Defining Organizational Humanness and Contributing Behavioral Attributes of Leadership: Qualitative Research Using a Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract: This study examined how employees experience humanness in organizations related to leadership behavior. More specifically, it was aimed to define what experienced humanness is from the perspective of employees, and which leadership behaviors employees perceive to contribute to these experiences of organizational humanness. To fulfill this aim, an exploratory grounded theory study was conducted, in which 13 employees were interviewed until saturation was attained, investigating their experiences in organizations that relate to humanness and examples of leadership behavior that influence it. Three overarching categories of experienced humanness were identified in organizations i.e., bounded space, attentive care, and human connection. Furthermore, eight specific sets of leadership behaviors appear to contribute to the experience of humanness. The findings were compared to the scientific literature and led to the conclusion that the findings yield unique elements, (e.g., fostering human connection within a team) that have not been covered in previous conceptualizations.

Keywords: humanness, human leadership, leadership, organizational humanization, organizational humanness.

JEL Classification: I31, M14.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, organizational dehumanization has received increased scientific attention, i.e., the experience of being treated as not fully human at work (Bohré-den Harder et al., 2023). Experiences of dehumanization are, unfortunately, widespread in organizational settings (Bell & Khoury, 2011; Belmi & Schroeder, 2020; Christoff, 2014) and have harmful consequences for employees, such as reduced job satisfaction and increased emotional exhaustion (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2017; Brison et al., 2022). Furthermore, organizational dehumanization has negative consequences for organizations as well, such as decreased extra-role performance, lower levels of trust, and increased turnover intentions and rates (Bell & Khoury, 2016; Brison et al., 2022; Caesens et al., 2019; Taskin et al., 2019; Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2015).

Although scientific knowledge on organizational dehumanization and its contributing factors and detrimental consequences has increased in the past decades, the positive opposite of organizational dehumanization, i.e., organizational humanness, has received very little attention (Bohré-den Harder et al., 2023). Only four scientific studies have attempted to describe humanness in organizations (Bell & Khoury, 2011; Haarjärvi & Laari-Salmela, 2022; Quintelier et al., 2021; Taghavinia et al., 2021). None of these descriptions, however, have been empirically tested, leaving the conceptualization and operationalization of the definition unvalidated to date. This lack of validation represents a notable caveat, as it hinders a comprehensive understanding of organizational humanness and impedes researchers’ ability to pinpoint key dimensions, factors, or indicators of humanization.

The present study seeks to address this specific gap and contribute to its reduction. In this study, the authors focus on developing a definition of organizational humanness from the perspective of employees and in relation to their experiences of their supervisors’ behavior. This approach, with a strong focus on the perspective of employees, is in line with Alvesson and Einola (2019), who emphasize the need to focus on the experiences of followers rather than on the intentions of leaders or conceptual theories by academic experts.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore how employees define, perceive, and experience humanness in organizations related to leadership. The main overall research question of the study was: How is humanness in organizations experienced by employees, and how does this experience of humanness relate to leadership behaviors?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As stated above, the scientific knowledge on organizational humanness, i.e., the positive opposite of organizational dehumanization, has received little attention until now (Bohré-den Harder et al., 2023). The few scientific studies with this focus forward four distinct descriptions of humanness in organizations. First, Bell and Khoury (2011) describe organizational humanization as the opposite of organizational dehumanization, i.e., “the experience of having one’s experiences, desires and feelings recognized by the organization and the opportunity for personal agency and self-actualization through creative and instrumental participation in organizational processes” (p. 4). Second, Quintelier et al. (2021) describe humанизation as “the attribution of more (or less) human-like qualities” (p. 2). Third, Taghavinia et al. (2021) depict humanness as a personality characteristic that reveals “respect for the personnel, good morals, the ability of intimate criticism and caring about the personnel’s problem” (p. 5). Finally, Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela (2022) theorize humanness in organizations as an ongoing process, focusing on interactions between team members more than the experiences of individuals. These descriptions have not yet been empirically tested. This study aims to contribute to the knowledge on organizational humanness by studying how employees experience organizational humanness.

The Role of Leadership in Organizational Humanness

Given the negative consequences of organizational dehumanization, scholars have typically investigated the factors that contribute to the dehumanizing perceptions of employees (Brison et al., 2022), including empirical studies on the antecedents of organizational dehumanization (Ahmed & Khan, 2016; Bell & Khoury, 2016; Caesens et al., 2017, 2019; Demoulin et al., 2021; Stinglhamber et al., 2021; Taskin et al., 2019). Based on the outcome of these studies, Brison et al. (2022) observed that leadership is one of the important contributing antecedents. Hence, it is helpful to indicate which leadership behaviors can also contribute to positive experiences in organizational humanness. Four recent studies show that organizational dehumanization may be reduced by positive leadership behavior (Arriagada-Venegas et al., 2021; Moriano et al., 2021; Sainz et al., 2021; Stinglhamber et al., 2021). Stinglhamber et al. (2021) found that high-quality Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), characterized by respect, support, and the provision of developmental opportunities and resources, led to the employees’ experience of feeling treated as a human being. Moriano et
al. (2021) studied the relationship between organizational dehumanization and security-providing leadership, i.e., being available, sensitive, and responsive to the followers’ needs, and found that security-providing leadership decreases organizational dehumanization, reducing burnout. Arriagada-Venegas et al. (2021) concluded that authentic leadership correlates negatively with experienced organizational dehumanization, while Sainz et al. (2021) demonstrated that authentic leadership predicts lower experienced organizational dehumanization. These findings do indeed indicate that leadership can reduce the experience of organizational dehumanization.

Based on a review of research on humanness and leadership behavior, Bohré-den Harder et al. (2023) conclude that most studies that investigate the relation between leadership and humanness focus on the negative-negative relation, i.e., abusive leadership–organizational dehumanization and some recent articles, as the four articles mentioned above, focus on the positive-negative relation, i.e., positive leadership related to diminished organizational dehumanization. However, to the best of knowledge, the positive-positive relation, i.e., positive leadership leading to more organizational humanness, has not been studied before, which is the second aim of the present study.

**METHODOLOGY**

For this study, a grounded theory approach was used to define organizational humanness rooted in the participants’ experiences. Grounded Theory methodology is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon (Chun Tie et al., 2019) and when the ideas and concerns of the participants are central to the understanding of the phenomenon or the process (Palmquist et al., 2017).

**Data Collection and Participants**

The authors collected the data through extensive in-depth interviews with participants. The eligibility criteria for participants were: (1) having a work contract (not interim or freelance), (2) working within an organization (e.g., no self-employed or domestic workers), (3) working in an organization larger than 10 employees in total, with at least one manager or supervisor, (4) having (had) a hierarchical manager, and (5) having working experience of at least one year, but not necessarily related to one specific organization or manager.

