability has negative associations with risk and harm, suggesting a loss of power and control in relationships (Shildrick, 2002). However, we argue that this interpretation of vulnerability stems from a disembodied and calculative approach to relationships that epistemologically and morally prioritises distinctions over connections (Held, 2006). Vulnerability, for us, is embodied and relational, requiring an ethical attentiveness to others (Antoni and Beer, 2024). This is particularly evident in relationships in which there is an imbalance of power, such as those involving exploitation, abuse or violence.

Erinn Gilson (2014) highlights the fact that vulnerability is fundamental to understanding harm, well-being, rights, equality and responsibilities. Understanding vulnerability as a relational and embodied phenomenon requires an ethical approach that moves beyond individualistic moral theories. This approach reconceptualises human existence in the social world and emphasises interconnections, interpersonal relationships and responsiveness to others. Within this framework, caring emerges as a fundamental response to vulnerability, embodying compassion, empathy and responsibility for the well-being of others (Hamington, 2004). The act of caring arises from a feeling of responsibility for the needs of others.

Caring and compassion are key elements in the lives of organisations (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012; Rynes et al., 2012). Researchers have increasingly recognised the vulnerability-generating factors that promote personal growth, relationality, trust and authentic caring connections (Hamington, 2004; Johansson and Wickström, 2023). Empathic caring that involves resonating with another's emotional state, for example, while witnessing someone in pain, facilitates these connections (Slote, 2007). This intersection of vulnerability and an ethics of care provides the basis for relationships grounded in embodied knowledge and the lived experiences of all participants.

Embracing vulnerability through relational care enables empathy, strengthens relationships and builds trust (Hamington, 2004; Johansson and Wickström, 2022; Satama et al., 2023). Openness about one's vulnerabilities evokes emotions such as empathy and compassion, which are the basis of ethical responsibility and moral impulses. These emotions can catalyse transformative change (Johansson and Wickström, 2022). This relational view of vulnerability and caring provides a lens via which to address powerlessness in leadership. We distinguish between inevitable human and socially induced interdependence, as in leader–employee relationships, in which power imbalances are exploited for individual gain (Noddings, 2015). Traditional ethical frameworks focus on rational decision-making, but the ethics of care shifts the focus to emotions, affect and relational dynamics as moral resources. In this view, interdependence is aligned with powerlessness, while the insistence on autonomy and self-sufficiency is aligned with power often masking the true nature of power dynamics.

We build on Fiona Robinson's (2020, 16) argument that care ethics functions as a form of critical feminist theory, extending beyond gender to critique inequality and marginalisation

rooted in asymmetrical power relations within hierarchical structures and hegemonic norms. Using this reasoning, we argue that care ethics can be employed to explore the tension between self-centric and other-centric perspectives, emphasising our ontological interdependence. It can show how qualities such as mutual vulnerability, interdependence, attentiveness and responsiveness to others' needs have been marginalised or silenced by the dominance of the rationalist, patriarchal and masculine values embedded in structural power.

The intersection of vulnerability and relational care informs our critical examination of leadership, exposing how conventional frameworks reinforce the myth of asymmetrical power distribution and privilege the powerful in leadership dynamics. Thus, we adopt relational care ethics as a critical feminist approach to vulnerability, using it to challenge entrenched power structures in leadership. We propose the concept of powerlessness as an element of leadership grounded in vulnerability and relational care. This concept is intended to diffuse the concentration of power typically associated with leadership positions. This approach diversifies agency within leader-employee relations and expands the imagination of care beyond the constraints of traditional power structures. Below, to illustrate our argument, we show the layers of vulnerability and leadership using empirical materials derived from previous research.

Altering the power dynamics informed by hierarchical structures

In a previous study of sporting CEOs, one author noted that sportiness was often emphasised to highlight qualities such as persuasiveness, competitiveness and strength (Author, 2017). This presentation reinforced the CEO's authority and positioned him or her as a figure to follow. A contrasting approach was highlighted when a CEO struggling with personal issues openly acknowledged his vulnerability. In this case, openness did not attract followers but, rather, fostered a shared sense of responsibility and mutual concern among employees, who began to see themselves as co-creators, not subordinates. This shift from seeing the CEO as an unapproachable hero to a human like us shows how vulnerability creates a space in which to transform leadership. By embracing vulnerability, leaders can dismantle hierarchical structures and promote relational care. In this case, the CEO's vulnerability deeply impacted employees and encouraged a sense of shared responsibility that transcended traditional power dynamics. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but, rather, an invitation to connection and shared care. The CEO's openness allowed for a natural exchange of caring and caregiving roles between managers and employees, challenging traditional power structures and questioning dualistic notions of power and responsibility. As the ethics of care shows, leadership based on mutual accountability shapes the relationship between leader and follower, creating a space in which both parties can freely contribute to collective well-being.

