



# Accountable Selves and Responsibility Within a Global Forum

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## Abstract

This study examines the accountability of the self among sustainability and humanitarian advocates participating in the World Economic Forum. Drawing from Butler's (*Giving an account of oneself*. Fordham University Press, New York, 2005) philosophy, we explore how these individuals narrate their accountability to themselves and others, the contradictions they experience, and how they explain becoming responsible in this context. Our data illustrate the difficulties faced by these individuals in resisting the temptation to condemn themselves for compromising their own values, and/or to condemn others who think and behave differently. Through their humility in relation to their incoherent identities, and their generosity in engaging with others, the participants show their responsibility both to those they advocate for and to other delegates who may have different perspectives. The study illustrates how accountability to and of the self emerges through relations with others, how individuals struggle to resist ethical violence, and how they take up moral responsibility through human interaction.

**Keywords** Accountability · Humanitarianism · Judith Butler · Responsibility · Sustainability · World Economic Forum

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to increase our understanding of the accountability of individuals who are working to improve sustainability and humanitarian agendas in a global context. Despite being worthwhile goals, sustainability and humanitarianism are highly politicised concepts that draw from the multiple perspectives of individuals, corporations and non-profit organisations, nations, and governments. As such, those working in the areas of sustainability and humanitarianism may find themselves holding different viewpoints from others who may not have these agendas at the forefront of their concerns. Our interest is to understand

the experiences of sustainability and humanitarian advocates participating in a global forum, especially when they find themselves in an underrepresented position with others who do not share their perspective or worldview. Working in such a space can be particularly difficult when the matters that are up for debate are potentially world-changing (Willmott, 1996).

We argue that these sustainability and humanitarian advocates can be classed as 'accountable selves', that is, they "hold and enact a sense of being accountable" (Sinclair, 1995, p. 220) to themselves and others for their values, actions, and behaviours. The accountable self is a key unit through which to analyse accountability (Masiero, 2020). In exploring these accountable selves, we draw from Judith Butler's work 'Giving an Account of Oneself', in which she conceptualises the subject as morally accountable (Butler, 2005). Although Butler does not use the term 'accountable self' per se, her understanding is that accountability, or giving an account of oneself, "takes a narrative form, which not only depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions but also draws upon narrative voice and authority, being directed towards an audience with the aim of persuasion" (Butler, 2005, p. 12). In common with other Butlerian scholars in the field of accountability (see, for example, Messner, 2009; De Coster & Zanoni, 2019), we, therefore, utilise the term 'accountable

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self' or 'accountable selves' to discuss the accountability of the sustainability and humanitarian advocates in our study. For Butler, "an account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself" (Butler, 2005, p. 21). The particular context in which this interaction with others takes place is significant because "moral questions not only emerge in the context of social relations, but the form these questions takes changes according to context" (Butler, 2005, p. 3). In other words, individuals try to give an account of themselves, in relation to others, in multiple contexts where they are subjected to social norms.

Butler (2005, p. 40) argues that any "account of myself is partial" and necessarily opaque, caused by the "limits of self-knowledge" (Butler, 2005, p. 19), making it impossible to give a full account of oneself (Loacker & Muhr, 2009). What Butler terms 'ethical violence' occurs when individuals have false expectations of being fully aware of who they are and what they do, causing them to turn on themselves when they act in ways that are less than their ideal. At the same time, they experience other people who hold different beliefs or values as an affront or an attack on their own values. They find it impossible to maintain a coherent sense of self-identity (see Butler, 2005, p. 42). However, Butler (2005, p. 21) argues "that what we often consider to be ethical 'failure' may well have an ethical valence and importance". Acknowledging the unavoidable limits of both my own and others' self-knowledge, Butler suggests, can serve instead as the basis of humility in relation to myself and generosity to others.

We explore the accountability of sustainability and humanitarian advocates within the context of the World Economic Forum (WEF). At the time of this research, the WEF's mission was to provide a space for those "committed to improving the state of the world" through "public-private cooperation" (World Economic Forum, 2018). Recently, their website states that "our activities are shaped by a unique institutional culture founded on the stakeholder theory, which asserts that an organization is accountable to all parts of society" (World Economic Forum, 2021b). In many respects, the WEF is perceived as representing mainstream economics through its inclusion of powerful nations, global corporations, and banking systems (e.g. Elias, 2013; Fougner, 2008; Graz, 2003) that have a particular commitment to market capitalism. Indeed, banking and finance was the largest industry represented at the 2020 Annual Meeting in Davos with around 20% of participants (World Economic Forum, 2020a). The WEF also includes participants who challenge this perspective, such as delegates from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), religious representatives, critical academics, and climate activists. However, these voices remain relatively underrepresented,

with only around 9% of participants being from the civil society sector, for example (World Economic Forum, 2020a). Nonetheless, the WEF contains voices from multiple perspectives and remains a context with political influence and power in global politics and the economy (Graz, 2003), making it attractive to those seeking to drive ethical transformation through change (Lozano, 2001).

This article draws from interviews with 25 participants in the WEF, including senior representatives of organisations from civil society, education, business, and religion. These individuals all have responsibility for addressing issues of sustainability and humanitarianism in their respective contexts. As such, our participants seek to reshape the dominant economic and political agendas of the WEF through their engagement from within, building on the assumption that the WEF has the potential to be a "space of possibility" (Brown et al., 2015, p. 640) for transformational change across global agendas.

Therefore, we seek to understand the accountability of individuals who are working to improve global sustainability and humanitarian agendas in the WEF, and how they participate in such a way that allows them to be accountable for their own sense of ethics. Our research questions are as follows: (1) How do participants narrate their accountability to themselves and others? (2) What contradictions do participants experience? And (3) How do participants explain becoming responsible in this context? Our contribution is to understand the accountability of sustainability and humanitarian advocates in the WEF, an analysis that offers insight into why sustainability and humanitarian agendas are so difficult to address.

The following section sets the theoretical context of accountable selves using Butler's (2005) concept of the morally accountable individual. The research context and methodology are then described before we provide data excerpts that illustrate the experiences of sustainability and humanitarian advocates participating in the WEF. We show the difficulties—the ethical dilemmas, and sense of incoherence—these delegates experience as they seek to fulfil their responsibilities to those whose interests they are at the WEF to represent. The often weak and/or compromised outcomes of their efforts make it constantly challenging to continue to stay open to, and engage with, other WEF delegates whose values and perspectives are typically very different from their own.

## Accountability and Accountable Selves

Accountability occurs when individuals are held to account by others or when individuals hold themselves to account for their own behaviours. When accountability is framed in terms of individuals being held to account by others, it

may encompass a calculative practice between company and stakeholders (Brennan & Solomon, 2008), and/or a call for greater transparency between one party and another within an organisational context (Killian, 2015; Yu, 2020). In these ways, social actors have “the capacity to give an account, explanation, or reason” (Munro, 1996, p. 3) for their actions to others, whether requested or not. Hence, being accountable is to provide a reason to another for one’s behaviour (Messner, 2009); it includes both giving and asking for reasons for conduct (McKernan & McPhail, 2012). This giving of an account is a moral practice, since it is essentially a response to being asked to enact discourses of responsibility to others for one’s behaviour (Yu, 2020).

