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Understanding Leadership in Public Collaborative Contexts

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Abstract

The paper aims to contribute to theory on collaboration through problematizing and exploring the complexity that characterizes leadership in collaborative contexts and to provide some generative conceptualizations to inform future empirical and conceptual development. It draws on a substantial review of leadership theory relevant to the context of public sector collaboration and provides examples from empirical research on collaboration over the last two decades in the UK and US respectively. It does so by identifying and developing key characteristics of the context, the nature of leadership in relation to context, and leadership agency pertaining to actors who actually make a difference in the process and outcomes of collaboration.

Understanding Leadership in Public Collaborative Contexts

This paper provides a needed synthesis of what is known about leadership in collaborative contexts with a view to indicate opportunities for future empirical and conceptual development. Interest from both academics and practitioners in the governance, leadership, and management of interorganizational collaboration continues to grow and there is now a large body of literature reporting on and conceptualizing many different aspects of collaboration. While the literature focusing specifically on leadership in collaborative contexts *per se* is not extensive and not as well studied and theorized as other leadership environments, an increasing number of studies have begun to address the phenomenon (e.g., Connelly, 2007; Crosby and Bryson 2005; Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Silvia and McGuire, 2010). The received wisdom is that in interorganizational contexts, the nature of the problems, the operating structures, and the diversity of participants differ from that of intraorganizational contexts. Typically, the issues and problems on which leadership is focused are multi-faceted and interdisciplinary in nature, and located in the inter-organizational domain beyond the reach of any single organization to tackle effectively on their own. Leadership as such is not situated within an organizational hierarchy with stipulated lines of authority and positional power, but rather sits in a context of interacting organizational hierarchies and social structuring. Participants can include individuals and representatives from groups and whole organizations that bring diverse resources, experiences, and professional expertise to the collaboration. That leadership in interorganizational contexts differs from that in intraorganizational ones in clearly evident. The complexity of problems, the lack of traditional hierarchy, and the collective responsibility for outcomes point to relational dimensions of leadership (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Murrell, 1997; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and to leadership that

goes beyond the exclusive focus on the 'leader' (Ospina and Hittleman, 2011; Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012).

The recent renewed interest in collective and relational leadership suggests that there is both scope and enthusiasm for further theoretical conceptualizations at this stage of the field's development. The paper starts with an identification and exposition of the defining characteristics of public collaborative contexts in which leadership is undertaken. This includes, for example, the identification of different types of collaborations/networks and associated units of analysis, the paradoxical nature of collaboration, types of structure and modes of governance, and varying perceptions of membership. It proceeds with a discussion of the importance of context for collaborative leadership and the nature of leadership as perceived by those involved in leadership roles. This includes, for example, distinctions between inward versus outward leadership, leadership "in" versus leadership "of" collaborations, and leaders versus followers. In view of the inevitably "messy" context and ambiguous nature of collaboration, the final section addresses leadership agency and how individuals who perceive themselves as leaders actually make a difference in the process and outcomes of collaboration. This final section effectively synthesizes what is known about the enactment of leadership for collaborative practice.

Conceptual Frameworks

This paper grows out of a review and synthesis of leadership theory relevant to collaboration in the public sector, and the authors' empirical research on collaboration over the last two decades in the UK and US, respectively. Three specific areas of research are particularly influential in the paper's focus: the theory of collaborative advantage (TCA) (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vangen

and Huxham, 2010; Vangen and Huxham, 2013), the practices associated with collaborative public management (CPM) (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; O'Leary and Bingham, 2009), and recent research applying a constructionist lens to relational leadership (CRL) (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Ospina and Sorenson, 2006). The TCA is a practice-based theory about collaboration structured around a tension between Collaborative Advantage (the idea that synergy can be created through joint working) and Collaborative Inertia (capturing the tendency for collaboration to be slow to produce output or uncomfortably conflict ridden). It focuses on explicating the complexity that underlies collaborative situations and the resulting challenges that are intrinsic to them. Interest in relational leadership in general (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and CRL in particular has increased in relevance and popularity lately. The argument for a redirection of leadership research towards leadership as collective and relational, and with more focus on context and relationship, is of particular relevance to this paper.