Vulnerability, a shared human condition, stands in stark contrast to leadership ideals based on power, control and success. By openly expressing their vulnerability, leaders invite others to join them, promoting shared care and more engaged work environment. When embraced as a relational phenomenon, vulnerability highlights a natural tendency to care that exists outside institutional power relations. This moral impulse fosters a sense of responsibility among employees who are actively involved in co-creating the organisation's direction. This transforms leadership and enables shared responsibility and responsiveness. This shift highlights the importance of trust, which is central to relational care. Trust does not derive solely from institutional power. Rather, it is based on a notion of trustworthiness rooted in benevolence and honesty. In management contexts, trust is reciprocal and based on a willingness to be vulnerable in response to perceived trustworthiness. As Mayer et al. (1995)

point out, trust involves the anticipation that others will respond to our needs, which evokes vulnerability. By viewing leadership from the perspective of relational care, we move beyond the traditional leader-follower dynamic, in which the leader has power and the follower is vulnerable. Relational care places both leader and follower within a redistributed ethical responsibility, in which both are equally vulnerable and involved in the caring process. This approach encourages vulnerability and fosters trust, enabling a form of leadership that transcends hierarchical control. Vulnerability, especially among minority groups, acts as a bridge to mutual understanding. Through emotional resources such as empathy and compassion, individuals demonstrate moral responsibility towards others and create a collective desire to change the organisation in which they and society. The dynamics observed in Johansson and Wickström's (2023) study show how organisations that foster a caring environment nurture the trust needed for vulnerability to flourish.

Diffusing the power of an egocentric self: reducing self–other tension through sharing vulnerability and care

Building on the foundational view of individuals as autonomous and independent beings who survive and thrive by continuously enhancing their individual agency, the notion of self-concept has been central to the normative construction of leadership, particularly ethical leadership (Ford et al., 2008; Johansson and Edwards, 2021). For example, the self-concept of ethical and caring leaders is said to be rooted in these leaders' awareness of how their thoughts and behaviors are being carried out and perceived by others. Leaders, as independent performers who construct their sense of self in this way aim to maintain power by positioning themselves as having a high moral standing, which allows them to influence the self-concepts and beliefs of their followers. As such, this ethical, caring leadership typology assigns leaders caregiving responsibilities while simultaneously reinforcing asymmetrical power relations. By positioning the leader as the ethical and caring caregiver without emphasising attentiveness to others' needs and the moral responsibility that arises from them, this approach primarily serves as self-endorsement (Johansson and Edwards, 2021).

Vulnerability intrinsically tied to relationality and inter-subjectivity. A leader's sense of self is redefined through interdependence, mutual interactions and the connections they cultivate with others. Thus, the self is continuously shaped through the reciprocal exchange of embodied learning and knowing with others through vulnerability and care. Relational care offers an alternative mode of care by positioning vulnerability not as a weakness but, rather, as an opportunity for interpersonal connections; intersubjectivity and relational, ethical responsibilities. When leaders and co-workers both openly acknowledge their vulnerability, they shift the dynamics of power by emphasising mutually shared human experiences through interdependence. The sense of self, thereby, emerges from not only the way in which co-workers may perceive the thoughts and behaviours of leaders but also the equitable, reciprocal caring relations between caregivers and caretakers. In this way, the leader and their co-workers may take turns being the caring hero or heroine, the ethical servant or the authentic role model. As such, relational care and vulnerability become transformative tools that defuse the power of a self-centred leadership concept and reimagine leadership as a collaborative, interconnected practice.