Accountability may also be framed as self-accountability, or the action of justifying one’s own behaviour to oneself, in “a process internal to the ‘self’ in the surveillance of the ‘me’ by the ‘I’” (Roberts, 1991, p. 358). An individual may hold themselves to account by evaluating their own actions or decisions and comparing them with some internal standard (Gelfand et al., 2004) and/or by their conscientious pursuit of an internalised ideal that can stem from religious or deeply held ethical values (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2019). Self-accountability, therefore, has an epistemic function, influencing decision making in line with one’s broader frameworks of identity and standards, and bearing the weight of those decisions (Rached, 2016; Sinclair, 1995).

In this paper, our concern is how individuals hold themselves to account within the context of complex interrelationships with others. In doing so, we utilise Butler’s (2005) conceptualisation of the self as morally accountable in relation to others. Drawing from Adorno, Butler (2005, p.7) argues that “there is no morality without the ‘I’”, or the self, but this ‘I’ or self “does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks” which relate the individual to others. As the self is relationally constituted, the terms through which we account for ourselves are socially derived, even when an individual is giving an account of their own actions, thoughts, or feelings. Moreover, Butler (2005, p. 12) argues that “narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one’s actions through that means”. In other words, what Butler terms ‘giving an account of oneself’ is the accountable self, giving an account of itself, to itself, in relation to obligations to others about performance, outcomes, and moral positioning.

Butler (2005) argues that the self is not separate from the conditions of its emergence, because an individual account is meaningless without its contextual social relations. A subject must deliberate upon “ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks” (Butler, 2005, p. 7), which entails “a critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning, ... in this sense, ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique” (Butler, 2005, p. 8). Butler (2005, p.

3) also points out that morality and/or ethics lies not just in thought or deliberation, but with performance, the conduct and practice of ‘doing’; in other words, through the act of engagement with others. It is through interaction with others that people become reflexive subjects, asserting their own identity in an ongoing process of becoming human (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009).

## Against Ethical Violence and for Becoming Responsible

Although individuals may feel that they ought to be able to give an account of themselves, this is a “difficult, if not impossible, norm to satisfy” (Butler, 2005, p. 42), because the self can never be fully coherent and cannot maintain self-identity at all times. The accountable self is an opaque, exposed, and mediated self that is inherently limited in its ability to give an account of itself. This is illustrative not of a weak sense of responsibility but of a recognition of incompleteness (Messner, 2009). The normative demand for a coherent self is, thus, impossible to satisfy and failing to acknowledge this may cause ethical violence to the accountable self.

Given that the self is an opaque self, individuals can never fully know how their ethical position has been arrived at, or how and why they respond to other individuals and situations. In these circumstances, ethical violence can occur towards ourselves by condemning the self for failing to live up to our stated ideals or values, and towards others by condemning them for what we perceive as their unethical conduct. In developing her theory of ethical violence, Butler draws from Kafka’s story, *The Judgement*, in which Georg’s father condemns him to death by drowning, causing Georg to rush from the room and commit suicide as a “gift of love” (Butler, 2005, p. 48). Huber and Munro (2014, p. 259) undertake a further detailed analysis of Kafka’s work, defining ethical violence as “acts of condemnation and cruelty purportedly in the name of ethics”. However, Butler (2005, p. 49) accepts that “condemnation does seek, in the extreme, to annihilate the other” and uses Kafka’s story to suggest that “for judgement to inform the self-reflective deliberations of a subject who stands a chance of acting differently in the future, it must work in the service of sustaining and promoting life” (Butler, 2005, p. 49). She goes on to argue that “condemnation is very often an act that not only ‘gives up on’ the one condemned but seeks to inflict a violence upon the condemned in the name of ‘ethics’” (Butler, 2005, p. 46).

In Butler’s terms, ethical violence is not literal, physical violence but has three possible dimensions: (1) being subject to a set of norms or accountabilities which in some way violates one’s own sense of what is right; (2) an internal attack on the self-arising from the perception of oneself as

less than ideal; or (3) being attacked by others for not conforming to their standards or views. These dimensions may occur together or be identified individually, depending on the context or the scene of address.

Butler's argument is *against* ethical violence, suggesting that one should resist the temptation to condemn oneself and others, not 'give up' on the 'condemned'. The self may be unavoidably opaque but to experience the "very limits of knowing" (Butler, 2005, p. 42) can support a position of humility towards oneself and generosity to others. This serves to counter ethical violence, as "I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves" (Butler, 2005, p. 42).

It is through engaging with others and being open to the address of others that ultimately Butler argues individuals become responsible: "It is on the basis of this susceptibility over which we have no choice that we become responsible for others" (Butler, 2005, p. 88) and "responsibility emerges as a consequence of being subject to the unwilling address of the other" (Butler, 2005, p. 85). Individuals become responsible by being willing "to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness...when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human" (Butler, 2005, p. 136). In this way, individuals cannot but become responsible human beings: "Indeed, to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community" (Butler, 2005, p. 83). Having outlined our theoretical approach, we now turn to the research context, the WEF.

## Research Context

Meetings of "world-straddling organizations" (Burawoy, 2010, p. 64) offer a social arena across boundaries of geography and power, through which social actors can interact, engage in debate, and create action on global agendas, such as sustainability and humanitarianism. The WEF was founded in 1971, with a focus on collaboration, co-production, and commitment towards global-scale economic improvement. Through an emphasis on its Annual Meeting at Davos, where the world's leaders meet to debate global issues, the WEF is recognised as being representative of the powerful elites of global capitalism and mainstream economics (Garsten & Sörbom, 2018; Graz, 2003; Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). The WEF has recognised the issues of sustainability, climate change, and inequalities as global risks (World Economic Forum, 2020b), placing 'How to Save the Planet' and 'Fairer Economies' on their Davos 2021

agenda, alongside other issues including health, business, and technology (World Economic Forum, 2021a). However, there are counter-arguments, such as that proposed by Sharma and Soederburg (2020), who argue that the WEF's promotion of global risk management to encourage the role of businesses in sustainable development goals only results in normalising business practices as a development agent, and depoliticises the social and environmental issues tied to this arrangement. Giesler and Veresiu (2014) also argue, through their ethnographic analysis of WEF initiatives, that the responsibility for sustainable consumption is shifted away from businesses to individual consumers. Garsten and Sörbom (2018) further argue that the WEF shapes market agendas within a system of discretionary governance, which has significant power but no formal mandate to implement its positions.

Despite the prominence of the Davos Annual Meeting, WEF activity happens all year round (Fougner, 2008) through other meetings and debates. Within the WEF there are multiple and diverse participants, such as political leaders and public figures, industry partners, faith leaders, and representatives of INGOs as illustrated in Table 1. These individuals have the economic resources to join the WEF as a member and/or are invited to participate because of

**Table 1** Participation at Davos in 2020

Top 10 industries by % of Davos 2020 participants	
Banking & Finance	21%
Public figures	10%
Media & Entertainment	9%
Civil Society	9%
Manufacturing and heavy industries	8%
Information Technology	8%
Energy & Environment	7%
Academia and Think Tank	6%
Food, Beverages & Retail	6%
Health & Life Sciences	5%
Top 10 countries by % of Davos 2020 participants	
USA	25%
United Kingdom	10%
Switzerland	6%
Germany	5%
India	5%
France	4%
Japan	4%
China	3%
Netherlands	3%
Canada	2%

Source World Economic Forum (2020b)

Analysis Authors' own

their stake in business, politics, academia, civil society, and celebrity (Pigman, 2007).