In general, the authors aimed for a diverse group of participants in terms of age, gender, education, and organizational context. Ethical approval for the research protocol for this study was obtained. The authors sent out a general call to participate in this study on social media and in the first author’s newsletter, to which a total of N=23 people responded. To be eligible for participation, respondents needed to meet the aforementioned criteria.

The first two respondents from the group of eligible respondents (n=17) were selected to participate in the interviews. The sampling of the following participants was informed by the gaps that arose from the data analysis throughout the interview process, following the idea of theoretical sampling in grounded theory methodology. This sampling strategy led to the selection of participants with varying organizational contexts, backgrounds and/or other characteristics. For this purpose, three specific sampling choices after the two initial interviews were made.

First, after seven more interviews with participants from organizations in the not-for-profit sector, four participants who worked in the profit-sector were selected. Second, to check for self-selection bias, two interviews were conducted with participants outside the group of self-responders to the invitations to participate on social media. The first author actively approached these two respondents, asking them if they were willing to participate. Both were also part of the group of participants from the profit-sector. Finally, after 11 interviews, two additional participants with occupations involving manual labor and physical work were selected, as until then, the respondents held jobs that involved administrative, managerial, or clerical responsibilities.

Thus, 13 in-depth interviews were performed, each lasting approximately one to one and a half hours. Interviews took place at a location of the participants’ preference: at the home of the participant (n=4), via online zoom (n=3), at the workplace of the first author (n=3), at the workplace of the participant (n=2) and in a public café (n=1). Before the interview, participants received general information on the study by email. At the start of each interview the participant gave their written consent for use of the data. After consent was given, general background information, i.e., age, gender identity, information on the job position and organization, was gathered on paper. This information was not included in the recording of the interviews. After the interview, participants received a letter, in which they were thanked for their participation, and information on the study purpose and the use of the data was presented once again.

Table 1 describes the main background characteristics of all 13 participants.
Table 1. Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Fictional) Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Cultural background</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>№ years of experience</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>№ employees in the organization</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Local government</td>
<td>10000</td>
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<td>Belgian</td>
<td>HBO</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Local government</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Dutch</td>
<td>HBO</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Police</td>
<td>65000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marc</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<td>1600</td>
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<td>700</td>
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<td>University</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Food industry</td>
<td>148000</td>
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<tr>
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<td>University</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>2700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
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<td>Retail</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Dutch</td>
<td>MBO</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>10000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table was created by the authors based on oral information provided by the interview participants. Abbreviations: MBO = equivalent of intermediate vocational college, HBO = equivalent of higher vocational education, also referred to as university of applied sciences, University = equivalent of bachelor’s or master’s degree

Source: Based on the demographic information as communicated by research participants

The topics for the interviews were very general, following suggestions from Sbaraini et al. (2011), Charmaz (2014), Chun Tie (2019), and Hull (2013). This meant that the interviews started with an open research question. In it, it was indicated to the participant that there were no pre-set assumptions on the part of the researcher regarding the experiences that are of importance to the participant. Moreover, the interview topics included general questions, starting with: What is humanness in organizations according to you? Other questions followed the course of the conversation. They focused on experiences, anecdotes, and examples of the participants with humanness in organizations and their experiences with humanness about leadership. Examples of questions are: What is humanness in organizations in your experience? Can you share an experience illustrating that? Can you elaborate on the behavior of your supervisor that is an example of humanness to you? Can you elaborate on what your supervisor did that elicited this feeling? What did your leader do to make you feel valued? How is humanness related to the specific tasks your leader assigns you?

The data collection process is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Process Flow Diagram

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the research procedure that was followed
Data Analysis

The authors analyzed the data following the methodology as described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Charmaz et al. (2014). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. After each interview, the anonymized transcription was coded by highlighting relevant incidents in chunks of the text. An incident was marked as appropriate when it contained information on experienced humanness in organizations and/or the role of leadership for experienced humanness. Each relevant incident was assigned a unique number and was then copied into a separate coding file. Each interview led to around 60–80 relevant incidents. Co-authors coded several transcribed interviews. This process resulted in two transcribed interviews coded by three authors and an additional four transcribed interviews coded by two authors. The results of all these reviews were discussed among the three coding authors. Their combined insights and consensus informed the further analysis. Overlap in coding between the three authors was substantial in that most of the relevant incidents were coded by all authors.

From the eighth interview, only incidents with new unique information were added to the coding file to keep the coding file clear and organized. The incidents were compared throughout the research process, similar incidents were clustered, and each cluster of incidents was then given a code. The codes were then compared and led to higher-level abstract categories, each containing several codes. This process followed one of the foundations of grounded theory methodology, i.e., the constant comparison of codes. This led to three main higher-level categories with underlying codes. In the last three interviews, the coding process was reversed: highlighted incidents were compared to the codes, and the relevant code was registered next to each incident to check if all incidents were related to a code and to check for saturation.

As all the relevant incidents in the last three interviews associated with existing code, saturation was attained. The findings were then analyzed using constant comparison again and asserted that the three previously discerned overarching categories were robust. It could be concluded that together they comprise the definition of experienced humanness from the perspective of employees, with eight underlying leadership behaviours that contribute to this experienced humanness, with each having specific distinct aspects.

Two types of memos were written from the start of the project, i.e., one focusing on the research process and another on the content of the findings, such as codes, categories, and their relations. As mentioned, no new information arose from the data after eleven interviews, which pointed to saturation. However, following theoretical sampling, as discussed before, the authors checked for (self-selection) bias by selecting two more participants that met the eligibility criteria. The findings from these interviews confirmed the earlier findings, which led the authors to conclude that saturation was attained.

In the final phase of the research, the existing literature for information related to the concepts that emerged from the findings was examined. The focus was to determine whether the definition of experienced humanness and the corresponding leadership behaviors that resulted from the analyses of the interviews were distinctive from other concepts forwarded in the literature. Based on the following three steps, the concepts from the literature were selected to which findings were contrasted. First, the authors looked at codes in the data that suggested relations with other known concepts from the literature. Second, some concepts emerged in discussions between the co-authors about the findings. Third, the authors investigated earlier studies on positive leadership about dehumanization (Arriagada et al., 2021; Moriano et al., 2021; Sainz et al., 2021; Stinghamber et al., 2021).

In total, nine concepts were selected and reviewed for possible overlap in leadership behaviors, i.e., Leader-Member-Exchange (LMX), psychological safety, psychological safety climate, organizational justice, Organizational Citizen Behavior (OCB), person-environment fit, organizational humanization, security-providing leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. Subsequently, each concept was checked in the literature and compared to the categories and underlying codes of the definition of humanness as saturated from the data. For each of these nine concepts, similarities and differences with the definition of humanness and accompanying leadership behaviors that emerged from the interviews in the study are reported in the results.