In a recent talk with a female head of a department at a university, the following reflection, provided after sharing her personal life situation with co-workers, was very intriguing. She described that she considered different options throughout the summer and decided to send a personal, yet formal email for the whole department. She said: *'This is an unusual practice,*

especially in a public institution. I feel this experience has made a large impact on my work [and] my relationship with colleagues, and it has also changed the way I see myself. I have received much support from co-workers, which has boosted my confidence in making other decisions in my leadership role. I'm still reflecting on this insight, as I'm not entirely sure why it's impacted me this way. But I don't regret choosing to share this recent personal situation with my colleagues.'

This manager found that expressing vulnerability and receiving deliberate care and support from co-workers impacted how she views herself as a leader in an academic institution and helped her understand herself better as a person. Drawing on vulnerability and relational care, we understand the self in leadership as fluid and dynamic, being continuously shaped by relationships with others via reciprocal emotional exchange, not merely immediate impressions or performed relatability. Intriguingly, here, expressions of vulnerability shifted the focus from a narrative centred on the qualities of the self to one emphasising caring actions, emotional connections and support from others as the foundation of the self-concept.

To diffuse the tension surrounding the pursuit of power in leadership, we advocate deconstructing the power embedded in a leader's self-concept and coming to view it not as something rooted in independence and self-reliance but, rather, as something that emerges and evolves through relationships. A leader's sense of self is redefined through the interdependence, mutual interactions and the connections they cultivate with others. Thus, the self is continuously shaped through the reciprocal exchange of embodied learning and knowing, which is performed in relation to others through vulnerability and care. Here, powerlessness is rooted in the understanding of self-formation as a fundamentally relational phenomenon. This shifts the focus from an individualistic, power-driven notion of leadership to one that acknowledges the inherent interdependence of human existence. Vulnerability, rather than being perceived as a limitation, shapes the self through emotional attachment to caring relations and natural moral responsiveness. Through this openness to vulnerability, the self engages with the experiences of others; thus, it is not a fixed entity but, rather, a continuous process of co-becoming—a dynamic, evolving presence shaped by the ethical commitments and relational entanglements that define human existence.

Deconstructing gendered power dynamics in leadership

Leadership has long been constructed using masculine and patriarchal lenses, and vulnerability has often been seen as a liability rather than a good thing for leadership. This prevailing view, which equates leadership with strength, control and emotional detachment, crowds out the interpersonal and caring qualities that are vital to ethical and inclusive leadership. Far from undermining authority, however, vulnerability can be a powerful tool for fostering trust, connection and collaborative engagement in leadership practices.

At the heart of an ethics of care is an emphasis on relational care, sensitivity and attentiveness—qualities traditionally associated with femininity that form an essential part of the human experience for all genders. By embracing vulnerability, leaders can reconfigure their authority (Raelin, 2016) and move from hierarchical structures defined by hierarchical androcentric decision-making towards more inclusive, relational, dynamics of warmth. This shift is even more prevalent in high-stakes contexts such as elite sports, in which traditional masculine ideals of invulnerability often prevail.

To illustrate our argument, we rely on research data derived from one of the authors that showcases how a female head coach worked in a male-dominated, high-pressure sports

environment as the World Cup approached. Faced with a coaching team used to ruthless scrutiny, she had to strike a delicate balance between authority and vulnerability. In one crucial meeting, she expressed the need for trust and support: ‘I want you to trust me as we approach this tournament.’ This moment of vulnerability did not diminish her authority. Rather, it created a shift in team dynamics, fostered a more collaborative atmosphere and shifted the focus from individual criticism to collective success.

The reaction of her colleagues, many of whom were experienced professionals, was remarkably positive. By expressing her vulnerability, the head coach created a space in which openness and mutual respect could flourish, challenging entrenched masculine power dynamics of sports that often emphasise competition over cooperation. In doing so, she exemplified empowerment of leadership in which vulnerability is a necessary strength, redefining leadership as an interconnected, communal process based on care and shared responsibility. Thus, when vulnerability is incorporated into leadership and related practices with critical feminist insight, it does not undermine the feminine authority. Rather, it shapes it, shifting the focus from control to connection. This reframing allows for the development of leadership and management practices that are more ethically grounded and also better adapted to the complexities of the human experience and that foster environments in which trust, collaboration and care are paramount. In this way, vulnerability offers a pathway to more inclusive and sustainable leadership that transcends traditional gender-based expectations and embraces the full spectrum of interpersonal capacities constructing gendered dynamics involving powerlessness in leadership.