However, whilst all these participants can be considered powerful by nature of their seniority and renown, they do occupy different positions of power relative to one another in the WEF. For example, a country's president may be perceived as more influential than a head of an INGO. As Fougner (2008, pp. 124–125) describes: “There has been much talk about NGOs being excluded for being too critical, and some NGOs have come to see their participation as largely ‘cosmetic’”. Participation is also dominated by representatives from the US (25%) and UK (10%), as shown in Table 1. Furthermore, there is an imbalance of participation by gender, which is supported by the stereotypical figure of the ‘Davos Man’ (Huntington, 2004): a rich, powerful, male member of the global elite. To address this, in 2011, there was a quota set for women attendees at Davos, with the top 100 partner companies expected to bring at least one woman among their five allocated places, or they would lose their fifth place (Elias, 2013). However, the rational economic woman, or ‘Davos Woman’, who emerges is entirely framed through economic competitiveness rather than any gendered structures of socioeconomic inequality within global market capitalism (Elias, 2013). Women still represented less than a quarter of participants (24%) at Davos 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020a).

The WEF is, thus, an ideal context to study how the sustainability and humanitarian advocates interviewed for this research experience participation in the WEF, in relation to how they are accountable to themselves and the others they represent. The remainder of this paper directly examines the participation of these social actors in the WEF, particularly how they narrate their accountability to themselves and others, the contradictions they experience, and how they explain becoming responsible in this context. The next section describes the methodology and methods employed.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

Our interpretive study sought to address the overarching “analytic question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) of how sustainability and humanitarian advocates experience their participation in the WEF. The dataset consisted of 25 individual qualitative interviews with these global social actors, which were conducted between 2013 and 2015. The sample was drawn from the published profile of participants in the WEF during 2013 including: (1) websites listing attendees at the 2013 Annual Meeting (e.g. The Guardian, 2013); (2) websites detailing additional WEF participants (e.g. World Economic Forum, 2013); (3) journal articles, newspaper

articles, web pages, news reports, and television material identifying other potential research participants; and (4) snowballing, that is, suggestions and introductions from existing interviewees to additional research participants not identified through the other methods. Individuals were approached on a purposive basis to include sustainability and humanitarian advocates from the private sector, the public sector, and civil society organisations to gather a range of perspectives, although the sample was not intended to be representative or generalisable. The study received full institutional ethics approval prior to the fieldwork being conducted. Participants are listed in Table 2 with anglicised pseudonyms to provide additional anonymity.

The interviews were largely unstructured to encourage participants to talk about their motivations for participating in the WEF, the perspectives brought to the Forum by different actors, the relationships between these actors, and how they work together. The interviews lasted 50 min on average, resulting in a dataset of 1200 min of audio-recording, which were transcribed verbatim.

**Table 2** Research participants

Anglicised pseudonym	Main job role	Sector
Adam	Senior Vice President	Corporate
Chloe	Chief Executive	Corporate
Chris	Senior Academic	Research and education
Declan	Senior Director	Not for profit
Dexter	Secretary General/Chief Executive	INGO
Dylan	Civil Servant	Public/Government
Frances	Managing Director	Not for profit
George	Senior Academic	Research and education
Jacob	Senior Academic	Research and education
Jason	Senior Advisor	Corporate
Jessica	Academic	Research and education
Juliet	Managing Director	Not for profit
Katherine	Associate Vice President	Not for profit
Kyle	Director	Not for profit
Paul	Senior Academic	Research and education
Preston	Managing Director	Corporate
Riley	Director	Corporate
Sam	Executive Director	Not for profit
Simon	Managing Director	Corporate
Taylor	Chief Executive Officer	INGO
Tom	Chief Executive Officer	Corporate
Tristan	Religious Leader	Religious
Tyler	Chair of Foundation	Not for profit
Victoria	Chief Executive Officer	Not for profit
Wendy	Director	Not for profit



## Approach to Theorising

Our approach to theorising was abductive, through which we sought to “assembl[e] or discover[...], on the basis of an interpretation of collected data, such combinations of features for which there is no appropriate explanation [...] in the store of knowledge that already exists” (Reichertz, 2010, p. 6). In practical terms, abductive theorising involves a systematic combining of theory and data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), an iterative move between the extant literature and the data. This process brings together theory, framework, data, and the specific context (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). It typically begins with a rough theoretical framework, which is subsequently refined through deepening insights from the data (Dubois & Gadde, 2014). This approach enabled us to build on the insights developed in the extant literature on accountability, particularly Butler’s (2005) conceptualisation of giving an account of oneself, when refining the findings. “Abduction is therefore a cerebral process, an intellectual act, a mental leap, that brings together things which one had never associated with one another: A cognitive logic of discovery” (Reichertz, 2010, p. 7). In our study, we brought together the literature on accountability (e.g. Roberts, 1991, 2009), studies reporting on participation in the WEF (e.g. Fougner, 2008; Graz, 2003), our interview data, and Judith Butler’s (2005) philosophy on becoming a responsible subject (e.g. Loacker & Muhr, 2009). A visual representation of our three-step approach to abductive theorising is shown in Fig. 1.

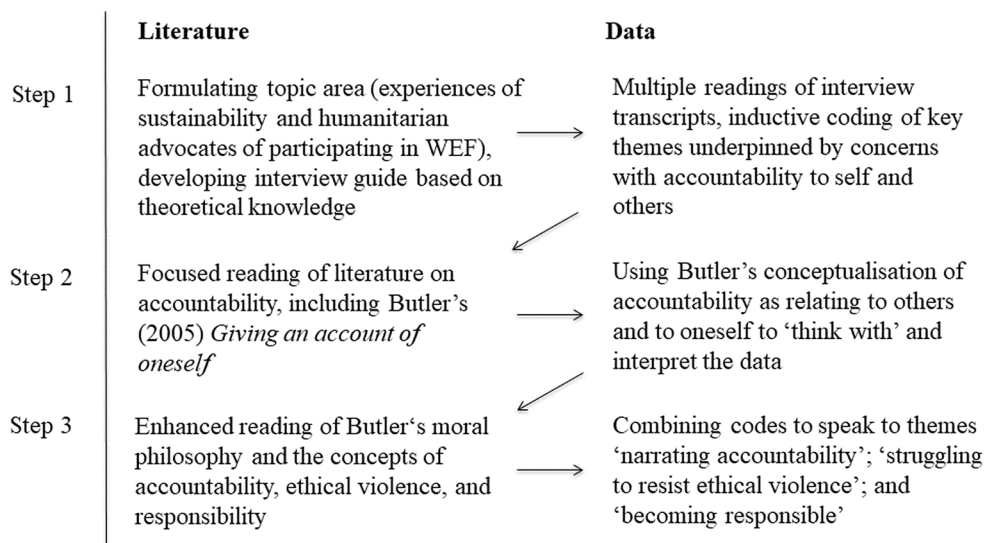
Step 1 was a theoretical interest in how sustainability and humanitarian advocates experience their participation in the WEF. We read relevant studies about participation in the WEF to inform the interview guide and conducted the interviews as described above. The first analytic phase involved familiarisation with the data through multiple, detailed

readings of the interview transcripts, which we coded inductively, “mak[ing] judgments about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780). At the end of this step, we realised that the research participants, in their role as sustainability and humanitarian advocates, were grappling with accountability to themselves and others. They spoke about tension and incongruence between sustainability and humanitarian agendas on the one hand, and business/economic agendas on the other. Further, they noted how their experiences of participating in the WEF led to moral deliberation in relation to their own identities and behaviours, the causes or agendas they were representing, and their interaction with others who did not share their priorities.