RESULTS

From the interviews, three overarching categories of experienced humanness and eight contributing leadership behaviors were identified, as presented in Table 2. Each of the higher-order categories relates to the experience of employees, whereas the leadership behaviors concern the supervisor’s behavior that, as observed by the participants, contributes to the experience of humanness.
Table 2. Experienced Humanness in Relation to Leadership Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-order category of experienced humanness</th>
<th>Contributing leadership behaviors</th>
<th>Aspects of the leadership behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| A. Bounded space                              | 1. Giving the space to be fully human | -Giving the freedom to show who you are, share experienced emotions and express individual preferences  
-Giving opportunity for sharing personal concerns or vulnerabilities, or for fulfilling obligations in the social network of employees  
-Modeling behavior of how to treat people as humans (and not as robots) |
|                                               | 2. Giving opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment | -Supporting a fit between knowledge, skills, and talents to the actual tasks: what you do  
-Giving the freedom to organize how you do the tasks at hand  
-Valuing input and exchanging feedback |
|                                               | 3. Setting and upholding clear boundaries | -Setting clear expectations  
-Promoting an open conversation with team members on boundaries  
-Modeling enforcement of the mutually set boundaries |
| B. Attentive care                              | 1. Dedicating time to employees and expressing sincere interest | -Carving out time to deliberate together, share, listen and ask questions  
-Giving the opportunity and time to share a personal perspective, even if there is difference of opinion  
-Being interested in the employee as human, in a broader sense than just on a superficial and professional level |
|                                               | 2. Showing caring responsibility | -Being supportive and available when in times of struggle or in need  
-Backing up employees in relation to judgments or requests within the larger organization  
-Seeing potential in an employee and giving chances or nudges in the right direction  
-Taking action when the (social) well-being of an employee is at risk |
|                                               | 3. Communicating decisions transparently and empathetically | -Communicating decisions honesty and transparently  
-Listening to employees when they receive the decision and helping them cope with the associated emotions |
| C. Human connection                           | 1. Appropriate self-disclosing | -Sharing vulnerabilities, emotions, and struggles  
-Sharing with the intention of making the connection, not to ease one’s own struggles |
|                                               | 2. Fostering human connection within a team | -Creating a supportive atmosphere in a team  
-Modeling using the created conditions and framework for connection within the team |

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the analysis of the interview results

In the following, the authors will elaborate on the overarching categories and the contributing behaviors.

First Category: Bounded Space

Regarding how participants experienced humanness in organizations, the first overarching category the authors found in the interviews was (A) “Bounded space”. All participants shared that space is essential for being fully human and feeling at ease at work. Participants reported that they feel at ease when their supervisors fully accept them for who they are as individual (A1: giving the space to be fully human), when their supervisors trust them and challenge them to develop personal talents (A2: providing an opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment) and when there is clarity around what is accepted behavior, and which conduct is not permitted (A3: setting and upholding clear boundaries). In the following section the authors will elaborate on these three leadership behaviors.
Giving the Space to Be Fully Human

The authors named the first leadership behavior: “Giving the space to be fully human”, pointing to seeing and valuing others as a whole human being. Participants shared three different aspects of this leadership behavior. First, participants experience feeling seen when they are given the freedom to show who they are, to share the emotions they experience, and to express their individual preferences.

Rachel: Humanness to me is that we are seen as human beings and not just as a number coming to do the work.

Participants feel that they are being seen and valued when this openness to the human element reveals itself in how people are (implicitly or explicitly) treated, for example, by how the workplace is designed. Moreover, it shows itself in the extent to which working methods suit human needs and how neurodiversity or physical disabilities are accommodated.

Participants strongly believed that when these human aspects are considered, it contributes to the results people can achieve at work.

Karen: Just taking into account that we need oxygen, you know, basic stuff, like a good temperature, like, I worked in really filthy places, where I needed to express milk for my child. Or worked in a basement, without good lighting, no windows that can be opened, no oxygen, I mean, how can you expect to work productively as a human being.

John: I feel that the fact that I am known to have a “label” [Attention Deficit Disorder, ADD], did actually impact my career opportunities. (...) It is still complicated at the office, if you use your headphone out of self-care, to only listen to your own “buzz”, people make jokes or giggle about it. People find the peculiar uncomfortable.

The feeling of being valued as a full human being is supported by supervisors paying attention to facilities and working environment.

Mary-Ann: Workplace facilities, like an adjustable desk, or a water bottle or, like, all the facilities here are really good. That makes you feel like they value their employees.

A second way in which participants mentioned feeling seen and valued was when their supervisor gives an opportunity to share personal concerns or vulnerabilities or for obligations one has in their social network, for example, as a parent or an informal caregiver.

Karen: (...) when they (...) also are looking to the person that you are outside of work. When you are caring for others, that they understand that you have kids, or parents who are sick. Thus, taking into account the full life of a person. That is humanness to me (...) that we also take into account the whole thing.

Supervisors make their employees feel like they can share their full personal concerns, vulnerabilities and obligations, by showing interest and creating opportunities for employees to fulfill their social obligations.

Evan: I have this colleague, and his wife has a chronic illness. And our supervisor just every now and then checks in with him and asks how he is doing and if he needs anything.

All participants expressed their need to be seen as human and not be forced to compartmentalize experiences, preferences, emotions, and obligations when they come to work. Not being treated as a robot but as a human being with feelings, thoughts, and a social network contributes to how comfortable people feel at work. The third aspect that participants shared regarding feeling the space to be fully human is the modeling of this behavior by the supervisor.

Although giving space to be fully human relates to both supervisor and colleagues, the supervisor’s role is seen as exemplary and a driving force for the whole team. In other words, by being a role model, i.e., exhibiting behavior that supports this viewpoint, the supervisor encourages similar attitudes and behavior within the team.

Sophie: With that exemplary behavior in terms of humanness he can stimulate this behavior in the team. Giving Opportunity to Grow and Develop in a Challenging and Supportive Environment

The authors named the second leadership behavior that contributes to the first overarching category (A) “Bounded space”: “giving an opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment” (A2). From the interviews, it became clear that humanness includes being challenged and encouraged to live
up to one’s full potential in a supportive environment. Participants mentioned two relevant aspects that elaborated on this leadership behavior.

