Article

Stories of Leadership: Leading with Empathy through the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Leader–follower interactions during times of complexity are critical in managing rapid change demands and ensuring organizational sustainability. Between early 2020 and 2023, many organizations worldwide witnessed an unprecedented need for organizational change that rapidly transformed the work environment. This study focused on understanding the contexts of leader and follower interactions during times of change using the shifting organizational landscapes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying a qualitative methodology, we collected data from 12 leaders across multiple business sectors in Africa, Asia, and the United States using semi-structured interviews. We then transcribed the interviews and applied an iterative phronetic approach to analyze the data by engaging complexity leadership, emotion in organizations, leading with empathy, belonging, and power and control as theoretical lenses for data analysis. We analyzed how individual leadership experiences during a time of complexity fostered a shift in leadership paradigms and leadership styles within organizations. The findings indicated that due to the unprecedented situations faced during COVID-19, leaders shifted from leadership styles that applied a lens of power and control to an adaptable model that follows the framework of complexity leadership and applies a lens of leading with emotional intelligence. The findings provided a nuanced understanding of the leader–follower relationship by allowing for a complex and varied description of how individuals discursively situate their experiences around issues of power and control. The findings also showed that leaders became more intentional about leading, purposely changing their leadership style to create an environment that supported open communication, belonging, empathy, and awareness. The findings also suggested that when leaders adapt elements of emotional intelligence in leading during times of organizational complexity, they do so with the goal of motivating others and creating a feeling of connection with followers. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: belonging; complexity leadership; control; emotion; emotional intelligence; empathy; organizational communication; power

1. Introduction

Between early 2020 and 2023, many organizations worldwide witnessed an unprecedented need for organizational change that rapidly transformed the work environment and operational procedures. Many countries across the globe had to enforce mandatory shutdowns to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The mandate forced organizations to quickly move work from the traditional, in-person work environment to virtual spaces. The changes that most organizations faced due to COVID-19 were unfamiliar territory that threatened organizational sustainability. However, opportunities for leaders to apply new ways of thinking to leadership practices emerged [1] given "the level of uncertainty associated with rapidly changing, unpredictable conditions" [2] (p. 911). Although some studies have investigated changes to industries [3], leadership [4], and behavioral change [5] during COVID-19, none of these studies specifically addressed the impact of the crisis on leadership paradigms.

Due to organizational changes put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we examined how stories of leadership during the pandemic served as an opportunity to reflect on leadership experiences, processes, and practices to develop and advance new ways of thinking and operating in organizations. Exploring leaders' stories regarding their leadership experiences is important to further understanding leadership during times of complexity, including the rapid organizational change that took place during COVID-19. Doing so allows leaders to reflect on what has happened (i.e., how leaders led) and how their experiences may then serve to tell a story that acts as a catalyst to move organizations forward [6] for continued sustainability. We conceptualized sustainability in this context as the capacity to manage emotional work [7] experienced during times of complexity. Given the global nature of the COVID-19 context, this study drew on the unique experiences of leaders from Africa, Asia, and the United States for a robust understanding of leadership experiences related to the sustainability of organizations and organizational members.

This study makes several contributions by exploring leadership during a time of complexity. Examining leaders' stories of their leadership experiences within the context of complexity (specifically, within the context of rapid organizational change) allows scholars to broadly think about organizational contexts within what at times can be "rigid systems" of organizing [1] (p. 1403). Indeed, organizational leaders can either contribute to or impede progress based on whether they "[limit] initiatives to those emphasizing awareness and consciousness-raising training in leadership development more than [they promote] other more ambitious structural and policy changes" [8] (p. 814). Our study sought to understand the contexts that impede such progress by focusing on how individuals' leadership experiences during a time of complexity (i.e., COVID-19) served to both inform and shift leadership paradigms in organizations. The following overarching research question was posed:

> Research Question: How do stories of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic serve as an opportunity to reflect on leadership experiences, processes, and practices to develop and advance new ways of thinking and operating that sustain organizations and organizational members?

We begin with a brief review of relevant background literature related to leadership concepts (including complexity leadership) and other related theoretical lenses (including emotion in organizations, leading with empathy, belonging, and power and control). We also discuss the research methods, findings, and implications for organizations and organizational members.

1.1. Literature Review

A vast body of scholarship has examined leadership paradigms, including transformational, delegative, transactional, and participative styles. A recent search on Google Scholar identified over 5.2 million results when the keyword "leadership" was entered into the search feature. Amazon also identified over 60,000 results for the search term "leadership book". Given this trend, we begin the literature review with an overview of the styles of leadership that are particularly relevant to this study (Table 1) while making note of how various aspects of these leadership styles connect to the current study.

1.1.1. Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is a task-focused leadership style characterized by an exchange between the leader and follower that is mutually beneficial [9,10]. Transactional leadership relies on a reward system for achieving a desired result. For example, leaders provide rewards such as recognition or promotion in exchange for the follower providing desired results such as meeting the leader's goals. It is argued that this type of leadership is process-driven, meaning the leader sets goals and communicates expectations and feedback to motivate the follower to produce the desired results [9]. In other words, the leader–follower exchange follows a predetermined structure. Studies show that transactional leadership is most useful when the desired outcomes are clearly defined through a chain of

command or a specific set of goals (e.g., military or first responder) and when the leader can provide consistent direction and feedback to followers [10]. The goal-oriented approach makes transactional leadership a beneficial style of leadership to use in emergencies or in times of crisis when there is a need for clear direction to produce efficient and effective results [11–13] and in times of urgency (e.g., COVID-19) when swift decision-making is required [11]. Although transactional leadership theory provides insights into leadership behavior during times of crisis, its bureaucratic nature is equally limiting as it relates to employee behaviors. While transactional leadership may be effective in creating a sense of extrinsic motivation for employees [10], it can also serve to cause a lack of innovation or creativity in the workplace over time because employees may perceive that rewards are contingent upon compliance, making them less likely to take risks or be creative in their work [14,15]. There is evidence that shows that the transactional leadership style negatively relates to other aspects of leading such as empathy and emotional intelligence (EI) [16]. Other evidence suggests that a transactional leadership style can be more effective when combined with a transformational style of leadership [14].

1.1.2. Transformational Leadership

Unlike transactional leadership, which depends on a predetermined structure and process, transformational leadership relies on motivation and connection to achieve results. Transformational leadership focuses on "transform[ing] and inspire[ing] followers to perform beyond expectations while transcending self-interest for the good of the organization" [9] (p. 423). This leadership approach encourages followers to challenge the status quo, think creatively, and strive for excellence that exceeds performance expectations [9]. One study showed that transformational leadership is characterized by the ability of leaders to create a shared vision, articulate a clear direction, and motivate followers to be autonomous and take the initiative to make creative decisions [9]. Largely, transformational leadership uses motivation and inspiration to secure followers' commitment in achieving the vision. Evidence suggests that transformational leadership is positively associated with increased performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, [12]. However, in a fast-changing environment, achieving the same results may become challenging for the leader [17]. Importantly for this study, research has also shown that transformational leadership is linked to aspects of EI [18,19], although some studies found that only a moderate relationship exists [16]. Transformational leaders typically exhibit motivation, self-awareness, self-confidence, and other similar characteristics associated with EI [18,19]. Other leadership styles such as passive leadership [20] have also explained the relationship between structure and leadership and the effect on leader–follower response.