The theories of collaborative advantage and collaborative public management are grounded in original studies of leadership and management in collaborative contexts. The research yielded a definition of leadership as being concerned with 'making things happen' (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Vangen and Huxham, 2003) in situations where a single entity cannot take on a challenge alone (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003). Three media instrumental in shaping and implementing collaborative agendas through which leadership is enacted include not only the behavior of *individuals*, but also the *structures* and *processes* of a collaboration. In this conceptualization of leadership, the structure refers to the partners involved and the relationship between them. Processes refer to the formal and informal instruments via which partners communicate. In addition, participants include representatives of organizations and groups, and individuals associated with the collaboration that have the power and expertise to influence and

enact its agenda. An important point identified through the TCA research is that all three leadership media—structures, processes, and participants—are to a large extent outside of the immediate control of the partners. Structures and processes often impose upon or emerge from the activities of the collaboration, and many of the participants who influence and enact the collaborative agenda are not necessarily "partners." Collaborations are dynamic to the extent that structures, processes, and participants tend to be changing perpetually (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b). Although individuals who lead are often thwarted by tensions and dilemmas to the extent that outcomes are not as they anticipated (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011), they nevertheless clearly affect the outcomes of a collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

This conceptualization, in essence, shows leadership as a relational process and the enactment of leadership by individuals as taking place in a context of multiple, interdependent "relationships." The TCA is clearly similar to a constructionist view of relational leadership (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006; Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012) whereby leadership is defined as a process of social construction produced through relationships (Fairhurst, 2007; Hosking, 2011). First, in terms of understanding leadership, "constructionists privilege process and context over agency" (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012, 18). Leaders and leadership as such are embodied in *context* and in *relationships* (Ospina and Hittleman, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). There is thus an explicit emphasis on the importance of context and a recognition that actors are embedded in it (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). While there are also important differences, including for example, the notion of 'relational', the TCA, CPM, and the CRL emphasize the importance of the context in which leadership takes place. Therefore, one area of further theoretical conceptualization

5

developed in this paper relates to the context of collaboration and the inherent relationships in which leadership takes place.

Second, leadership in collaborative contexts relates to a "collective challenge" which also demands attention to elements of leadership beyond the exclusive focus on the leader (Heifetz, 1994; Ospina and Sorenson, 2006; Ospina and Hittleman, 2011). The TCA explicates the source of leadership as not exclusively the individual as a leader but also the structure and processes inherent in the collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). This is consistent with the constructionist view that 'the leader', while relevant for action, represents a different phenomenon to that of 'leadership' (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006). Hence, a second area for conceptualization developed in this paper is concerned with leadership constructs that transcend individual leader qualities and traits.

Finally, the TCA, CPM, and the CRL emphasize actors as embedded in context and point to the danger of confusing leadership with an individual identified as the leader. Yet, many relevant studies of leadership in collaborative entities also point to the importance of leadership agency and the role that individuals play in moving a collaboration toward the achievement of advantage (Vangen and Huxham, 2003; McGuire, 2006). A third area for conceptualization therefore is concerned with leadership agency and the conceptualization of challenges encountered by those who seek to 'make things happen' in collaborative contexts.

The research-oriented action research study on leadership in social collaborative contexts, the multi-method research on leading through government partners, and the application of the constructionist lens to relational leadership suggest that a better understanding of leadership may be gained through this exploration of context, constructs, and agency. In what follows we theorize leadership in collaborative context through identifying and developing key

6

characteristics of the context, the nature of leadership in relation to context, and leadership agency pertaining to actors who actually make a difference in the process and outcomes of collaboration. In so doing, our aim is to develop generative conceptualizations pertaining to context, constructs, and agency.

Characteristics of Context

This section seeks to identify and develop some defining characteristics of public collaborative contexts in which leadership takes place. Most fundamental, leadership in collaborative contexts spans boundaries that are organizational, professional, and geographical. In contrast to intraorganizational contexts, leadership is not situated in clearly defined hierarchical structures where relationships between formally acknowledged leaders in position of authority and their followers are defined. Instead, leadership is situated within overlapping hierarchical structures that vary in complexity depending on the purpose of collaboration, the number and diversity of partners involved, and the geographical region over which it spans. As collaboration is typically initiated to address specific needs—for example, to achieve a major technological innovation, access a new market, undertake inter-disciplinary research, or implement new government policy—they tend to be highly idiosyncratic in structure and in their blend of resources and expertise. For that reason, no two collaborative contexts are the same. Nevertheless, it is possible to begin to identify different ways in which researchers characterize, albeit sometimes implicitly, collaborative contexts and from which a better sense of the nature of leadership and leadership agency can then be understood. We shall return to that in the following two sections. First we shall characterise collaborative context in terms of "entities and environments," "collaborative

governance" versus "governing collaborations," "ambiguity, complexity, and dynamics in the context of collaboration," and finally "collaborations as paradoxical phenomena."