In the second step, we read the literature on accountability and self-accountability in detail (e.g. Brennan & Solomon, 2008; Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009; Rached, 2016). In contrast to other scholars, Butler’s work encompasses both accountability to others and accountability of the self. This resonated with the first analytic phase, in that our research participants represented not only themselves, but also other stakeholders. Returning to the data in Step 2, we used Butler’s (2005) notions of giving an account of oneself, ethical violence, and responsibility in order to ‘think with’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017) her conceptualisation of accountability and responsibility in relation to our data. This step resulted in a better understanding of the complex ways in which the research participants accounted to and for themselves in relation to others as part of their participation in the WEF and the subsequent tensions they experienced. This second analytic phase highlighted the moral dimension of their accountable selves as well as challenges to individuals’ self-knowledge and self-identity.

In the third step, we returned to the literature with an enhanced reading of Butler’s (2005) work. A third analytic

**Fig. 1** Approach to abductive theorising



phase followed, in which we categorised the codes identified in Step 2 into three interrelated themes. These themes were then used to formulate the guiding questions for this article and to structure the findings presented below. Our approach to theorising, therefore, did not follow a traditional linear trajectory, but an iterative one that enabled ‘discovery’ (Locke, 2011) of new insights. Before presenting our findings, we will elaborate on the three analytic phases listed in the data column of Fig. 1 by providing more detail on the thematic data analysis process used and the development of our coding framework.

### Data Analysis

Within this abductive approach, we conducted thematic analysis, which is a “foundational method for qualitative analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). This method enables researchers to identify, analyse, and report themes across a dataset that say something important about the phenomenon under investigation. In light of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) claim that thematic analysis can be conducted as part of different analytic approaches, we suggest that it can be applied in an abductive approach. A visual representation of the development of the coding framework is provided in Fig. 2.

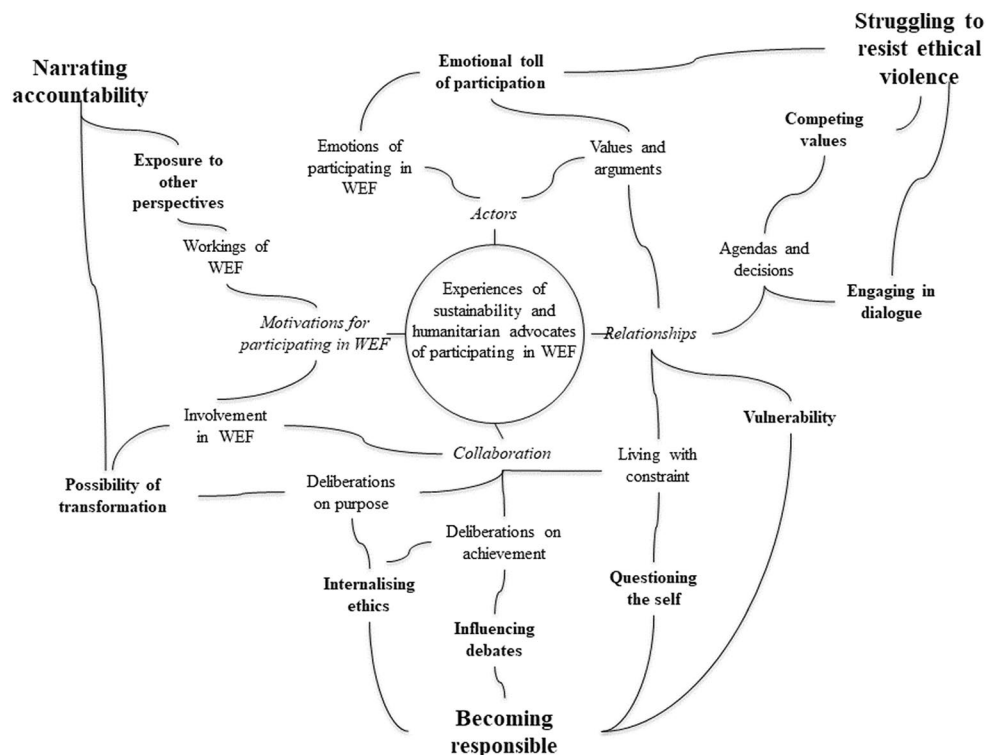
The centre of Fig. 2 depicts our starting point—the analytic question of how sustainability and humanitarian advocates experience their participation in the WEF, from which the interview themes (depicted in italics) follow. When

reading the interview transcripts as part of the first analytic phase, we noticed that our research participants spoke about the workings of the WEF, their own involvement, and the emotions associated with participating. They also spoke about other actors’ perspectives, values, and arguments, and alluded to agendas and decision-making. Moreover, they spoke about how participating in the WEF made them deliberate on the purpose and achievement of their participation as well as the constraints they experience. These themes were coded as part of the first analytic phase (depicted in normal font in Fig. 2).

After exploring the literature on accountability and self-accountability, we applied the insights from Butler’s (2005) philosophy to our second analytic phase. We re-coded the data with a focus on the key themes of accountability of the self, as detailed in the literature review section of this article, refining the codes identified previously. Specifically, we focused on text that related to research participants’ exposure to other perspectives and the possibility of transforming sustainability and humanitarian agendas through participating in the WEF. Themes included the emotional toll of participation, competing values, and engaging in dialogue, as well as internalising ethics, influencing debates, vulnerability, and questioning the self. These codes are depicted in bold font in Fig. 2.

In the third analytic phase, after enhanced re-reading of Butler’s (2005) work, we combined these codes into larger analytic categories emphasising key aspects of Butler’s

Fig. 2 Coding framework



conceptualisation of the accountability of the self. We called them: (1) ‘narrating accountability’ (i.e. exploration of research participants’ accountability to themselves and others); (2) ‘struggling to resist ethical violence’ (i.e. disorientation expressed as tensions and contradictions); and (3) ‘becoming responsible’ (i.e. deliberating on how they may open themselves up to critique and self-questioning).