Although leadership has been studied extensively, most studies have focused on process leadership (i.e., transactional, transformational, etc.). Given this narrow lens, there is a gap in understanding the dynamics of the interactions between leaders and followers. To fill this need, complexity leadership scholars have recently introduced a conceptual framework that explains the effect of capitalizing upon social relationships in times of complexity (such as crisis and change) with regard to leaders' ability to adapt to the demands of the situation [21,22].

1.1.3. Complexity Leadership

The complexity of situations that organizations are experiencing in modern times along with an increase in interconnectivity is changing information flow and the distribution of power [21,22]. Though essential to this study's context, traditional leadership styles that focus on hierarchical views have transformed over the last two decades. Leaders have found that they must be lean and agile for organizations to adapt and remain competitive. In light of the need for change, Lichtenstein and colleagues proposed the complexity leadership theory, which focuses on the complex adaptive needs of organizations and proposes that leadership is a "complex dynamic process" that occurs through interdependent relational interactions within organizations as people and ideas intersect [23] (p. 2). Complexity

leadership theory moved the focus of leadership away from hierarchical systems to consider the complex interactions that take place through the leader–follower relationship. This approach highlights the relational aspects of the leader–follower exchange; specifically, that leadership is relationally enacted as a mutual exchange in complex environments [23] and introduces the adaptive and learning processes that occur when leading in complex and dynamic circumstances such as a crisis [23]. Research has also questioned the power and control that leaders influence using the interactive nature of complexity leadership, especially when leading in times of rapid change [24].

The COVID-19 pandemic created a need for research and practice that places a renewed focus on understanding how leaders adapt when facing complex challenges, including within complex situations where people must work together to address problems that do not have a clear solution [1]. To study how leaders react under complex pressures [1] and how leadership is socially constructed in that context [23] also requires an understanding of the social and relational aspects of leading and leadership styles, particularly as it relates to emotion in organizations and issues of power and control.

1.1.4. Emotion in Organizations

For the purposes of this study, emotion in organizations is conceptualized as the relational process that individuals navigate when in groups to negotiate interpersonal relationships [25,26]. Emotion in organizations is relational [26], meaning that it is enacted and sustained through discourse, or the way employees talk [27]. Importantly, research has noted that emotion norms are socially constructed through employees' everyday activities and organizational structures [28–31] and serve as a pertinent part of organizational life [32].

Until fairly recently, emotion in the workplace was seen (negatively) as a concept that was not in alignment with organizational goals such as productivity [33] and was measured in terms of job satisfaction or commitment or altogether ignored [34]. This view began to shift when Arlie Hochschild, a sociologist, studied the display of emotion by flight attendants and distinguished between emotion management (i.e., the effort individuals make to manage their feelings so that they align with social norms) and emotion labor (i.e., the commercialization of emotion when employees such as flight attendants are paid to project a certain feeling) [35]. Additionally, recent organizational communication scholarship sheds light on how emotions are shared between people and groups and thus influence organizations [34,36,37]. Riforgiate and Komarova noted that individuals experience emergent work feelings that are shaped, shared, and understood through communication and serve as important pieces of the social and relational aspects of work [38] that sustains organizations. Other research shows that emotion may serve to strengthen workplace relationships [39], ignite transformation [40], and lead to preferred organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction and job commitment [41]. Importantly, emotion in organizations is a "complex social process" [34] (p. 161) that this study explored further within the context of leadership.

A concept related to emotion in organizations is emotional intelligence. Previous research links characteristics of EI (i.e., exhibiting motivation, self-awareness, and self-confidence) with transformational leadership [18,19]. Researchers have defined EI as the way individuals monitor their own and others' feelings and emotions and then use the information to guide their own thinking and actions (i.e., have empathy) [42–44]. In essence, EI is the ability to accurately perceive and understand the emotions of the people around us [45]. Accurately perceiving the emotions of others is crucial to social interaction [46] because it facilitates appropriate responding and bonding [47]. According to Daniel Goleman, neuroscience shows evidence that humans simultaneously focus their attention in many ways [48]. Based on this information, it is argued that an essential duty associated with a leaders' primary task is to direct their followers' attention [48]. This allows individuals to filter distractions and concentrate on one thing—their work [48]. Goleman posited that to effectively lead others, the leader must engage in five critical dimensions of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Table 1) [49].

Within these five critical dimensions of EI, there are three types of EI awareness: (1) inward focus—engaging in self-awareness and self-control; (2) focus on others through empathy; and (3) outward focus—devising strategy, innovating, and managing organizations [49] (Table 1). The concept of focusing on others through empathy, one of the five critical dimensions of EI, was an important one for this study because it is the dimension that allows for the relational focus on others. Goleman further advanced three specific types of empathy referred to as "The Empathy Triad": (1) cognitive empathy—the ability to understand another person's perspective; (2) emotional empathy—the ability to feel what someone else feels; and (3) empathic concern—the ability to sense what another person needs from you [49] (Table 1). Contextualizing empathy in this way was important to the current study because we used empathy as a lens to examine leadership paradigms with a renewed focus.

Table 1. Components of Emotional Intelligence.

Five Critical Dimensions of EI	Definition
Self-awareness	Knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, drives, values, and impact on others
Self-regulation	Controlling or redirecting disruptive impulses and moods (e.g., thinking before you act)
Motivation	Relishing achievement for its own sake
Empathy	Understanding other people's emotional makeup
Social skills	Building rapport with others to move them in desired directions
Types of EI Awareness	**Definition**
Inward focus	Engaging in self-awareness and self-control
Empathy	Focusing on others through an understanding of their emotional makeup
Outward focus	Devising strategy, innovating, and managing organizations
"The Empathy Triad"	**Definition**
Cognitive	The ability to understand another person's perspective
Emotional	The ability to feel what someone else feels
Empathic concern	The ability to sense what another person needs from you

Data from [49].

Despite critiques of EI as a commodified construct that is associated with organizational productivity and "sold" via the popular press [44], studying emotion in organizations—particularly as it relates to how leaders lead others with emotion—is important for sustaining organizations. Prosocial emotions can serve to help organizational members manage burnout and stress, create feelings of job satisfaction, and make sense of their organizational setting [34,50]. Focusing on prosocial aspects of emotion work in turn helps create healthy work settings and sustainable organizations. Given this, the notion of leading with empathy is previewed next.