The first aspect is centered on the tasks, i.e., what people are assigned to do. Many participants emphasized the importance of the fit between their knowledge, skills, and talents and their actual tasks. In addition, they stressed how humanness to them means that their supervisors allow them to grow personally and professionally, by taking on new responsibilities, and that making mistakes does not lead to negative consequences for them.

\[\text{Sophie: That I am asked to do things that I feel skilled for, where my talents are, that makes one happier. If I need to do things that I am not good at, that I do not believe in and do not get any energy from, then, no (…) the fact that I have something to offer and that this is acknowledged. That feels like they take me seriously.}\]

\[\text{Mary-Ann: (…) I was allowed to learn, and in the meantime, I felt really valued (…) and I have never ever not felt valued or that I was not supposed to be there, or that there was an attitude of: you are just a newbie, but always was treated with a lot of respect.}\]

Supervisors contribute to this experience by giving employees new and challenging tasks and by allowing employees to make their own mistakes.

\[\text{Myra: They know that making mistakes is part of work (...), that there are no direct repercussions with making mistakes.}\]

\[\text{Jake: He gave me the space to make my own mistakes and learn from them.}\]

The second aspect of allowing growth and development is the freedom people are given in organizing the work, i.e., how they may do their jobs. Participants explained how having a certain degree of autonomy and the experience of being trusted by your supervisor made them feel able to prioritize and organize the tasks that they are responsible for.

\[\text{Evan: They both gave me the freedom to use my own processes of coordinating, without being forced to use a specific prescribed way of project management.}\]

A third important aspect of this leadership behavior appears to be that employees are asked for input to be taken seriously. Moreover, giving and receiving constructive feedback respectfully was forwarded as necessary, for example, when being encouraged to learn on the job.

\[\text{Myra: To be able to do the work that I love. To have freedom and autonomy to make my own choices. Being allowed to make mistakes and have constructive feedback conversations (...)}\] and to be taken seriously.

Supervisors contribute to the feeling of autonomy and trust by valuing the input and expertise of their employees.

\[\text{John: He took the time for his people, and he gave his team space to develop their ideas that led to processes and collaboration to improve and work more smoothly.}\]

From the interviews it became clear that this space to develop individual talents is seen as a responsibility for the employees themselves, but that at the same time it needs encouragement, initiative, and support from the supervisor.

\[\text{Setting and Upholding Clear Boundaries}\]

The third and last leadership behavior contributing to the overarching category (A) “Bounded space” is “setting and upholding clear boundaries” (A3). Participants spoke of the necessity of having boundaries in the given space, which creates a sense of certainty and clarity about the expectations. Three important aspects emerged. The first was the mere existence of clear boundaries and expectations known to all employees.

\[\text{Julia: A boundary is also something you need to feel safe, (…) when it is clear to me as to what he expects from me, that feels safer.}\]

\[\text{Karen: [When things are] Unclear feels very stressful to me because you do not know what to expect.}\]

The second aspect focuses on how the boundaries are agreed upon. Some participants elaborated on how these boundaries are dependent on agreement and an open conversation between team members in a
respectful manner, initiated or encouraged by the supervisor. These boundaries can relate to work agreements, to how to deal with substantive differences of opinion, to (un)accepted manners between team members or to ways of working and communicating amongst each other.

Jake: Having a conversation with each other about this, is part of an open culture. (...) It is okay to be outspoken because it is not like we are made of soap or sugar, as long as we respect each other. People will only have this open conversation when they feel at home and respected and will not be punished when they set a boundary. (...). I think the supervisor has the role of initiator and a sort of intermediary in these conversations, sort of process facilitator and also maybe sometimes the person who makes the decision.

The third aspect that came from the interviews is the enforcement of the boundaries. Some participants imparted that the role of the supervisor is to see to it that the boundaries are not violated, and to encourage team members to hold each other accountable for respecting the (preferably self-set) rules of conduct within the team. This, in turn, adds to the feelings of safety.

Sophie: I would like to trust that if somebody thinks I cross a line, that the other one would share that, or when I do something that someone else does not approve of. That gives me a huge feeling of safety.

From the interviews it emerged that the behavior of supervisors that contributes to the clarity of boundaries is twofold. Firstly, the supervisor can make sure that the boundaries are clear, either by setting the boundaries themselves or by facilitating a group process for boundary setting. Secondly, the supervisor can make sure that the set boundaries are followed and that if the boundaries are crossed, appropriate action is taken.

Olivia: That they held an open conversation about how we each use our leisure time and work/life balance and how we each respect our boundaries.

Jake: The minute that the boundary was crossed, he was there and stood firm by saying: this is not okay, we will not do this from now on. And people respected him for it, because you knew: oh, right, there are boundaries that cannot be crossed.

The three topics of leadership behavior that contribute to the first category of experienced humanness: (A) bounded space stress the importance of working space with clear norms to make it a safe and secure environment. Only then can one be and become whomever one truly is at work. Such a work setting also makes it possible for employees to thrive and develop themselves.

Second Category: Attentive Care

The second category of experienced humanness from the interviews is (B) “Attentive Care”. This category points to the employees’ experience that there is sincere attention for them from their supervisors, by their supervisors being present and available and taking deliberate action when necessary. This attentive, caring behavior of the supervisor also relates to the process of decision-making and communicating these decisions to the employees involved. For this second category of experienced humanness, the authors found three contributing leadership behaviors.

Dedicating Time to Employees and Expressing Sincere Interest

The authors named the first leadership behavior contributing to this category: (B1) “dedicating time to employees and expressing sincere interest”. All participants reported experiences of how supervisors gave sincere attention, manifesting themselves in taking time, being available and present, giving personal attention, genuinely listening, and being truly interested in their employees. Participants revealed three aspects in which their supervisors can show this sincere interest. The first is supervisor behavior that is about carving out time to deliberate together and to share, listen, or ask questions.

John: Some of them just talk to you for them to tick the box. But this one really took the time. When a conversation can run out of time, then you feel, like, ah, you actually take the time for it.

Jake: I think it is really important to be social. I mean: really nice that you ask how I am doing. Or is that just because you need me to do something?

One of the participants added that it is acceptable if occasionally this time is not available, as long as the supervisor mentions this with awareness and proposes a different time and place to be in contact.
Evan: Of course, I get that sometimes it is not a good time, and although that can be hard for a minute, it is okay. As long as he then says, it won’t work today, but you will be the first tomorrow.

The second aspect of showing interest is mentioned by some participants who showed the importance of being given the opportunity and time to add nuances to an opinion, or to be able to share their perspective, even if there is a difference of opinion.

Julia: That I was not given the opportunity to defend myself, that hurt me (...). She did not make the time, but literally pushed me away.
Evan: To be able to share my full story, without the other one immediately joining in with tips and solutions.

The third aspect of this leadership behavior is being interested in more than just the superficial or professional level. Many participants emphasized the importance of the opportunity to mutually share what is going on in their lives out of genuine interest, which makes them feel connected. Some participants point out that supervisors sometimes need to have the courage to go a step further than the superficial questions and take the time to get to know someone, which came from the interviews as the third way that a supervisor can show genuine interest.

John: For him to ask me how it really feels to have ADD and working in this organization, that would be an interesting question.

All participants talked about the importance of making eye contact, including literally. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of the social skill of tuning in, picking up signals of how the other person likes to be in contact, and responding accordingly. Taking the time is a crucial part of paying attention, and, according to the participants, supervisors need to prioritize the conversation with their employees, even if there is not a direct work-related need to do so.