The data that follow are extracts of the accounts given by our research participants during the interviews. The first section addresses how they narrated accountability in relation to their participation in the WEF. This is followed by an illustration of some of the tensions for participants as accountable selves—including competing values, engaging in dialogue, and the emotional toll of participation—as they experience and struggle to resist ethical violence. The final data section presents materials relating to research participants’ accountable selves as they demonstrate taking up responsibility.

### Narrating Accountability of Participating in the WEF

As sustainability and humanitarian advocates, our research participants ostensibly attend the WEF because they wish to advance their causes and agendas. In doing so, they narrate their sense of accountability as they take part in the WEF, particularly when engaging with other parties who may not share the same priorities. The WEF deliberately brings together people of very different views, persuasions, and interests, but whether this works as an artifice to change minds and behaviours is debatable. For example, Preston’s comments give an indication of his internalised debate regarding the degree of transformation that may be possible through participation in the WEF:

[The WEF is] not particularly open to competing ideologies and governance systems and different ways of organising society...so it definitely operates within the constraints of a set of values and views...so I don’t think you’re going to see transformational change to the system coming through that in the sense of entirely reinventing systems...So I think it depends whether or not, whether you’re looking to create an alternative system or whether or not you are looking to create change within the system.

The challenge he faces is how to remain open to dialogue with others who have different perspectives on ‘the system’ while not betraying his own values, and yet accepting that the outcomes he desires are unlikely.

Similarly, Juliet describes an example of the choices to be made in terms of actions taken within the WEF.

...the thing about [the] WEF is that everyone is trying to be a do-gooder in many ways and so you have

to come with the story that says that you are wanting to improve the world’s economy but also wanting to improve the world, right?

Juliet’s account only hints at some criticality of those at the WEF (‘everyone trying to be a do-gooder’, ‘come with the story’), as if there is a risk of insincere impression management (see also Cho et al., 2018), whereas Jacob makes this appearance of insincerity more explicit:

Davos in particular, reminds me of a sort of religious ritual, so you go there and, and you say all the right things and you put the incense out and so on and so forth, but then you go home and you don’t necessarily behave according to the religious rituals you just attended. But certainly if you didn’t know that and if you weren’t of a sceptical orientation and you come into Davos meetings, for the most part you wouldn’t know that you are with a bunch of hard-nosed capitalists out to screw the world.

In this statement, Jacob strongly implies a perception of hypocrisy amongst mainstream participants at the WEF, who appear to believe in or support the stated causes but fail to act on or actively work against their implementation. This leaves participants, such as Jacob, in a dilemma as to their own level of engagement: whether to critique and risk exclusion or condone and potentially be complicit. Aware of these contradictions within the WEF in relation to sincere transformative change and that his actions or inactions may have consequences for others at ‘home’, he chooses to be ‘there’. He is accountable to others but also has to be accountable to himself. This links directly to Messner’s (2009, p. 920) theorisation, drawn from Butler (2005), of the internal ethical conversation that takes place within accountable selves:

An ethical question can emerge from the relationship between an actor and someone else, and in its most basic form, it takes the form of: ‘How should I act in this particular situation I am situated in?’... ‘Who is directly affected by what I do, here and now? And who is indirectly concerned, somewhere else and/or at some other time?’ In other words, the ethical question relates to the triangular relationship between oneself, particular others (those who are present), and generalised others (those who are absent).

There is pressure from one’s self to decide what is best (McKernan & McPhail, 2012), even when this raises considerable tensions. Kyle comments:

You’ve got all these corporate executives many of whom have made statements about development issues like you know youth unemployment or like inequality and that sort of stuff, but you know they are also part of the system they are criticising and the question it



always begs is what are you going to do to change it?  
That's not something that's ever on their agenda.

The problematisation becomes more evident when Tristan comments: “maybe we need to loathe, we need to be critical but somehow we need to be in there to impact”. ‘Loathe’ is a very strong negative and emotional term, but he counters this with a commitment to ‘impact’ and ‘needing to be there’ to create it. This suggests that the sustainability and humanitarian advocates choose to stay at the WEF both out of a sense of responsibility for those on whose behalf they advocate, and also out of a sense of responsibility to try to inform or influence the corporate delegates while they are there. For Butler, being accountable to the self goes beyond the giving of an account, beyond narration itself, to what she terms ‘exposure’ (Butler, 2005, p. 34); a performative, embodied, active accountability of the self, embedded in a human interaction to take up responsibility. This is implied by Tristan’s use of ‘we need’ and illustrated in the active, performative sense of accountability demonstrated by our participants, where they ‘need to be in there’.

Giving an account of oneself is, therefore, an experience of engaging with one’s own ethical positioning through interaction with others (Butler, 2005). However, Butler (2005, p. 39) points out that there are “several vexations in the effort to give a narrative account of oneself”, offering five reasons for this:

There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) *primary relations*, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my *partial opacity* to myself. Lastly there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the *structure of address* in which it takes place. (Butler, 2005, p. 39); italics original)

Bodily experience, or exposure, is not fully narratable and can have no full recollection; as “a relational being... our primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge” (Butler, 2005, p. 20). The scene of address takes place within a set of normative structures, hence, the self is “caught up in a struggle with norms” (Butler, 2005, p. 26), which undermines its attempt to provide a coherent narrative. Thus, the subject can never fully know itself, meaning our participants’ efforts to give an account of themselves, or to narrate their accountabilities, inevitably fails (Butler, 2005, p. 42). Although our participants should be able to

give an account of themselves, this is impossible because they can never be fully conscious of what they do and why, and how they are responding to that particular scene of address at the WEF.

For these reasons, our participants experience a tension within their accountable selves: they seek to promote the interests of other, less powerful people to those in the WEF who purportedly have competing views and agendas. At the same time, our participants are trying to remain open to dialogue with ‘hard-nosed capitalists’ (as termed by Jacob above), suggesting an understanding that such parties may be open to change. These tensions, arising from their lack of coherent self-identity, mean that they have to resist what Butler terms ‘ethical violence’, which we address next.

## Struggling to Resist Ethical Violence

Butler suggests that ethical violence occurs because the self can never be fully coherent and cannot maintain self-identity at all times; it is a “difficult, if not impossible, norm to satisfy” (Butler, 2005, p. 42). Ethical violence may arise when individuals are subject to norms that violate their sense of what is right; when we perceive ourselves as less than ideal; or when others attack us for not conforming to their views. For our sustainability and humanitarian advocates at the WEF, the data suggest that they could slip into ethical violence towards themselves by, for example, berating themselves for not upholding their own values sufficiently strongly. Equally, they could potentially inflict ethical violence on other corporate delegates by condemning them for hypocrisy. The data also show their struggle to resist the temptations of ethical violence towards themselves and others, arising during difficulties faced in the form of competing values, engaging in dialogue, and the emotional toll of participation. Awareness of ethical violence, and a struggle to resist it, may not be a conscious process for our participants, but our data illustrate several instances where they seek to resist condemnation of themselves and others. This illustrates that neither our participants nor those they are conversing with are ethically pure and coherent selves, and that responsibility is best served by attending the Forum and trying to engage in dialogue, despite their discomfort.