1.1.5. Leading with Empathy

Leading with empathy is a style of leadership that is gaining traction in the modern workplace [48,51,52] and can be used to examine current leadership paradigms within organizations. Empathy was defined by Decety and Jackson as a human-centered perspective with "a sense of similarity between the feeling one experiences and those expressed by others" [53] (p. 71). Empathy may take on many forms, including caring for others, the perception of experiencing the emotions of others, and the awareness of what others think and feel [53]. Empathy is an essential leadership skill that can help foster a positive work

environment and increase employee engagement. For example, leaders who empathize with their employees can better understand their needs and create a more supportive work environment [54]. Leading with empathy also fosters an environment of trust and understanding, hence leading to greater employee engagement and productivity [55]. Leading others with empathy also acts as moderator for creating a sense of belonging [56].

1.1.6. Belonging

Belonging is a byproduct of leading with empathy to create a supportive environment that fosters trust and a sense of fit among followers. Belonging is the psychological need individuals have to feel connected to others in their community in meaningful ways [57]. Feelings of belonging become critical to how individuals perceive themselves as situated within and engaged with an organization. This is important because good citizenship behaviors decrease when individuals do not feel a sense of belonging within their organization [58]. Before COVID-19, the issue of creating an environment that supports a sense of belonging while promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion was among others that had gained the spotlight in many organizations because people naturally crave a sense of belonging within their social environment [59].

1.1.7. Power and Control

Finally, power and control are pivotal in understanding leadership during times of unprecedented change. Power is conceptualized as how organizations and individuals influence or control others' thoughts and actions [60]. Tompkins and Cheney positioned power as the ability to accomplish a goal even if it is in opposition to the goals of others, and they argued that organizational power is the ability of leaders to control the actions of others to meet organizational goals [61]. Hence, power is seen as the "pivotal concept in explaining the process by which specific organizational and institutional structures prevail over others [62]. In this way, organizations may control employees' actions (through leaders) to meet organizational goals. Interestingly, research found that power is also a key factor in understanding whether employees feel discomfort with engaging in emotion labor [31].

In summary, this study applied the theoretical tenants of complexity leadership, emotion in organizations, leading with empathy, belonging, and power and control as a theoretical lens and sought to further understand the relationship between these concepts and various relevant leadership styles (Table 2) using the contexts of leadership during times of change against the backdrop of the shifting organizational landscapes of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly important because there is little communication research that is related to EI even though communication scholars are well positioned to contribute to the conversation [34].

Table 2. Literature Review Concepts.

Concept	Description
Transactional leadership	Characterized by an exchange between the leader and follower that is mutually beneficial [9,10]; a task-focused, goal-oriented approach in which the leader–follower exchange follows a predetermined structure. This type of leadership is useful for emergency or crisis situations [11–13].
Transformational leadership	Focused on transforming and inspiring followers; followers are encouraged to be creative and seek ways to exceed performance expectations [9]. Rather than depending on a predetermined reward or structure, it relies on motivation and building connections in achieving results; it is participative.
Complexity leadership	Similar to transformational leadership in that it emphasizes leader–follower collaboration. Different in the sense that it occurs through interdependent relational interactions; a complex dynamic process that allows people and ideas to intersect. It enables mutual exchange in complex environments [23]; it is also adaptive and innovative.
Emotion in organizations	The relational process that individuals negotiate when in groups to navigate interpersonal relationships [25,26].

Table 2. *Cont.*

Concept	Description
Emotional intelligence	The social intelligence that involves the ability to observe one's own and others' feelings and emotions; the individual then uses that information to guide their thinking and decision-making [42]. Leadership styles: transformational leadership, complexity leadership.
Leading with empathy	Human-centered; includes caring for others the perception of experiencing the emotions of others, and awareness of what others think and feel [53]. Creates a supportive work environment [54]. Leadership styles: transformational leadership, leading with emotional intelligence.
Belonging	The psychological need individuals hold to feel connected to others in a meaningful way [57]; feeling connected to others is often a result of leading with empathy. Leadership styles: leading with empathy, leading with emotional intelligence.
Power and control	Organizations and individuals influence or control others' thoughts and actions [60] to accomplish a goal [61]. Leadership styles: complexity leadership, transactional leadership.

2. Materials and Methods

To address the research question, this study employed a social constructionism meta-theoretical lens to allow for an exploration of how individuals make sense of their lived experiences [63] (p. 8) as they describe and explain their social experiences [64] (p. 266). A social constructionist approach is an important one because the ways that we construct our world reciprocally shapes our social and relational environments (i.e., cultural, organizational, and political) [64]. A qualitative approach was utilized to reveal how participants described leading in organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic and how they subsequently created meanings for their experiences [63,65]. The researchers began an exploration of leadership during COVID-19 with as few preconceived perceptions as possible.

2.1. Qualitative Study and Context

This study recruited participants who were 18 years of age or older and had experience leading others in a professional workplace during times of complexity, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study recruitment was posted on social media (i.e., LinkedIn and Instagram) and via the first author's university online news publication within the United States. Recruitment processes generated robust research data from a variety of participants (N = 12) located in Africa, Asia, and the United States, including seven males and five females. The demographics comprised five Caucasians, three Black Americans, two Asians, one Black African, and one Nigerian. Participants ranged from 22 to 66 years of age. While participants were not directly recruited from outside of the United States, the study recruitment reached a broad population of participants across the globe. Participants had a range of highest level of education completed, including one high school graduate, one doctoral degree, four bachelor's degrees, five master's degrees, and one participant who declined to provide this information. Participants had between 1 year and 4 months to 21 years of leadership experience and supervised between 2 and more than 200 individuals in various industries, including aviation, energy, government, higher education, human resources, military defense, railroad engineering, and social services.

Given that this study used qualitative techniques in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the findings, Hennink and Kaiser's [66] rule of conducting between 5 and 24 interviews to determine the information saturation point for qualitative research was employed. Additionally, this study drew upon Maltterud and colleagues' [67] concept of information power to determine the adequate sample size for this study. The concept of information power states that the more knowledge of an event that the participants in a qualitative study hold, the less the number of participants needed for the study.

Data were collected through one-on-one, in-depth interviews. Participants were asked to generally "share [their] stories regarding [their] own leadership experiences during the

COVID-19 pandemic [since January 2020]". Participants were guided to start their story at the beginning of the pandemic and walk the researcher through their story. Probing questions included, "What has changed about how you lead? What challenges have you faced as a leader? What unexpected successes have you achieved as a leader?" Participants were also specifically asked to share how their "leadership (style, processes, practices) changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic". This method allowed for a rich description of participants' lived experiences [63,65]. Participants voluntarily shared their experiences during an open-ended, semi-structured interview process that took place virtually via Zoom. The interview lasted between 47 min and 90 min. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim, which resulted in a Word document containing 566 pages of single-spaced text.