**Showing Caring Responsibility**

The second behavior contributing to the overarching category (B), “attentive care” is named: “showing caring responsibility” (B2). Participants conveyed in the interviews that they expect their supervisors to take concrete action when necessary to provide for what their employees need to perform their jobs. The authors identified four different aspects within this caring responsibility. The first aspect is the general offer to be available when employees experience times of need or struggle.

Kate: She was a very helpful support to me, you know, I knew that I could always call her and share and that she would be available.

The second aspect is when individual employees or teams need the support of their supervisors to back them about other requests or judgments in the organization. Some participants illustrated this by emphasizing that leaders should be willing to stick their neck out for an employee, to form a buffer to higher organizational requests and/or defend the individual or the team given others in the organization.

Marc: In our organization he supports his team all the way through. With unconditional trust. (...).

Evan: Well, in board meetings, they were used to talk about people behind their back and we all knew that, but he would never ever let that happen to us. He thought that his team was his and others should not interfere.

The third aspect that requires caring responsibility from the supervisor relates to the development of the employees. One participant explained that taking action for them meant that a leader sees potential and puts an employee on the right path, giving them a chance or a nudge in the right direction.

John: I once had this leader who really saw me, and he asked me to participate in a think-tank for a week and I considered this an act of really seeing somebody and being valued. (...) He could have seen three thousand other people and he saw me and how this could be something for me.

The fourth and last aspect in which participants reported they found the supervisor’s support essential is when work takes a toll on the employee’s well-being. Several participants shared accounts of supervisors who felt responsible for the employees’ social well-being and took action accordingly whenever necessary.
and possible. These actions resulted in the feeling that someone is taking care of the employee, putting them at ease, and providing good working conditions, expressed by even quite ordinary behaviors, such as getting them a cup of coffee when they were busy at work or working overtime.

**Myra:** Well, he arranged for the team members that needed to work late at night, that they could stay the night in a hotel, or that they could take the taxi to go home. He just made sure that the work could be done a bit easier. (...) And when there were deadlines, he would assist to see if other people could jump in to help.

These actions also include organizing extra resources if people are given an assignment, to ensure that they actually have the availability within their contract, to carry out the assignment, as one of the participants explained:

**Evan:** People are hired to do a certain job. And they have, say 36 hours to do that. And then, because they have some talents, they are asked to do all sorts of projects, but these are added to that other work and need to be done in the same 36 hours. Of course, this will not work. And if you only notice this when people fall down, I would say you are beyond humanness. So just make sure that people get the hours to do what they are asked to do.

Overall, the participants made it clear that words need to be put into action, to hold value. If one says they care about their people, then acting accordingly is expected, otherwise a human way of treating does not feel very genuine.

**Marc:** On the one hand I felt the humanness and the space to talk to him about things that I thought needed to change. And then he said: “Yes, thank you, I agree, and I will change it”, but he never did. That bothered me. (...) As if it was just a manner of behaving, but not really sincere.

**Communicating Decisions Transparently and Empathetically**

The third and final leadership behavior contributing to category (B), “attentive care”, involves a mindful decision-making process, named “communicating decisions transparently and empathetically” (B3). Many participants reported supervisors making difficult decisions with negative consequences for some or all team members. Two aspects seem to be of specific importance. The first aspect is that the decision is communicated honestly and transparently. Participants share their understanding that things will not always go their way and that not everything is possible, comprehending the fact that the need for decision-making sometimes may exceed the effort to satisfy everyone involved.

**Sophie:** To rip off the band-aid, so to say, open and honest. And then leave some space to disagree or to just be bummed about it.

The second aspect involves how the supervisors follow up on the tough decisions, which, according to the participants, is also crucial in whether such a decision is still regarded as human. This human way of follow-up includes supervisors taking the time to communicate the decision, sharing honestly and transparently how they balanced different information and paying attention to how the employee receives the decision. In all of this, listening and respecting the fact that the decision might trigger questions or emotions in the other person is essential.

**Olivia:** She was available to me, I shared with her that it bothered me a lot and she said: “I cannot take this away from you, but I will be available to listen and support and maybe give some advice”.

**Jake:** If you take a decision that is tricky for a group, the minute that you take the time, and the space to explain it: what, where, how, and the motivations that led to the decision, and being transparent about it, then this will be much easier to swallow for people, then when only hearing the decision.

And the vulnerability, if you share your thoughts and the struggles that you have experienced (...) that will lead to understanding and for them to conclude: “I do not like it, but I get it”.
The supervisor should be able to hear and address these questions and emotions, without subsequently nullifying the decision. Part of the follow-up process is also to examine what it takes for the employee to move forward after the decision, especially when they had negative consequences for the employee.

**Third Category: Human Connection**

The third and final category of experienced humanness that emerged from the interviews is the experience of feeling connected: (C) “human connection”. Participants disclosed examples of how the leader creates and encourages connection. There are two leadership behaviors that will be elaborated on in the following.

**Appropriate Self-disclosure**

The first behavior within the higher order category of (C) “human connection” is named “appropriate self-disclosure” (C1). Two aspects of this leadership behavior were identified. The first is about sharing openly. Many participants emphasized the importance of some reciprocity in the relation with their supervisor that is experienced when the supervisor’s own vulnerabilities, emotions, struggles, or mistakes are imparted.

Karen: Well, she just said: “I don’t know, I have doubts around this”.
She asked questions and was very open, on substantive things as well (…) and she showed her vulnerability.

Participants said that this reciprocity leads to seeing the supervisor as a person as well, i.e., as more than just a person with a certain role or function. This openness creates a sense of mutual humanness that is interpreted by many participants as an invitation to share what is on one’s own mind.

Olivia: If your supervisor never shares anything personal, I would also feel that I do not have room for that.

Moreover, participants conveyed that the disclosure of supervisors’ worries or thoughts normalizes the employee's experiences and creates recognition and connection.

Jake: For me personally, I value knowing that my supervisor too has, uhm, certain worries or fears, so that I can identify with him, and feel the connection, like, he is also a human being.

Jill: That he shared his humanness (...) I think it helped me (...) in terms that it normalized things.

The disclosure of supervisors also involves sharing struggles or emotions related to difficult decisions. Many participants disclosed that they value seeing that a supervisor was affected by the emotional cost for employees in case of difficult decisions. The second aspect of this leadership behavior, however, is that there is a thin line when it comes to self-disclosure: many participants explained that they do want to see that their supervisor is a human being and not a robot, but they are not interested in the ins-and-outs of the emotional toll for the supervisor.

Mary-Ann: I want to see that the other person does not like the consequences that the decision has for me, but otherwise, at that moment (...) I am not interested in the person saying that he has not slept for three nights.