## Competing Values

The WEF is “a membership organisation” (Frances) and attendance at the Forum offers a “barometer of status” (Willmott, 1996, p. 24) as to whether you can afford, or are considered suitable, to participate. For example, Chloe describes her experience of the Young Global Leaders (YGL) community of the WEF: “The YGLs is like a fraternity/sorority, if you are in the club people meet with you, it is like you have

been vetted and it opens doors". She suggests that 'being in the club' implies that people will meet with you, conferring status and position. It means that you are accepted into the fold (or not, if you are considered to be unworthy). She appears to enjoy the sense of being chosen to be included, perhaps even flattered by the apparent recognition from the other powerful actors at the WEF. However, knowing that she takes pleasure from this affirmation or self-aggrandisement could also lead Chloe to feel that she has betrayed her own values and lacks a coherent self-identity, invoking a form of ethical violence where one perceives oneself as less than ideal. In seeking to resist this, she must call upon and retain a 'certain humility' (Butler, 2005, p. 69), which allows her to recognise that being involved is not for her own self-aggrandisement, but for the benefit of those she represents. In this sense, accepting her own limitations and recognising a degree of susceptibility to other perspectives is part of her process of becoming responsible.

Similarly, Jason experiences internalised ethical conflict in terms of competing values, specifically the promotion of corporate agendas and business development through company-sponsored entertainment. The entertainment is free for the WEF participants but funded through the sponsoring corporations, which makes Jason feel uncomfortable:

That's the part that I don't like, there is a lot of evening and night activities going on and they are of course either trying to promote, for example, a country, or a specific company...and when I have gone to those type of events you get quite mixed feelings, if they serve, for free, nice, good food, you know who is paying, it's their customers, so I don't want them to pay for that type of stuff.

Despite this, he continues to participate, presumably enjoying the 'free, nice, good food'. His discomfort and 'mixed feelings' are an example of an internalised ethical debate where he could both condemn himself for going against his own values and/or condemn the other delegates for their enjoyment in participating. In his struggle to resist ethical violence directed towards himself or others, he weighs up the balance of benefits in participating, asserting that the WEF is a good investment in money and time, as "being inspired by good solid data or by good practices is one way of moving the sustainability agenda forward". Ultimately, his decision is that participation is worthwhile.

In contrast, Dexter's experience of competing values between civil society goals and other agendas at the WEF leads him to question his continued engagement:

I left Davos this year thinking that I don't think I would go back, certainly not on the current terms...there are some great people inside [the WEF]...so these are not bad people in any sort of sense, or they're not all bad

people trying to conquer the world or drive a neoliberal agenda necessarily...I don't know...it's not an unfamiliar question to many of us in civil society, we have to choose when and where to engage...

Although Dexter illustrates his disquiet with participation 'on the current terms', he refrains from outright condemnation of the other delegates, resisting a temptation to inflict ethical violence on others.

Butler's "social theory of recognition insists upon the impersonal operation of the norm in constituting the intelligibility of the subject", demonstrating that individuals come into contact with norms through living exchanges with others, such as at the WEF, where there is a basic problem of understanding "who are you?" (Butler, 2005, p. 30) and, subsequently, who am I in relation to you? Our participants are aware of the paradox that in engaging with the WEF, their presence may give legitimacy and recognition to those others who could arguably be the source of the issues they are attempting to address, leading to some kind of moral collusion. These competing values speak to Butler's (2005) assertion that individuals need to reconsider the relationship between ethics and social critique, being aware of the social norms that bring us into being, but recognising the limits of our ability to uphold coherent selves. Therefore, Jason does not wholly disengage from the corporate entertainment, even when he claims 'that's the part that I don't like', and Dexter recognises that the other participants are not 'all bad people'. Hence our participants illustrate their struggle to resist the temptations of ethical violence to themselves and others, recognising that no-one is a coherent and ethically pure self, and accepting their limitations. The following section illustrates how participants experience and resist ethical violence when engaging in dialogue.

## Engaging in Dialogue

Accountability is relational between an individual and others; therefore, engaging in dialogue is essential when moving towards some kind of mutual understanding. When those in the dialogue are ostensibly on opposing sides or hold different views, it would be all too easy to become damning or condemnatory. For example, our sustainability and humanitarian advocates could be damning of the corporate delegates at the WEF, and vice versa, by engaging in ethical violence. However, Butler urges individuals to resist ethical violence, recognising a lack of coherent identity of the self: "An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others who may or may not mirror one's own constitution" (Butler, 2005, p. 41).

Paul illustrates this when reflecting on the dialogue of delegates who do not seem to believe there is a problem in relation to sustainability:

This was just after the whole collapse of the banks and everything and [senior bank representative] got up and he just said ‘look guys it’s not our fault, it wasn’t our problem, wasn’t our fault, you know, we’re good people, we’ve been doing all these good things for the world, this wasn’t our fault, just let’s get on and carry on business as usual’. And you think ‘come on’.

Paul’s expressions reveal his vexation with those who refuse to take responsibility for the actions of their sector or organisation, and those who privilege profit over sustainability (‘carry on business as usual’). Despite the frustrations of engaging with others who think differently, Paul recognises that these other delegates could still be influenced to some degree by his being there, and that he needs to engage in dialogue with them out of his sense of responsibility. He will endure this sense of powerlessness and frustration in order to represent the sustainability and humanitarian issues with which the other delegates are not fully engaging.

The difficulty for our research participants in representing sustainability and humanitarian agendas is that invited members from sectors outside of mainstream business (for example, politics, religion, civil society, academia) may be expected to acquiesce to the agendas of paying industry members. Simon illustrates this:

...the mission statement of [the WEF] is ‘committed to improving the state of the world’, now if you were a cynic you might say well you can’t start to improve the state of the world unless you can have a debate about some of the, well, anything should be on the table to debate, and if it’s not on the table then you’re not going to improve the state of the world if you can’t even talk about it.

Simon’s comments suggest that there may be certain things kept ‘off the table’ in the WEF, although it cannot be expected that the WEF or any other forum of this kind solves sustainability and humanitarian issues all at once. Paul and Simon’s comments, however, illustrate their struggle to engage in these debates. They could choose not to attend the WEF because of its corporate viewpoint and exclusivity of agenda items, thus, experiencing ethical violence by violating what they think is right, attacking themselves, or being attacked by others for not conforming to their views. Instead, they resist the temptation to condemn themselves or others, resisting ethical violence by deciding to engage in dialogue, and trying to get other agendas on the table to make the dialogue more focused on sustainability and humanitarian issues. As such, they behave with “humility and generosity alike” (Butler, 2005, p. 42): humility in representing themselves and their own

identity, and generosity in tolerating or even “offer[ing] forgiveness to others” (Butler, 2005, p. 42). This may, however, result in an emotional toll, which is outlined in the next section.

### The Emotional Toll of Participation

Our data show that demands to maintain a coherent self-identity as sustainability and humanitarian advocates take an emotional toll, which could be characterised as ethical violence towards the self. This is illustrated by Paul, for example, who describes the ‘struggle’ of constantly countering arguments offered by others:

[It is] a constant struggle to keep trying to counter the arguments all the time... I mean, somewhere that has to be done, someone’s got to do it but it’s just a sort of soul-destroying job at the moment.