2.2. Phronetic Iterative Approach to Data Analysis

In keeping with a social constructionist approach, the data analysis focused on the discursive nature of participant interviews and how participants described their experiences and perceptions of leadership in complex contexts. In addressing the research questions, this study employed a phronetic iterative approach to data analysis to consider existing theories and lenses (i.e., belongingness, complexity leadership, and power and control), our own research interests (i.e., leadership, identity work, organizational communication, and organizational behavior), and the emergent nature of qualitative field data [68]. The phronetic iterative approach "focuses on self-reflexivity, context, and thick description" [68] (p. 4). The phronetic iterative approach as a qualitative research method has a number of advantages, including that "qualitative data can be systematically gathered, organized, interpreted, analyzed, and communicated so as to address real world concerns" [68] (p. 4). The goal of using this approach was to allow both existing theory and the data to determine the more specific phenomena being studied [68]. In practice, this approach appears to be a combination of grounded theory and the constant comparative method for analyzing qualitative data as refined by Tracy in her practical, iterative approach to qualitative research methods [68]. It is important to note that iteration is a process in which the researcher repeatedly reflects upon and revisits the data and connects participant stories with existing literature while seeking to enhance the researcher's understandings of participants' experiences [68]. In other words, the iterative data analysis process allowed us to engage the data and connect the data to emerging insights based upon our own reflections upon the current literature and various theoretical lenses [68]. Data analysis followed three steps: primary-cycle coding, secondary-cycle coding, and selective coding as discussed further below.

Following Tracy, several criteria were utilized for analyzing interview data in order to refine as many emergent themes as possible [68]. First, *primary-cycle coding*, similar to open coding, was utilized to look for initial meaning in the data. The researchers fully immersed themselves in the data by reading, re-reading, reflecting upon, and discussing the data while refraining from forming opinions [68]. During this initial phase, we read and coded several times, writing memos on the data. (i.e., initial thoughts, reflections, and analytic questions) [63]. As the interview process progressed, we engaged in a memo-writing process that allowed for initial interpretations to be made [63] and for relationships among concepts to be explored [69,70]. In doing so, we were able to consider categories as they emerged. The primary-cycle coding process was used to initially classify participants' statements [68,70], analyze data through an "initial, unrestricted" [65] (p. 219) and "analytic" process, and identify concepts and their dimensions within the data [70] (p. 101). During this process, data were sorted line-by-line and placed into categories, and statements that were found to be unique or interesting were highlighted [65,71]. For example, during the first primary-cycle coding process, exemplar quotations (see Section 3) that discussed concerns with employees' emotional wellbeing were labeled with the following memos: "Concerned with the emotional wellbeing and health of others," and "Personally motivated to lead others in ways that build relationships; engaged in Emotional Intelligence".

First-level codes were then formulated to focus on "what" was presenting itself in the data (i.e., descriptive words such as those ending in "-ing"—"acting," "leading," "finding," "requiring", etc.) [68]. The focus here was on the "who, what, and where," (NOT the "why" or "how") [68]. We developed a list of open codes that attempted to stay close to participants' interpretations. It was during this stage that we began to shift our focus to participants' significant attention to their leadership experiences that related to leading with emotion and communicating with followers. For example, first-level codes included "Concern for others; worrying about followers; caring for emotional wellbeing; concern for mental health of others; engaging in empathy while talking with followers," and "Leading remotely; questioning a lack of control over many aspects of leading work processes; concern for managing relationships; personal decision to lead differently; ensuring that followers feel supported by engaging them communicatively".

This study sought to understand participants' leadership experiences as they related to social and structural dynamics within organizations. To fully explore these issues, we followed other research methods while taking care not to think solely in terms of stand-alone categories, but we also asked questions throughout the data analysis process that would specifically shed light on the overlap of participants' day-to-day experiences [71]. In seeking to move beyond stand-alone categories of understanding, our goal was to examine how participants' stories of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their self-reported experiences [71]. Doing so allowed us to explore participants' thoughtful responses to leadership as it aligned with belongingness and power and control. To do so, we followed Hunting's recommendation to ask three inter-related questions during the data analysis process: (1) "Who is included within this category?" to uncover who was included/excluded and how categories may or may not have depended on each other for meaning; (2) "What role does inequality play?" to examine power structures as experienced by the participants; and (3) "Where are there similarities?" to discover commonalities across categories that may have been conceptually different from one another (i.e., EI and belongingness) [71] (p. 8). The goal in using these questions during the data analysis phase was to think beyond stand-alone categories and "create space for the complexities" surrounding participants' experiences [71] (p. 8).

Second, the researchers engaged in *secondary-cycle coding* in which we reviewed the data again with the goal of combining the initial categories through the process of axial coding [68]. Axial coding is the process of critically reviewing the data under each code to organize, identify similarities, and categorize them [65,70,71]. The process of axial coding utilizes subcategories and allows coding to take place "around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions" [65] (p. 123). During the continual memoing and coding processes, constant comparison techniques (or the constant comparison of new data with data that had already been coded) enabled us to uncover the common themes that continued to emerge through participants' stories [65]. This process further refined the categories by producing related categories and themes, connecting similar participant experiences [65], and locating differences among participant stories [65]. This process led to analytic and interpretive second-level codes that served to explain, theorize, and synthesize the data into patterns or groupings [68]. Second-cycle coding uncovered themes such as "empathy" and "motivation".

Finally, *selective coding* was used to merge and solidify categories [71]. The categories were then grouped into "core categories" in order to finalize each or theme [70,71]. This process involved moving between the data and existing theory [62] to develop thematic categories grounded in the data while remaining informed by existing theoretical concepts [68]. After developing the thematic categories, we identified and further conceptualized the key aggregate thematic dimensions. These aggregate dimensions served as the basis for our findings. We then moved between the aggregate dimensions, data, and existing scholarship until we were confident that our interpretations of participant experiences, existing theory, and our own proposed contributions were consistently linked [68]. For example, the coding

process described above lead to the final selective coding theme: "Leaders shift previous leadership styles to focus on leading with EI".

3. Results

The research question posed in this study explored how individuals' stories of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic served as an opportunity to reflect on leadership experiences, processes, and practices to develop and advance new ways of thinking and operating that sustain organizations and organizational members. The data suggested that leaders have shifted from leadership styles that center on processes and procedures (e.g., transactional) to styles that are focused on (1) leading with EI (i.e., shifting from transactional to more of transformational and complexity leadership styles) and (2) communicating with intention and concern to create spaces where employees feel a sense of belonging (i.e., transformational leadership, EI, and leading with empathy). To fully understand the nuances of the leader–follower relationship during times of uncertainty (specifically, during the shift from in-person work to remote work during COVID-19), this study considered how the leader–follower relationship is socially constructed through the lens of power and control.

3.1. Leaders Shifted Previous Leadership Styles by Engaging in EI Awareness

The first dimension of EI that was indicated in the themes was self-awareness. Leaders in this study explained that their leadership experiences during COVID-19 gave them experience the dimension of EI known as self-awareness. EI self-awareness involves knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, drives, values, and impact on others [48].

Through a process of reflection and self-awareness, leaders began to employ a leadership style that incorporated leading with emotion and/or EI. Participants who had previously utilized a directive or delegative leadership style to gain power and control over organizational processes and procedures and employee productivity by giving commands and directives to subordinates explained that they had shifted to a leadership style that was instead focused on leading with the three types of EI awareness intentionally foregrounded: (1) inward focus (i.e., self-awareness), (2) focus on others through empathy, and (3) outward focus (i.e., managing organizations).