The intention of the disclosure seems to be important here: if the supervisor’s disclosure intends to have employees feel sorry for them or ease their hard work, it is not appreciated. But when the supervisor talks about their feelings to share their understanding of the emotions that might be going on, then participants do value the disclosure, and it adds to the connection.

**Fostering Human Connection Within the Team**

The second and last leadership behavior within the overarching category of (C) “human connection” is named: “fostering human connection within a team” (C2). Many participants mentioned the importance of connection within a team, between the individual team members, and the role that the supervisor plays in this regard, by creating a supportive atmosphere in which connection can grow.

Mary-Ann: I believe it to be important to organize things that are not specifically related to work. That could include a teambuilding or an inspiration session or a training in a different environment. (...) Not to be friends or something, but that you do stuff together, in order to foster mutual relations. (…)
And if you have a supervisor who never joins, nor has the time or takes no initiative, that makes you think like: never mind, my supervisor doesn’t care, I will skip it. (…)

So yes, I believe that a supervisor plays an important role, and he will then address it as part of the conversations that he has with his people.

Participants shared examples of how this atmosphere of connection in teams and mutual contact between team members is encouraged, from conversations at work meetings, in-app groups, team get-togethers, or social outings outside of work to deepen the relations between team members.

Supervisors do not necessarily need to organize these meetings themselves, but many participants found it important that supervisors stimulate and attend the meetings to show how social interaction within the team is highly valued.

Marc: I would not say that he needs to be the “super-humanness-provider”, but he is best in the position to create a breeding ground for humanness to foster, between the others.

The first aspect of this leadership behavior focuses on the supervisor creating the conditions and framework within which the interaction in the team takes place and has the impact on setting the atmosphere, by choosing to emphasize the team performance instead of focusing on mutual competition between team members.

Olivia: Among each other a supervisor can emphasize team performance, like: we are all doing this together, or he can just let people compete, like: who performs best?

That will give a whole other dynamic (…) and the “we” in a team feels more like humanness.

The second aspect within this leadership behavior is the role that the supervisor has in fostering this atmosphere for connection, i.e., their exemplary behavior as a role model, which was also emphasized as one of the aspects of leadership behavior (A1): giving the space to be fully human, where participants talked about the experience of treating each other as fully human beings. In both aspects, the supervisor can impact their own behavior, how they treat individuals (leadership behavior A1), or how they foster connection between team members (leadership behavior C2).

Summarizing the interview findings, experienced humanness in organizations was defined as employees’ feelings when they experience bounded space, attentive care, and human connection. The leadership behaviors that contribute to experienced humanness are operationalized in eight discerned behaviors, i.e., (1) giving the space to be fully human, (2) giving an opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment, (3) setting and upholding clear boundaries, (4) dedicating time and expressing sincere interest, (5) showing caring responsibility, (6) communicating decisions transparently and empathetically, (7) appropriate self-disclosing, and (8) fostering human connection within a team.

Overlap with Other Concepts

As far as the authors know, this study was the first to provide a definition of experienced humanness in organizations from the perspective of employees, based on an inductive approach. To examine whether this definition is distinctive from other concepts, the findings were contrasted to nine concepts from the scientific literature on leadership behavior, i.e., Leader-Member-Exchange (LMX), psychological safety, psychological safety climate, organizational justice, Organizational Citizen Behavior (OCB), person-environment fit, organizational humanization, security-providing leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership.

This is in line with the grounded theory methodology, in which literature study is postponed until the final phase, to enable the researcher to keep an open mind during the data gathering as described in the method section (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

The authors did not find overlap between findings on the definition of experienced humanness and/or the contributing leadership behavior with five of the concepts, i.e., Leader-Member-Exchange (LMX), psychological safety, psychological safety climate, organizational justice, Organizational Citizen Behavior (OCB), person-environment fit.

The findings did show potential overlap with four other concepts, i.e., organizational humanization, security-providing leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. Below, these concepts are described and contrasted to the definition of experienced humanness in relation to leadership.

The authors have summarized the related concepts in Table 3.
Table 3. Possible Overlap between Experienced Humanness in Organizations and Other Concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-order category</th>
<th>Contributing leadership behavior</th>
<th>Possible overlap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Bounded space</td>
<td>1. Giving the space to be fully human</td>
<td>Organizational humanization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Giving opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment</td>
<td>Transformational leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Setting and upholding clear boundaries</td>
<td>Security-providing leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Attentive care</td>
<td>1. Dedicating time to employees and expressing sincere interest</td>
<td>Organizational humanization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Showing caring responsibility</td>
<td>Authentic leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Communicating decisions transparently and empathetically</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Human connection</td>
<td>1. Appropriate self-disclosing</td>
<td>Authentic leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Fostering human connection within a team</td>
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Source: Compiled by the authors based on the analysis of the interview results and literature analysis

Organizational Humanization

First, the authors contrasted the findings to the definition that Bell and Khoury (2011) gave of organizational humanization, i.e.: “the experience of having one’s experiences, desires, and feelings recognized by the organization and the opportunity for personal agency and self-actualization through creative and instrumental participation in organizational processes” (p. 4). The authors suggest that the first element of the aforementioned definition, i.e., the experience of having one’s experiences, desires, and feelings recognized, aligns with the first overarching category: bounded space (A), and more specifically to leadership behavior A1: giving the space to be fully human. Furthermore, when supervisors take dedicated time for employees, expressing sincere interest as described in leadership behavior B1, related to overarching category B, i.e., attentive care, participants report that they experience that their feelings are recognized as well.

The second part of Bell’s definition, i.e., the opportunity for personal agency, and the third part, i.e., self-actualization through creative and instrumental participation in organizational processes, both align with some elements of leadership behavior A2 from the findings, i.e., “Giving opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment”, respectively the space to perform tasks that fit the personal preferences and talents, and the need for autonomy and the freedom to organize and prioritize the work tasks.

The researchers propose that the definition is different in three respects. First, the attention is focused on the behavior that leaders show that increases a sense of humanness, and the experience that employees report resulting from these behaviors. Thus, the authors’ definition underscores the distinct role that the leader has in the context of humanness at the workplace. Second, the findings from the interviews provide more specificity to the definition that was crafted by Bell and Khoury (2011) in terms of how leaders should align their behavior with their words and intentions (leadership behavior B2), as well as how they should behave in the process of decision-making, particularly when the decisions made ask for specific care and attention (leadership behavior B3). Third, findings add several distinct elements to the definition of Bell and Khoury (2011), i.e., the need for clear boundaries (leadership behavior A3) and the overarching third category of human connection (C) with the two contributing leadership behaviors appropriate self-disclosing (C1) and fostering human connection within the team (C2). It is concluded that the definition of Bell and Khoury (2011) does not contradict the authors’ definition. However, their definition is more specific to the leadership behavior that contributes to experienced humanness and is more encompassing in that it adds more elements, such as the need for boundaries and the category of connection. Moreover, the definition is explicitly directed at the behavior of supervisors that influences the experiences of employees, whereas the definition of Bell and Khoury (2011) is more centered on the experience of the employees in itself, without specific reference to leadership behavior.