Paul describes the emotional impact on him as ‘soul-destroying’, as if he feels he has failed, and thus, he is deliberating on whether or not to continue future participation: “I don’t know, I still haven’t decided whether I’m going to carry on or not carry on”. His challenge is how to stay open to others with different values, in a way that allows him to be accountable to his self and feel satisfied with his self-identity.

Similarly, Dexter explains the emotional effects of his participation on his sense of self:

I feel deeply uncomfortable...obviously I’m very happy that I’ve been invited...but I feel really uncomfortable about being invited or elected to join a club where the majority of people are there because their companies have paid for them to be there... it’s not an entirely...merit-based honour. And that just offends my own sort of ethics.

Here, Dexter is considering both his self as portrayed by others (he has been invited to participate) but is also accounting to his self (feeling uncomfortable despite also feeling happy) for joining ‘the club’ (see also Munro, 1996). He has to live with the mixed feelings and discomfort as the price of his responsibility to those whose interests he represents. Indeed, there is also a hint that he feels a sense of obligation to the mainstream participants, those ‘people [who] are there because their companies have paid for them to be there’, knowing he could potentially change their views.

Tristan acknowledges his dichotomous position that participating in the WEF is an opportunity to challenge mainstream economics, whilst also recognising that he contributes to the legitimacy of the WEF through his participation. He explains:

One wonders if [other participants] really care about the poor or [if rather] they want to understand the

system in order to further oppress the poor and make money...I understand going [to Davos] may legitimise [what is happening there], but [what] if we don't go and speak this language that critiques neoliberal approaches...[to] challenge them and change their heart?

Tristan continues by referring to “a cognitive dissonance within the individuals that are there because they know what is the right thing to do but the economic policies dictate otherwise”. Tristan's use of the term ‘cognitive dissonance’ resonates with a lack of coherent self-identity in both himself and others who may think they ‘know’ in one way but act in another. Following Butler (2005), this dissonance might suggest that a failure to be aware of and acknowledge the opaqueness of the self can result in a form of ethical violence towards the self.

Butler suggests that ethical violence arises from the demand “that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same” (Butler, 2005, p. 42), and she acknowledges that this is an impossible task. The data in these examples illustrate the inherent inability of humans to maintain a coherent self-identity (here: as sustainability and humanitarian advocates), illustrating the emotional toll that can occur when incoherence is apparent. Only when individuals acknowledge their own opacity, and that of others, can ethical violence be overcome. Suspending this demand for complete coherence in self-identity counters ethical violence through a process of disorientation and “de-centering”, in which a “new sense of ethics” emerges (Butler, 2005, p. 42). Butler explains that in order to resist such a form of ethical violence, individuals must take care not to succumb to acts of judgement: “to remember that not all ethical relations are reducible to acts of judgment, and that the very capacity to judge presupposes a prior relation between those who judge and those who are judged” (Butler, 2005, p. 45). In an act of judgement, an individual already has a relationship with the one who is judged whether they are aware of it or not. This leads Butler to suggest that “one way we become responsible and self-knowing is facilitated by a kind of reflection that takes place when judgments are suspended” (Butler, 2005, p. 46). It is to issues of responsibility that we now turn.

## Accountable Selves: Becoming Responsible

The sustainability and humanitarian advocates in our study persist in engaging with the WEF, despite the struggle to resist ethical violence directed towards themselves, to others, or from others. In doing so, they have to resist “the grandiose notion of the transparent ‘I’ that is presupposed as the ethical ideal” and embrace “self-acceptance

(a humility about one's constitutive limitations) or generosity (a disposition towards the limits of others)” (Butler, 2005, p. 80). When the advocates have humility in relation to themselves and generosity in relation to others at the WEF, they can become responsible in representing their causes. This process of becoming a responsible subject requires taking a risk in responding to the other, opening oneself up to critique and self-questioning, and demands “courage from the ethical self” (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 274).

Hence, our participants demonstrate this courage as sustainability and humanitarian advocates, despite the struggle to resist ethical violence, and despite the extent of their challenge being potentially limited. Jacob illustrates this issue, arguing that:

Those who participate have to figure out ways of being able to sell [their positions], they have to show leadership and they have to be able to have some sort of influence, but it's very, very, very difficult, breaking the impasse in particular.

Here, he is questioning himself, ‘figuring out’, acknowledging a need to step up into leadership and to take risks, yet struggling with relations with the other delegates who have other agendas and priorities. Butler reminds us that it is in these interactions that individuals reflect on their ethical identities, and their accountabilities to the self and others:

Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds. (Butler, 2005: p. 20)

For example, Adam gives a moral rationale to challenge the perspectives of others when describing “different people meeting [through the WEF] with different organisational and personal views, not to argue, but to set a challenge for change”. His acknowledgement of difference and ‘a challenge for change’ reflects the need to address frameworks of morality through interactive dialogue with others (Butler, 2005), where he is potentially changed as much as those whom he seeks to change. As Butler (2005, p. 15) puts it:

If I am held accountable through a framework of morality, that framework is first addressed to me, first starts to act upon me, through the address and query of another. Indeed, I come to know that framework through no other way.

The opportunity for engagement with others enables an individual participant “to come into being as a reflexive subject” (Butler, 2005, p. 15); to think, be challenged, and to



challenge others. This applies both to our participants and the other delegates they wish to challenge.

Sam reflects further on his internal reflexive conversation as follows.

[The WEF participants'] interests are to be seen... it's being seen as a global citizen...but there are these contradictions which we all have to struggle with and it's always a balancing act, so you think first are you crossing any moral red line for oneself, struggle with that, I don't think so, and secondly it's taking part and going to create something worthwhile potentially...I wouldn't say our involvement... is a principal part of our strategy, it's just a useful thing...I'll be able to do some good, it's not nearly enough and I made some useful contacts and built up our profile in ways that help us in other things we're doing.

In this excerpt, Sam highlights intersecting accountabilities as: (1) participants' responsibilities to others as 'global citizens'; (2) personal moral responsibilities ('moral red line'); (3) organisational strategic responsibilities ('our involvement', 'our strategy', 'our profile'); and (4) personal impact ('do some good'). Sam recognises the potential for contradiction between each of these four elements within his accountable self and the 'struggle' with the contradictions might reflect his self-opacity. Butler, however, notes that "my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others" (Butler, 2005, p. 84). Even if individuals are vulnerable to the address of others in ways that they cannot fully control, this does not mean they are without responsibility, as reflected in Sam's statement ('I'll be able to do some good, it's not nearly enough').

Nonetheless, Butler (2005, p. 91) argues that "making use of an unwilling susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other" allows individuals to react to the ethical demands of the other and take on responsibility. Katherine's experience, following, illustrates this point as she describes a vulnerability to other delegates with different viewpoints, while recognising a mutual accountability:

...there is a little bit of a hype on the Forum side, and you have to be a little bit careful of that but at the same time, I get why they do it, they have to do it and it actually serves a really good purpose and so I think, they're always going to be most helpful when you are working with them in a way that, that not only furthers your own agenda but also furthers their agenda and when you're able to find that synergy then it's pretty incredible what can be accomplished.