For example, John, an offshore oil rig manager from Africa, explained that because of uncertainties caused by the pandemic, the way managers communicated with employees had to change. He said that "you just don't take things for granted, you have to hear their opinions and manage their expectation". John recognized that in leading others, he could no longer strictly delegate work. Instead, he had to shift his own leadership behavior (i.e., inward focused; self-awareness) to accommodate employees' needs to be heard and understood (i.e., other-focused through empathy), and only then could he turn to managing the organization (i.e., outward focus).

Similarly, IB, a human resource manager at an information technology company in Africa, had similar experience leading others, stating, "I learned quickly that employees wanted to hear from you. So, [supervisors] had to learn to communicate in different ways". For IB, there was a progression of becoming self-aware (i.e., inward focus) that enabled her leadership style to shift from transactional leadership to a style that accommodated employees' needs (for her attention) through additional empathetic communication (i.e., other-focused through empathy). Once she shifted her leadership style, IB was able to manage the work of her organization (i.e., outward focus).

As another example, Fid, a railway engineer and manager in India, shared that he too became (self-)aware that people wanted to be heard (i.e., other-awareness). He stated, "It happened with most of the people. Like they were only trying to listen to their own emotions. So they wanted a lot of empathy [and a] lot of discussion". He added that most employees looked to their manager for guidance and support during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Fid stated the following:

> What I feel they don't want [was] financial support at that time. [Instead], they want emotional support first. Yes, and, as in general, people respect their seniors in office [and] for seniors calling [and] consoling them. So that is the best thing that can happen to [an employee], and only then he will be concerned about coming back to [work].

Managers like Fid explained that their experiences in leading the through the pandemic helped them become self-aware (i.e., inward focus) of the impact that communication had in managing and leading others (i.e., other-focused through empathy) through times of uncertainty.

Importantly, Fid explained his shift in leadership style further in this powerful way:

> To be honest with you, I have been more like a directive leader. In most part of my life, because in [this government] organization, it's a very tall organization. It's not a flat organization. So we have to be very strict with our junior [employees] of you know organization. But these covert times like, perilous times, these times test the emotions of a person. Like, I can tell you personally, [what] I will need in that team. So [when I'm] calling a person to attend [work], when he might be saying, 'I have three young kids, and one of my [children] was just born last month only.' So that for like, how can I call him now, because I know people are dying and people are dying like anything, and still calling them for duty for job. It was like inhumane for me. Right. What I found like [pause] leadership totally changed . . . . I had always thought, like the goals of organization, are the thing for me that I could focus [on] in my life—for nine years of my career. But for those few months I thought [pause] like organizations are like [pause] can be built up or even can be boiled down to zero. But [once people] go, they cannot come back. So, these are the times when a person is like, how professional you can be. It is a test.

Fid's experience echoed that of participants in this study who approached leadership prior to the pandemic in more traditional styles (i.e., transactional leadership), but found that their leadership style required change to adapt during a time of complexity. Participants in this study, who were leaders in a leader–follower context described shifting how they typically led followers from traditional leadership styles (i.e., transactional and transformational leadership). Leaders in this study moved from the notions of hierarchical leadership that applied a lens of power and control to an adaptable model that followed the framework of complexity leadership and applied a lens of leading with EI.

In summary, for participants in this study, leading during COVID-19 created opportunity for a shift in leadership style. By leading with the three types of EI awareness foregrounded, these leaders found that they were more effective in their leadership role. In this way, the data suggested that participants' shift in leadership style was related to the concept of leading with EI.

3.2. Leading with Emotional Intelligence

Goleman stated that leaders can exhibit different dimensions of EI, which include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation; empathy, and social skills [49]. Participants in this study shifted from leading with transactional and transformational styles of leadership, holding power and control over work and organizational members, to leading with EI. Participants described monitoring the feelings of themselves and others and then using that information to guide their actions. Four of the five dimensions of the (EI) framework were identified within the themes for this study: self-awareness, empathy, motivation, and social skills. The fifth dimension of EI, self-regulation, was not a focus of the stories shared by participants in this study.

3.2.1. Leading with Self-Awareness

Leaders in this study explained that their leadership experiences during COVID-19 caused them to experience the dimension of EI known as self-awareness. Specifically, participants explained that during conversations with followers during COVID-19, they became more aware of their own strengths, weaknesses, and impact on others.

IB, the human resource manager at an information technology company in Africa, noted that she began to focus on being more self-aware. IB summed up her self-awareness with the following statement:

> [Leading through COVID-19 has] given me grounds to develop and grow some more. As a leader, [this experience] is giving me grounds to . . . not see things my way and stick to my way. You know it's given . . . it's opened me up to hearing other people. You know, seeing other people's opinions . . . . Open to . . . to ague our points, voice our points and, you know, come to a conclusion rather than just that [strict] kind of leadership. So yeah, it's opened me up to be a better leader, basically.

IB's growth and development occurred when she became reflective and self-aware of the changes that she needed to make with her leadership style. Through self-awareness, IB challenged herself to "not see things" in her own way but to change and evolve (e.g., hearing others and seeing their perspectives). IB was then able to move to a leadership style that included leading with EI.

As another example, Fid, the railway engineer and manager in India, shared that followers were looking to him for reassurance. As he stated, "I had to discuss [via] [tele]phone up to 1 h and 30 min . . . 45 min . . . console a lot of people". He further explained, "a lot of my junior people cried when I was talking to them about their daughter, their kids, their mother or father . . . [and I] thought that I had to console them". Through these interactions, Fid began to understand the impact of his communication with followers, stating that it was "only then [that] they started like listening to me, [because] they first wanted to vent out". For Fid, it was important to become self-aware by recognizing his impact on others as he began to listen to his employees on a personal level (i.e., other-awareness). In doing so, Fid also engaged in leading with empathy by listening to his direct reports before turning to talk about the work. This leads us to the next dimension of EI uncovered in these data—leading with empathy.

3.2.2. Leading with Empathy

The second dimension of EI that was suggested in the themes was empathy. Goleman defined empathy as the ability to sense the emotions of others [21,28]. Leaders can be empathetic by seeking an understanding of the emotions of others [28]. Empathy may take on many forms, including caring for others, the perception of experiencing the emotions of others, and the awareness of what others think and feel [31]. Specifically, some participants in this study shared that, while leading during the height of the pandemic, they began to sense the emotional turmoil that many of their employees were feeling.