Discussion

Cultivating powerlessness in leadership offers an ethically attuned framework for critically renewing leadership by deconstructing traditional leader centrism, self-centrism, androcentrism, while integrating care ethics as a core principle. By diffusing the concentration of power within hierarchical structures, powerlessness challenges the top-down, authority-driven leadership, advocating for more collaborative, relational practices. This shift rejects the egocentric drive for personal power and status, positioning leadership as a collective caring, shared responsibilities that prioritises mutual respect, empathy and the well-being of the community (Scheibmayr, 2024; Robinson, 2020). By fostering an environment in which care and vulnerability are not only accepted but a catalyst for caring, inclusive leadership, this approach calls for the equitable values of justice, interdependence and mutual flourishing.

We caution against constructing idealised leadership narratives that entrap leaders in constant evaluation and expectation, which inadvertently reinforce power structures in which a symbolically privileged position is held by omnipotent caretakers—leaders who claim legitimate power under the guise of care while still maintaining hierarchical authority over subordinates (Gabriel, 1997; Johansson and Edwards, 2021). Instead, we seek to move the discussion beyond traditional notions of leadership by framing vulnerability, like care, as a fundamental relational and embodied human condition experienced by everyone, including organisational leaders, within various organisational contexts. In this perspective, leadership is not an autocratic command but, rather, a shared practice that emerges from the interconnectedness of human experience (Tronto, 2003; Satama et al., 2024). By integrating relational care ethics, this approach extends the concept of caring beyond the traditional discourse of leadership (Satama et al., 2024), in which organisational boundaries and a temporal focus on problem-solving receive greater attention. Instead, we propose a leadership

based on interdependence and shared responsibilities, emphasising shared ethical responsiveness and mutual support.

With powerlessness we feel that leadership can be unprecedentedly generative for leaders and colleagues to share a nurturing role and address ethical astuteness. This is about maintaining and creating enduring caring relationships that acknowledge and address shared human vulnerabilities (Tronto, 2003; Levay and Andersson Bäck, 2022). In expanding the theoretical debate on vulnerability in leadership, we suggested several ways to move the field forward. First, we theorised vulnerability as a shared embodied experience that exists beyond individual perceptions and touches on collective sensing. Here, being humble plays a pivotal role, as it involves leaders acknowledging their own vulnerabilities and limitations. By recognising that leadership is not about exerting control but, rather, about engaging with others in a humble, interdependent way, leaders open up spaces for mutual empowerment. This humble approach fosters an environment where emotions and experiences are freely exchanged, allowing leaders to not only recognize but also honor the emotions of others. As they attune themselves to the embodied experiences of those they lead, they expand their empathetic behaviors—the ability to perceive and understand unspoken emotional states. This reciprocal knowledge generation deepens relational ties and trust, cultivating a collective atmosphere.

Second, as care ethics emphasises, moral responsibility is not a unilateral act but, rather, a relational and reciprocated one (Robinson, 2020). Leaders who care do not only respond to the immediate needs of their followers but also actively consider the long-term implications of their actions for the well-being of all beings and the environment. This perspective reshapes leadership into an act of care for people, communities and towards the planet. By envisioning a future in which well-being is collective, leaders inspire a sense of shared moral duty that transcends individualistic goals. It is through caring relationships that leaders can work to address social inequalities and foster more equitable, inclusive environments for all.

Finally, we expand the conceptualisation of vulnerability by introducing a focus on powerlessness in leadership. The notion of powerlessness in leadership challenges the traditional view of the leader as the individual with power over others. Instead, it positions the leader as someone who leads through care, responsibility and a deep understanding of the shared vulnerability in human relationships. Being humble becomes a core strength when leaders step back to mutual empowerment, fostering a collective form of leadership grounded in mutual respect and care, rather than hierarchical authority. This not only deconstructs the traditional power-centric view of leadership but works towards as leadership as generative acts. By integrating care ethics with vulnerability, we envision leadership as a dynamic, interconnected process that can flourish in a space of reciprocal responsibility—one in which all are seen, heard, and valued not for their positions but for their shared care and empowerment.

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