Security-providing Leadership

Moriano et al. (2021) found that security-providing leaders can enhance the psychological safety climate and prevent organizational dehumanization by treating their employees in a personalized way. For security-providing leadership, they refer to Molero et al. (2019), who describe five purposes for a security-
providing figure. The first purpose is creating a secure base, which can be understood as people perceiving their leaders as supporting and encouraging their pursuit of goals in a safe environment. The second purpose is providing a safe haven, which includes that people tend to perceive their leaders to give them a source of protection, comfort calm and reassurance. The third purpose is being available when help is needed, responding to proximity seeking. The fourth purpose is supporting emotional ties, making it possible to feel connected to a person (i.e., supervisor) who cares. The fifth purpose is to prevent distress due to unwanted separations from the leader. Moriano et al. (2021) propose that one leader may fulfill all of these functions.

When contrasting findings to these five purposes of security-providing leadership, it is concluded that there are two overlapping elements. The first overlap is between leadership behavior A2: "allowing growing and developing in a challenging and supportive environment" and the first purpose of security-providing leadership, i.e., creating a secure base that can act as a safe environment to pursue employees’ goals. The second overlap is between leadership behavior B1: “dedicating time to employees and expressing sincere interest”, and the third purpose of security-providing leadership, i.e., being available when help is needed. To better understand the relation between the second purpose of security-providing leadership, i.e., providing a safe haven, and leadership behaviors A3: “setting and upholding clear boundaries”, the data from the interviews are analyzed to see if the quotations from participants show overlap with the operationalizations from the literature on security-providing leadership. Molero (2019) elaborates on the haven as the attachment figure being a source of protection, emphasizing the relationship between supervisor and employee. The data point to the clarity that is created by setting boundaries, not so much to the mutual personal relation, which led to conclude that the two elements are different. It was found that the two overlapping elements of security-providing leadership and data from this study are centered on overlap in specific leadership behaviors, i.e., leadership behavior B1: “dedicating time to employees and expressing sincere interest” and leadership behavior A3: “setting and upholding clear boundaries”, but not in the overarching categories, of experienced humanness, i.e., bounded space, attentive care and human connection. It was suggested that further research is needed to determine the extent to which the five factors within the concept of security-providing leadership and experienced humanness in relation to leadership may correspond or differ.

**Authentic Leadership**

Sainz et al. (2021) found in their study that higher authentic leadership predicted lower organizational dehumanization. Walumbwa et al. (2007) describe four distinct but related components of authentic leadership, i.e., self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing of information, and internalized moral perspective. The first component, self-awareness, relates to understanding oneself and understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses. Although the authors had some indications in the interviews that self-awareness is important for leaders to express genuine interest (behavior B1) and communicate decisions empathetically (behavior B3), the study did not focus on the inner processes of leaders. The second component, relational transparency, is explained as presenting one’s authentic self, sharing information on thoughts and feelings “while trying to minimize displays of inappropriate emotions” (Walumbwa et al., 2007, p. 95). This concept seems to highly overlap with behavior C1: appropriate self-disclosure, as found in the study. The third component, balanced processing, points to gathering and analyzing all relevant data that can be helpful for decision-making, even if these data are not aligned with their personal views. Although this component can be beneficial as a prerequisite for behavior B3 in the study (communicating decisions transparently and empathetically), the findings elaborate more on the process that follows the balanced processing, i.e., the communication to and with the employees affected. The fourth and last component, the internalized moral perspective, is described as a form of self-regulation guided by internal moral standards versus norms in organizations or groups, resulting in behavior based on and aligned with personal values.

There seems to be a link to an element of behavior B2 in findings, namely showing caring responsibility, specifically where participants shared that their leaders would take a stand for them and support them no matter what in larger organizations. All overlap that which is found between the definition and components of authentic leadership, however, is again on the specific leadership behaviors rather than on the overarching categories. To conclude, authentic leadership is likely to be related to the findings, specifically in the overlap with appropriate self-disclosure (C1). Furthermore, it seems plausible that some elements of authentic leadership may be a prerequisite for some elements of humanness in organizations. Further research is needed to investigate these hypotheses.

**Transformational Leadership**

Arnold and Conelly (2013) relate transformational leadership to followers’ and leaders’ psychological well-being. The concept of transformational leadership consists of four components: (1) idealized influence,
i.e., having strong values and putting these into practice, leading to employees seeing them as a role model; (2) inspirational motivation, i.e., communicating a clear and motivating vision, and having high expectations of the followers, (3) intellectual stimulation, i.e., encouraging employees to come up with new and different ideas and creative solutions, and (4) individualized consideration, i.e., supporting and developing all individual employees to their capabilities, by treating them as individuals.

The authors perceive an overlap between the last two concepts and some leadership behaviors that emerged in the findings. Intellectual stimulation seems to overlap with behavior A2: “giving opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment”, i.e., the challenging of employees to develop and learn, and the time that leaders give their employees to learn from errors and setbacks. The other overlap is between individualized consideration and behavior A1: “giving the space to be fully human”. Both concepts speak to the leader making an effort to get to know each employee and understand their needs and capabilities. However, the explanation of the leadership behavior also includes attention to work context, such as physical environment and work processes and how these aspects are tuned to human needs and preferences. These aspects do not seem to be included in the concept of individualized consideration. Further research might clarify the exact connection between the concepts.

In conclusion of this section, the definition of experienced humanness and the contributing leadership behaviors shows some specific overlap with four previously forwarded concepts in the scientific literature, i.e., organizational humanization, security-providing leadership, authentic leadership, and transformational leadership. On the level of the overarching categories of experienced humanness, i.e., (A) bounded space, (B) attentive care and (C) human connection, the authors only found some overlap with the definition of organizational humanization by Bell and Khoury (2011), specifically on the first two categories, i.e., (A) bounded space and (B) attentive care. Furthermore, the findings add two elements to this definition, i.e., the experienced human connection and the need for clear boundaries.

On the level of the contributing leadership behaviors, some overlap was found with three leadership concepts, i.e., security-providing leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. The five leadership behaviors that appear to be linked to one or more of these leadership concepts are (A1) giving the space to be fully human, (A2) providing opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment, (B1) dedicating time to employees and expressing sincere interest, (B2) showing caring responsibility, and (C1) appropriate self-disclosing. There was no overlap between the assessed concepts from the literature with three leadership behaviors in the findings, i.e., (A3) setting and upholding clear boundaries, (B3) communicating decisions transparently and empathetically, and (C2) fostering human connection within a team, which concluded that findings show additional insights to the knowledge on organizational humanness. Thus, the definition of experienced humanness and the description of the contributing leadership behaviors add to the understanding of experienced humanness and leadership behavior that influences this experience.