For example, Iggy, an assistant director in information technology, began to be concerned with the emotional wellbeing of others on his team. He described his empathic concern for his followers in the following way, stating, "I was worried about [employees] stuck [at] home, and you're not going anywhere, and you don't have the same ways of interacting with people that you're used to [having]. And I was concerned about that for them . . . ". Iggy equally shared concerns about followers' mental health as it related to completing the work itself. He stated, "You know they'd have to change how they do their job, which has an impact on what they do and how well they do it, and also the mental impact of it". He further explained leading with empathic concern by stating, "You know, I'm putting myself in their shoes bit here. You know, I suppose I get some energy out of talking with one person and [then] talking with another person". He further expounded upon why that statement was important by sharing the following information: "If you

don't have those [people to share with], and you don't have a way to get that energy, you know, [there is a] mental impact. I was concerned about as well". Here, Iggy describes in great detail how he cared for the emotional wellbeing and mental health of followers while leading during COVID-19.

IB, the human resource manager at an information technology company in Africa, also had concerns related to the mental health and wellbeing of followers. She explained that she had worried about the financial burden that many followers experienced due to working less hours. Similarly, Anabella, a manager at an aviation company, echoed similar concerns. Anabella said that "some people had reduced hours, and so financially, they were going through a lot". John, the offshore oil rig manager from Africa, also shared that both the financial and physical health of employees were a concern for him. He said, "If someone had COVID, they had a minimum of [a] 14 days quarantine period. You could not come to the work location or interact for that period". He further explained that it was hard on people because it affected the number of days that they could work, saying that "when it reduces their working days from 28 to 14, it is [financially] hard on the pocket".

Focusing on understanding others in an intentional way was important to leaders during COVID-19 because it allowed them to empathize with their employees and better understand their needs. During this challenging time, leaders who participated in this study indicated that they turned to leading with empathy in their leadership styles. Leaders in this study expressed that leading with empathy allowed them to create a more supportive work environment, foster trust and understanding with followers, and realize greater employee engagement and productivity. This is important as we turn to a discussion regarding the next EI dimension of motivation.

3.2.3. Motivation for Leading

The third dimension of EI that was indicated in the themes from the data analysis process was the motivation of leaders to drive toward improvement, hold a commitment to leading, and show a readiness to employ initiative through periods of difficulties [28]. Specifically, leaders in this study shared how they were resilient through their experiences during this time of rapid change and that in doing so, they were about to motivate employees.

For example, Raul, a manager working in the social services sector, shared how the practice of motivation in leading helped him in managing his team. Reflecting on his experience leading his team remotely during the initial COVID-19 lockdown, he explained that: "Leadership in general, when you have to remotely lead people, how much of control do you have?" He further said that for him, it was a personal challenge, noting that, "You know you're losing in the process, and how do you manage that relationship?" Because he was continually reflecting on these questions, it motivated him to take action. Raul explained that for him, part of acting on the situation was having the drive to make a conscious effort to improve the situation. He explained that "this part was a more personal decision for me as a leader". He went on to illustrate his actions, stating, "I remember I said earlier on, 'I [want to] make sure that my direct reports and my indirect reports know that I am on their side, that I'm there, I'm with you the whole time.'" Raul explained that he showed this to followers through his actions, saying, "[I did this] with more follow-up and more calls".

Leaders also talked about their motivation to support employees during times of uncertainty. Raul shared that ensuring that followers felt supported by him in their work and mental wellbeing was a top priority. Similarly, John, the offshore oil rig manager from Africa, shared his experience leading his team in the offshore field, where they had to safely operate with fewer people due to COVID-19 quarantines. John shared that despite the challenges, "we had to find a way [to] keep on doing their jobs". As the manager John stated, "so you have to try to motivate the people who are working to continue working" Motivating others was a challenge for leaders. As John further explained, "Motivating people in situations where you have information that is still being vetted and going through the proper channels, it is difficult to convince people it is safe to keep working". Due to

the unprecedented situations that leaders had to work within during lockdown, many of the challenges they faced required them to innovate and act with initiative to keep motivating employees.

3.2.4. Communication as a Social Skill

The fourth dimension of EI that was evident in the themes was social skills to move followers in the desired direction [21]. Having social skills requires a leader to be able to manage their emotions and also that of others through interactions when working with them [28]. For participants in this study, an important aspect of using social skills when leading with EI is the need to communicate with followers. Specifically, leaders in this study described that *"what"* they communicated with followers and *"how"* they communicated with followers both changed. Leaders indicated that they began to communicate with followers in very intentional ways.

As Iggy (the assistant director in information technology) described, the scope and nature of the communication surrounding the work change and "how" he communicated "shifted". As he stated:

> But the "how" and the scope shifted. Suddenly the impact was greater because more people were out sick, and everyone knew it could get worse at any moment. It required more intentionality and more 1:1 communication, in addition to group communication, to make sure there was space for folks to speak freely about the challenges they faced.

As Iggy noted, because normal modes of communication no longer existed (i.e., face-to-face), leaders became more intentional in their communication with individual followers and within teams.

Similarly, Anabella, who worked in aviation managing a team of people in turn-around operations for flights, also began communicating more intentionally with followers in similar ways. She was aware that she may not need to gather her entire team together each time she needed to communicate with just a portion of the team. As she stated, "[She was] not necessarily bringing everybody that may not be involved in the day, [instead] you could have a brief meeting and communicate whatever is new to everybody else". IB, who was a human resource manager, also shared similar reasons for changing the how information was communicated to the team and other employees that she had to manage. She noted, "Another thing I learned was that, come very quickly, we also had to learn to communicate in different ways. So, we have to think of other ways of communicating". These statements illustrated the changes that were made to how leaders communicated.

IB gave an example of using social platforms to communicate with employees rather just relying on the formal channels of communications. IB explained why changing the show of communication became important to leading in an unprecedented situation:

> Social media was a huge help, and when I say social media, it includes, you know, applications like WhatsApp groups and you know slack and all these other work groups that one could use, you know. You know, so as much as you want employees to be efficient and productive, you have to empower them to be that. You know, there are some tasks that are beyond...you know . . . the product. So, COVID-19 communication was via emails. You know you have something to say to employees, you send an email because people got tired of too many meetings.

As participants noted, because normal modes of communication no longer existed (i.e., face-to-face), leaders had to become more intentional in their communications with individual followers and within teams.

Intentional communication with followers also meant finding ways to foreground voices that were not being heard. Anabella explained that she also intentionally foregrounded voices that may have been silent. She described what this looked like in practice, saying, "We encouraged people to speak out". As IB stated above, she was intentionally listening to others and seeking out their opinions by asking them to voice their points of view. According to IB,

this was important in building the interaction and rapport between the leader and the team. As she stated, "Since we're not physically assembling together, especially the very first phase, when they shut down, we encourage people to speak out, . . . we tried in between ourselves to keep the communication alive".

Similarly for John, the offshore oil rig manager from Africa, foregrounding voices that may have been backgrounded or silenced meant intentionally welcoming and listening to the opinions of all followers, not just those with the loudest voices. This came to light for John as followers were utilizing various and differing technologies to communicate. Some followers communicated verbally, while some communicated via file sharing through tools such as Microsoft Teams or Slack. In John's own words: "With COVID, I found that everybody got their own opinion. Everybody got their own opinion, so we've learned to adapt where . . . you have to be able to accommodate multiple opinions about things". John acknowledged that he intentionally listens to all voices in this new mode of varying remote communication. Similarly, IB called the intentional foregrounding of voices "employee engagement". She described her experiences in this way:

> For me personally, a huge change, and I call it a huge change, would be employee engagement. I had people working with me [and] one specific role I gave that role the that tag for a specific reason was Employee Relations Officer. That person was tasked with the responsibility of feeling the pulse of the employees, engaging the employees, and ensuring that, you know, employees were OK and reporting that back...they wanted to hear from a senior person.... I had to find ways of engaging with employees.