Working in dialogue with others in the WEF, even when there appears to be a difference in interpreting ethical norms, may form a means of challenging and shifting the ethical positions of the other, forcing people to engage reflexively

with their self-identity or accountable self. Katherine continues:

...they might not agree with me because they may not see change happening in the way I see change ... it is more of a story of cooperation and the more you cooperate the more you can push people, you just do it, you do it more at their pace... And I would also say it's an organisation that is full of human beings and a lot of people think, it takes a lot, you have to build relationships, you have to, you sort of have to, you can't expect that they're going to be your best friend overnight.

Participants account to their selves for their engagement with others at the WEF in terms of potential efficacy and transformation (Roberts, 1996), risking ethical violence but also struggling to resist it when seeking to act responsibly. Ultimately, "to be ethical therefore means to question the self at the moment of uncertainty and to try to act responsibly in spite of limitations" (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 274). As Tristan summarises:

...overall it is better to have something that is deficient and can be criticised rather than not have anything, because then you will be operating in silos and not have an opportunity to meet and to challenge and to be challenged, whether people meet there to justify something wrong, but at least there is a platform where we can go and to challenge. So overall it is important.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our concern in this paper was to increase our understanding of the experiences of individuals who are working to improve global sustainability and humanitarian agendas in a global forum, the WEF. Since the WEF is often perceived as representing mainstream economics or forms of market capitalism, our aim was to ascertain how social actors who are not part of that mainstream participate in such a way that allows them to be accountable for their own actions; in other words, how they experience their accountable selves. We addressed the questions of how they narrate accountability to themselves and others, experience contradictions, and explain becoming responsible in this context. We found that our research participants had a deep commitment to sustainability and humanitarianism and highlighted an opportunity to extend this by participating in the WEF and changing the agenda from the inside.

Individuals' accountable selves are experienced as active and performative, embedded in human interaction, because moral philosophy lies in "conduct and, hence, with doing, within a contemporary social frame" (Butler, 2005, p. 3). The decision to participate in the WEF denotes a degree of

recognition of the other, but, in doing so, Butler (2005, p. 26) argues that an individual becomes “caught up in a struggle with norms”. The self emerges within a scene of address to the other in which the norms encountered are social, rather than personal or individually chosen. This causes a “disorientation of the perspective of my life” (Butler, 2005, p. 35), resulting in an inability to achieve coherent self-identity and self-understanding. The lack of a coherent sense of self can lead to ethical violence, which Butler associates with judgment and condemnation of others and of the self.

While the self may be unavoidably opaque, both to the self and others, this need not limit our human capacity or our striving to be responsible subjects:

Although self-knowledge is surely limited, that is not a reason to turn against it as a project. Condemnation tends to do precisely this, to purge and externalize one’s own opacity. In this sense, judgment can be a way to fail to own one’s limitations and thus provides no felicitous basis for a reciprocal recognition of human beings as opaque to themselves, partially blind, constitutively limited. To know oneself as limited is still to know something about oneself, even if one’s knowing is afflicted by the limitation that one knows. (Butler, 2005, p. 46)

Our data demonstrate how the sustainability and humanitarian advocates participating at the WEF narrated their accountability to themselves and others. We illustrate their experiences of dealing with competing values, engaging in dialogue, and the emotional toll of participation, all of which we identified as examples of where participants struggled to resist ethical violence. Our participants found the scene of address at the WEF a site of contestation, where they perceived themselves subject to norms that violated their own sense of what is right, during incongruent and uncomfortable interactions with others. Ethical violence can come from others who criticise as if we should know what we are doing as coherent selves. Yet, Butler cautions against condemnation of others because it projects onto others our own opacity:

Condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn. In this sense, condemnation can work against self-knowledge, inasmuch as it moralizes a self by disavowing commonality with the judged. (Butler, 2005, p. 46)

Our participants also sought to resist ethical violence arising from condemnation of the self, or violence turned towards the self in the name of ethics. They struggled with perceiving themselves as less than ideal and berated themselves for not being perfect, finding the experience ‘uncomfortable’

and ‘soul-destroying’, with some deliberating whether to ‘carry on or not carry on’, or pondering ‘I don’t think I would go back’. They questioned their relevance at the WEF, their complicity in being there, their relationship to those holding competing values, and the potential betrayal of their own values.

Since our study only draws from the perceptions of some sustainability and humanitarian advocates at the WEF, and not the other mainstream representatives, it was difficult to ascertain direct examples of the advocates being attacked by others for not conforming to their standards or views, which could be perceived as a limitation. Further research could address WEF participants in more representative groups to understand their accountable selves and moral responsibility, and potentially assess the interactions between different groups. Similarly, in addition to interviewing, further research could make use of participant observation, in addressing such interactions and how delegates stay open to different viewpoints without betraying their ideals. Nonetheless, our focus on sustainability and humanitarian advocates is important due to their underrepresentation at the WEF.

In understanding the accountability of the sustainability and humanitarian advocates in our study, we turned to Butler, whose argument against ethical violence foregrounds responsibility because it forces us to reflect on ourselves and the other. Drawing from Levinas, Butler argues that this form of responsibility does not derive from intentions and deeds, but from our relation to the other, and capacity to be *acted upon* by that other. Making clear that “we do not take responsibility for the other’s acts as if we authored those acts” (Butler, 2005, p. 91), she argues that any unwilling susceptibility to the other can become an ethical resource that enables us to respond to them in a responsible manner. In other words, the responsible subject does not judge or condemn the self or the other but engages with the other.

Hence, the responsibility of our participants is to those whose interests they seek to represent as sustainability and humanitarian advocates but also to the others, the mainstream participants at the WEF, with whom they engage. It is a process that Butler (2005, p. 103) terms “becoming human”, and Loacker and Muhr (2009, p. 274) describe as “becoming a responsible subject despite limitations”. Our participants may lack self-knowledge, experiencing contradictions and lack of coherence, but in their interactions with others they are risking themselves and their ethical positions “at moments of unknowingness” (Butler, 2005, p.136), when what they are diverges from those before them. They are becoming responsible. This intersubjective responsiveness to the other allows for further dialogue because:

[from a] disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer

forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves. (Butler, 2005, p. 42)

This helps to explain the discomfort evidently experienced by our participants but also gives a rationale for their continued engagement and attendance at the WEF.

The contribution of our study is fourfold: first, we give a rare insight into experiences of sustainability and humanitarian advocates as participants at the WEF, which is an under-explored context. Second, we expand on understandings of accountable selves by illustrating how accountability to and of the self emerges through relations with others. Third, in an empirical application of Butler's theory, we illustrate the struggle to resist ethical violence. Fourth, we build on conceptualisations of becoming a responsible subject by illuminating the experience of individuals taking up moral responsibility through human interaction. The difficulties encountered by our participants give an insight into why transformative change is so challenging when addressing sustainability and humanitarian agendas, but they also allow social transformation to remain possible, giving, ultimately, a possible sense of hope.

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**Data Availability Statement** The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of confidentiality but are available from the first author upon reasonable request.

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