CONCLUSIONS

In the past decades, the scientific interest in organizational dehumanization has grown. The present study contributes to the body of knowledge in this specific area in three different ways. First, in this study, attention was specifically paid to the positive opposite of organizational dehumanization, i.e., organizational humanness. Second, as far as the authors know, this study is the first one that is directed at the conceptualization of organizational humanness from the perspective of employees. Third, this study is, to the best of knowledge, the first study to relate experienced humanness to leadership behaviors as perceived by employees. The grounded theory approach that the authors followed led to a definition of experienced humanness in organizations from the perspective of employees, i.e., employees feeling bounded space, attentive care and human connection. Moreover, eight leadership behaviors were found that contribute to this experience of humanness as perceived by employees, i.e., (1) giving the space to be fully human, (2) giving opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment, (3) setting and upholding clear boundaries, (4) dedicating time and expressing sincere interest, (5) showing caring responsibility, (6) communicating decisions transparently and empathetically, (7) appropriate self-disclosing, and (8) fostering human connection within a team.

The attention was focused on the followers instead of the leaders and aimed to contribute to the field of leadership research in describing specific leadership behaviors that employees report as contributing to their experiences of humanness. As Alvesson and Einola propose (2019) the emphasis on followers, “seems much more fruitful and relevant than focusing on the presumably (in)authentic leader” (p. 393). The study contributes new insights, both on the crafted definition of experienced humanness as on the operationalization of contributing leadership behaviors, as it will be elaborated on in the following.
In this study, it was found that the definition of experienced humanness and the contributing leadership behaviors show some overlap with four previously forwarded concepts in the scientific literature, i.e., organizational humanization, security-providing leadership, authentic leadership, and transformational leadership. On the level of the overarching categories of experienced humanness, i.e., (A) bounded space, (B) attentive care, and (C) human connection, the authors only found some overlap with the description of organizational humanization by Bell and Khoury (2011), specifically on the first two categories, i.e., (A) bounded space and (B) attentive care. The findings add two elements to this description, i.e., the experienced human connection and the need for clear boundaries. The crafted definition of experienced humanness adds three aspects to the existing scientific literature. First, this is the first time that a definition of experienced humanness was crafted from the experiences of employees. Second, this definition is explicitly directed at the supervisor’s behavior, contrary to other descriptions of organizational humanness (Bell & Khoury, 2011; Haarjärvi & Laari-Salmela 2022; Quintelier et al., 2021; Taghavinia et al., 2021), that are constructed from the researcher’s point of view. Third, the definition includes several important elements that appear to be relevant for experienced humanness, specifically the need for clear boundaries and the emphasis on human connection.

As for the contributing leadership behaviors, the second element of the study, the findings add to the knowledge of which leadership behaviors are crucial to experienced humanness. Of the eight leadership behaviors that were found, three did not overlap with any of the assessed definitions, i.e., setting and upholding clear boundaries (A3), communicating decisions transparently and empathetically (B3) and fostering human connection within a team (C2). Five leadership behaviors showed some overlap with some of the other definitions, i.e., giving the space to be fully human (A1), giving opportunity to grow and develop in a challenging and supportive environment (A2), dedicating time to employees and expressing sincere interest (B1), showing caring responsibility (B2), and appropriate self-disclosing (C1). These findings add new insights to the knowledge of leadership behaviors that contribute to the experienced humanness of employees.

The methodological strengths of this study include the diversity of the sample, the comparative analyses using multiple coders and the process that led to saturation. However, the interpretation of the findings should consider several methodological limitations. First, the findings came from a limited number of interviews. Although saturation throughout the data was found and the definition is grounded in the experiences of the participants, it was suggested to examine this definition in a quantitative study, to test if the definition and operationalization that were crafted hold. Second, although some of the participants were from other backgrounds than Dutch or Flemish, all the participants lived and worked in the Netherlands or Belgium. Many participants have shared in the interviews that, although they emphasize the necessity of humanness in their workplace, they are also aware that they are privileged compared to working conditions in other parts of the world. Moreover, cultural backgrounds might influence the work-related needs of people and the experiences of organizational dehumanization (Nguyen et al., 2021). Therefore, the definition of experienced humanness in relation to leadership should be tested in other cultural contexts to see if the categories and underlying behaviors are supported in other circumstances.

Third, although the definition of experienced organizational humanness was contrasted to some leadership concepts, the selection was necessarily limited to those leadership concepts and theories that seemed most closely related. When it comes to leadership theory, Alvesson (2017) states that “the field is large, divergent and fragmented, making it difficult to make broad generalizations” (p. 1). There are many leadership concepts that were forwarded in the last decades (Alvesson, 2017; Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Day et al., 2014) and the existing body of knowledge is marked by fragmentation and lacks clarity and consensus. Furthermore, popular theories like transformational and authentic leadership and other popular positive leadership theories are under critique due to weak theory building (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), problems with measurement of positive leadership, and the fact that many definitions of positive leadership include outcomes. It was suggested that further research is necessary in various directions. First, it is necessary to verify if the definition of experienced humanness in organizations holds in other cultural contexts. Second, more research might clarify if other leadership concepts relate to the findings of the leadership behavior that contributes to organizational humanness, as found in this study. Third, it would be interesting to clarify which conditions or prerequisites are helpful or necessary for leaders to show the leadership behaviors that contribute to experienced organizational humanness, as found in this study. Fourth, to assess experienced humanness in organizations, it would be desirable to develop measures for both experienced organizational humanness and perceived human leadership behavior based on the findings of this study. Fifth, empirical research is needed to support the finding that this leadership behavior indeed relates to higher levels of experienced humanness in organizations.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations and the still apparent gaps in the knowledge on this topic, the findings of this study contribute to the literature on organizational (de)humanization in two different ways.
First, the concept of experienced humanness in organizations from the perspective of employees was refined, i.e., the experience of feeling bounded space, attentive care, and human connection. Second, it was clarified what leaders can do to enhance experienced humanness by identifying eight leadership behaviors contributing to experienced humanness in organizations. With these outcomes, this study was the first to shed light on experienced humanness in organizations from the perspective of employees. In addition, it provides behavioral insights for leadership practitioners who aim to increase humanness in organizations. Leaders can contribute to the experience of the humanness of their employees by giving them space to be fully human, allowing growth and development, setting and upholding clear boundaries, dedicating time to employees, showing caring responsibility, communicating transparently and empathetically, sharing their own experiences appropriately and fostering human connection within a team. These behaviors will help their employees to experience bounded space, attentive care, and human connection, which in turn will make them feel treated as fully human at work.

Author Contributions


Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Publication Package is available upon request at Leiden University.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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