At the forefront of IB's communication practices was engaging employees and intentionally seeking out all voices. This served multiple purposes in ensuring that work was being completed but also as a way to check on employee wellbeing.

Julie, a senior program manager for two colleges at a research university, described foregrounding, backgrounding, and the silencing of voices in similar, but more nuanced ways. In her own words, she stated:

> You know most maybe like, [I] think of like access and, like the way that we have access to things and [those] who do not have access to things. It just may be, you know, appreciate what I have and like how I can like help lead with that. So, there was just a lot of empathy that happened and compassion . . . ...But then also like, how can we help others to, like, have that same access?

Stacey, a manager at an institution of higher education, described foregrounding certain voices by saying:

> I think during the pandemic we also had the riots that happened, and I felt like there was a lot of silencing that happened, unfortunately, with African American students and black students....... So, I think there was probably silencing within our department that was happening, even before the pandemic hit, and I think it just maybe made it worse or escalated it because they some of these students didn't feel supported. . . . . moving to remote world where you're not . . . you feel like you might not be supported because you don't have connection to people.

Both Julie and Stacey reflected on leading through COVID-19 by including some of the nuanced ways that individuals' voices were backgrounded or silenced in organizations during the pandemic. Despite their individual efforts to foreground the experiences of a variety of individuals (i.e., students of color or lower socioeconomic status), they noted that in many ways, the silencing of these voices is a systemic structural issue that was exacerbated by the shift to the remote distribution of communication during COVID-19. In this instance, leaders recognized the need for creating spaces of belonging while also been cognizant of the imbalance that result from power and control.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to understand the contexts of leader and follower interactions during times of complexity using the shifting organizational landscapes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative framework, this study used a phronetic iterative approach to analyze the data while using the theoretical lens of leadership styles (i.e., complexity, transactional, and transformational), emotion in organizations, leading with empathy, belonging, and power and control to examine leadership. Themes that emerged centered around the different dimensions of EI (self-awareness, empathy, motivation, and social skills), including the three types of EI awareness, "The Empathy Triad", [49] and their applications through different leadership styles. Generally, the findings suggested that leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic mattered in gaining an additional understanding of the applications of different leadership styles while leading with EI.

To fully understand the nuances of the leader–follower relationship during times of uncertainty (specifically, during the shift from in-person work to remote work during COVID-19), this study considered how the leader–follower relationship was socially constructed [23] through the lens of power and control. Participants in this study, who were leaders in a leader–follower context, described shifting how they typically led followers from traditional leadership styles (i.e., transactional and transformational leadership). Leaders in this study moved from the notions of hierarchical leadership that applied a lens of power and control to an adaptable model that followed the framework of complexity leadership [24] and applied a lens of leading with EI. That is, leaders in this study shifted to a focus on leading with emotion through the relational process of navigating and negotiating their interpersonal relationships [25,26] with followers during COVID-19.

These findings allow for a more nuanced understanding of the leader–follower relationship by allowing for a complex and varied description of how individuals discursively situate their experiences around issues of power and control. Traditional notions of power and control hold leaders responsible for influencing or controlling the actions of others to meet organizational goals [60,61], which also are essential aspects of complexity leadership. Findings of this study indicated that this traditional view of power and control shifted during COVID-19. Leaders made this change during the time of uncertainty to allow organizations to remain agile and adaptive.

Specifically, while leading through COVID-19, leaders found that their own experiences and the experiences of followers led to emergent work feelings that were shaped, shared, and understood through communication and served as important pieces of the social and relational aspects of their work [38]. Given this, leaders in this study noted that they had to let go of the traditional prioritization of concern for the organization and began to focus on the (mental) health and overall wellbeing of followers. Participants described two ways of making this vital shift: (a) focusing on leading with EI through self- and other-awareness; and (b) intentional communication with followers that focused on foregrounding the voices of those who may have traditionally been backgrounded or silenced. These findings provide empirical support that emotions experienced by organizational members are a part of a "complex social process" [34] (p. 161) that employees engage in and maintain through discourse [26,27] while engaging in their everyday activities situated within organizational structure(s) [28–31].

Within complexity leadership, leading others is seen as a complex and dynamic process that is relational in nature through leader–follower interactions [1]. The theory of complexity leadership focuses on the ability of organizations to adapt to challenges to remain competitive [23]. Relatedly, findings from this study illustrate ways that leaders adapted to the challenges they faced and kept the operations of their organizations sustainable through the process. The findings illustrated that leaders took a renewed focus on *how* (i.e., practices) they adapted and *what* they adapted (i.e., leadership processes) when facing complex challenges during a time of unprecedented uncertainty [1]. Specifically, leaders in this study described that "*how*" they communicated with followers and "*what*" they communicated with followers both changed. Leaders indicated that they began to

communicate with followers in very intentional ways. By having intentional communication with followers, leaders employed social skills to "[build] rapport with others to move them in desired directions" [48] (p. 1).

Leaders in this study explained that their leadership experiences during COVID-19 caused them to experience emotion along the dimension of EI known as self-awareness or knowing their own strengths, weaknesses, drives, values, and impact on others [48]. Participants explained that during conversations with followers during COVID-19, they became more self-aware. Participants further recognized the need to: (a) lead with EI through a process of self- and other-awareness and empathy [45,46]; and (b) intentionally communicate with followers with a focus on creating a sense of belonging. The leaders in this study indicated that they intentionally created spaces that focused on cultivating feelings of connectedness, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among followers to sustain the organization and organizational members. The leader–follower relationship is consequential to organizations' ability to adapt to complex challenges and remain competitive [23]. The findings of this study shed light on how individuals experience leading through a complex challenge such as COVID-19 allowed for such adaption and shift in leadership style. These findings provide insight into leadership concepts and how organizations and leaders can apply the knowledge to adopt and create sustainable workplaces during normal operations or in times of crisis.

In discussing the findings and themes associated with the dimension of EI, belonging also was a concept highlighted by participants. Belonging is the psychological need for individuals to feel connected to others in their community in meaningful ways [57]. People naturally crave a sense of belonging in whatever social environment they find themselves [59]. Findings of this study also indicated that the current COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the need for organizations and leaders alike to create a supportive environment that fosters belonging and inclusiveness in intentional ways. Due to the pandemic, organizations were forced to make rapid changes to the workplace and work processes that were previously utilized, although they were unsupportive of building a sense of belonging, including working remotely via computer-mediated mechanisms that lacked face-to-face communication. The shifting work landscape (i.e., in person, remote, and hybrid) required that individuals find supportive systems outside the standard in-person working structure to help them cultivate feelings of belonging. Feelings of belonging become a critical aspect of how individuals perceive themselves to be situated within and engaged with an organization [57]. This is important because good citizenship behaviors decrease when individuals do not feel a sense of belonging within their organization [58]. Before COVID-19, the issue of creating an environment that supports a sense of belonging had been one that had gained the spotlight in many organizations [58,59]. This study provides empirical evidence for leaders to recognize that fostering an environment that is attentive to belonging is critical to organizational members' wellbeing and organizational success during times of complexity.

Another dimension of EI that was suggested in the themes was empathy. Empathy is conceptualized as the human-centered perception of experiencing the emotions of others and of having an awareness of what others are thinking and feeling [21,28,53]. Leaders can be empathetic by seeking an understanding of the emotions of followers [28] and/or caring for others [31]. The findings related to social skills and empathy (dimensions of EI) also suggest that paying attention to issues of power and control matters when intentionally focusing on fostering a sense of belonging for organizational members. Doing so affirms the theoretical importance of this concept in maintaining relationships between organizations and organizational members.

An additional dimension of EI that was indicated in the themes of the data analysis process was motivation. Motivation drives a leader toward improvement, commitment to leading, readiness to use initiatives, and being resilient through periods of difficulty [28]. Individuals employ motivation when they engage in an activity for the satisfaction that doing so provides, rather than for the purpose of receiving a reward or avoiding a conse-

quence [28]. Leaders shared how through their experience during this time of rapid change they were resilient and able to motivate employees.

This study also provides both theoretical and practical contributions to the study of leadership in organizational contexts in several ways. The findings illustrated some of the best practices discussed herein that may also be helpful in other complexity leadership scenarios that mirror that of COVID-19.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings from this study suggested that leading with EI during times of complexity and challenge matters as it relates to how leaders communicate with followers. Specifically, the findings complicated the various dimensions of complexity leadership [24] by examining issues of power and control, EI, social skills, and intentional communication [21].

Participants in this study indicated that they focused on changing how they led others during COVID-19 while the organizational processes and procedures also changed [22]. Specifically, leaders were changing *what* they were doing (i.e., more intentional communication) and *how* they did it. For example, some key leadership activities such as identifying work needs, delegating tasks, communicating priorities and expectations, soliciting input, and providing feedback changed during the pandemic. Leaders whose teams shifted to remote or hybrid work had to rethink how they led to accomplish organizational goals. Indeed, some changes involved rethinking concepts that we would generally expect organizations to rethink through a complexity leadership lens, including concepts of time (i.e., traditional vs. flex hours), location (i.e., distanced work), and use of communication and file-sharing tools (i.e., Slack and Teams). For example, a previously collocated team may have been able to maintain cohesion simply through proximity to one another. Online options would be needed to facilitate meetings in a remote or hybrid work environment. This change was in response to meeting changing organizational processes and procedures with a different "*how*" needed to accomplish the task/process.

However, while leading through COVID-19, leaders quickly recognized that focusing on organizational processes and procedures, while critical, was not as crucial as focusing on followers' overall health and wellbeing. Thinking through the boundaries and ground rules needed to guide communicating virtually was at the forefront of leadership concerns when viewed through a lens of leading with EI [21,45]. Additionally, during COVID-19, leading with self- and other-awareness concerns such as illness and family needs became a more significant and more frequent challenge for leaders (and followers) than before. This challenge presented the need to shift the scope of *how* individuals were leading others. The change focused on the "how" and "what" required to lead with self-awareness and other focus dimensions of EI at the foreground of the leader–follower process.

Leading with EI also required more intentional communication between the leader and follower that sought to create a sense of belonging by focusing on foregrounding voices that were in danger of being backgrounded or silenced. In this way, leaders shifted from the traditional views of leadership (i.e., transactional and transformational) that they generally engaged in to hold power and control into leading through EI with intentional communication to connect with followers and sustain the organization and its organizational members. This new leadership focus on the prosocial aspects of emotion work in organizations was engaged by leaders to help organizational members manage the stress of working through COVID-19 and to help followers create feelings of job satisfaction while making sense of their organizational setting [34,50]. The goal in doing so was to create a healthy work setting that served to sustain the organization during a time of complexity.

5. Conclusions

This study sought to understanding the contexts of leader and follower interactions during times of change using the shifting organizational landscapes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing complexity leadership, power and control, and EI theoretical lenses, this qualitative study analyzed how individual leadership experiences during a time of

complexity served as a catalyst to shift leadership paradigms and leadership styles within organizations. The findings suggested that due to the unprecedented situations faced during COVID-19, leaders had to shift from leadership styles that focused on processes and procedures to more accommodating styles (i.e., leading with EI). Additionally, the findings suggested that to motivate their followers; leaders became more intentional about leading, purposely changing leadership styles to create an environment that supported open communication, belonging, empathy, and awareness. This study provides empirical evidence that suggest the impact and effect that leadership styles may have in motivating and supporting followers during times of organizational complexity.

5.1. Limitations

Three limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sampling methods were limited because they did not represent one single organization, which would allow for examining variables such as organizational culture. This limited the researchers' ability to explore additional contexts surrounding leading through COVID-19 in one organization. Examining the culture of a single organization experiencing the challenge of complexity and change is essential to understanding the various ways in which systems and processes can be created and improved upon to create feelings of belonging through the leader–follower relationship. Second, this study was limited to a certain point in time and cannot speak to any variables that may be affected over time and space and examined through a longitudinal study. A longitudinal study might allow the research to reveal patterns within leader–follower relationships that were not apparent within this current study. Third, this study may have resulted in a sample of individuals who, due to their leadership experiences, may have been more likely to discuss those experiences with the researchers and may convey a certain point of view. The researchers acknowledge that by focusing on leaders' perceptions, this study may have considered a somewhat limited perspective. Exploring additional perspectives (such as those of followers) will be important for future theorizing.

5.2. Future Directions for Research

A key indicator of the findings of this study was that leaders had to shift to leadership styles that utilized more EI factors. Typically, during times of crisis, leaders adopt more coercive or authoritative leadership styles [24]. While researchers have studied the impacts of leading with EI under normal situations, there is a need to understand further the impact of leading with EI during times of crisis from the perspectives of both the employees and organizations. In other words, it is important to further consider the challenges and benefits of this type of leadership style in managing crises. In addition, examining whether leaders who changed their leadership style during COVID-19 continue to utilize the new leadership style or revert to their pre-COVID-19 style of leading post COVID-19 should be considered. Additionally, longitudinal research would allow for additional exploration for variables that may be realized both temporally and spatially. Specifically, a longitudinal study might allow the research to reveal subtle nuances within leader–follower relationships across time and space post-COVID-19 that were not apparent within this current study. Finally, while this study's participants were from Africa, Asia, and the United States, this study did not employ culture as a lens. Culture should be considered in future studies as an important consideration because doing so may shed light on additional leadership factors not considered in the present study.

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