Collaborative Entities and Collaborative Environments

Leadership features in the literature on public sector collaboration in two related ways. At the macro level, collaboration is increasingly a manifestation of interdependence between actors across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, and with citizens in tackling major societal issues that sit in the interorganizational domain. At the micro level, research on leadership in the context of collaboration is concerned with specific entities such as interorganizational partnerships and alliances. A distinction therefore is made between *goal directed* collaboration entities and that of *looser collaborative contexts* in which organizations collaborate on a range of common issues of common concern. The former sees collaborations as "organizational manifestations"; it is possible to name a specific entity or collaboration with which partners identify, have a sense of shared purpose, know what the structure is, who is involved, in what capacity, and why. It is important to note, however, that even in these contexts, partners do not necessarily have a clear sense of shared agreement over any of these factors. Many collaborations set up to address specific issues concerned with social and economic area regeneration, health, poverty, social exclusion, and climate change, for example, are of this nature. Other looser collaborative contexts focus less specifically on joint collaborative goals but are nevertheless identifiable in that partners collaborate on a range of issues of common interest while not necessarily associated with a specific entity or towards the achievement of specific joint goals. These contexts may be understood as "collaborative fabrics" (Jacklyn-Jarvis et al., 2014) in which partners link together via policies, processes, relationships, and participant

identities with which they have a shared and overlapping sense of association. What differentiates one fabric from another is the extent to which potential partners have a shared association with these. Collaborative fabrics may be identifiable by a locality (such as a city), a sector (such as health) or a social issue (such as racial discrimination), and may include many overlapping collaborations. For example, in the UK many established collaborative structures disappeared under the 2010 Coalition government and subsequent austerity. Yet individuals in nonprofit organizations continue to collaborate, often informally, with individuals in public sector agencies as they continue to negotiate public policy and pursue agendas that they regard as important to their sector *per se.* Similarly, Ospina and Foldy's (2010) research into the leadership of social change organizations in the US explicates leadership aimed at fostering collective action for the 'common good' (Crosby and Bryson, 2005) across a range of collective goals. Whether the context is more akin to a goal-directed collaboration or a collaborative fabric, defining lines of authority and responsibility in organizational hierarchies inevitably shape the parameters with which leadership can be enacted. Hence, as we shall elaborate below, there will be some aspect of the nature of leadership and leadership agency that are similar across the two different contexts.

"Collaborative Governance" and "Governing Collaborations"

Collaborative context may also be characterised in terms of governance structure. Here we shall note a distinction between "collaborative governance" and "governing collaborations" (Vangen et al., 2014). The former refers to patterns of "government and governing" in which organizations are commissioned by governments to work together to govern society, implement public policy, or manage public programs or assets (e.g., Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson, et al.,

2012; Klijn and Skelcher, 2007; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Raab and Kenis, 2009; Silvia, 2012; Skelcher et al, 2005; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2012). The latter refers to the organizational manifestations that are not necessarily mandated by governments or public agencies. In this context, governance is focused on the effective coordination of partners' resources towards the achievement of collaborative advantage rather than being a mode of governance in and of itself (Huxham, 2000; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Raab and Kenis, 2009; Vangen and Huxham, 2012). With reference to goal directed collaboration, Provan and Kenis (2008) conceptualized three ideal forms of governance: Participant-Governed or Shared Governance Networks, Lead Organization-Governed Networks, and Network Administrative Organizations (NAO). Research demonstrates that in practice collaborative contexts may comprise a mix of these (Vangen et al., 2014) and that different modes of governance are combined within the life cycle of a partnership (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). The mode of governance does influence the context in which leadership is enacted and the perceived legitimacy (or not) with which organizations and their representatives lead. In "collaborative governance," public agencies have a legitimate and distinctive leadership role (Ansell and Gash, 2008; McGuire and Silvia, 2009; Milward and Provan, 2000; Silvia, 2012; Skelcher, et al., 2005; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009), but this is not necessarily the case in goal-directed collaborations where, depending on governance form, there may or may not be a designated lead organization (Cristofoli et al., 2012; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Provan and Kenis, 2008).

Ambiguity, Complexity, and Dynamics

Empirical research has shown that collaborative contexts are characteristically highly ambiguous, complex, and dynamic in nature (Daley, 2009; Huxham and Vangen, 2000b; May and Winter, 2007; Provan and Kenis, 2008). In terms of collaborations addressing major societal issues, for example, it is common for organizations to partner in many collaborations or indeed for divisions of large organizations to become involved in collaborations independently of one another. Ambiguity then arises as those involved are frequently not able to name all the partners, or to recognize each other's perceptions of relative status, or to know whether a partner is representing themselves or something else, or to know the degree to which an individual is representative of their organization, a group, or a community. In practice, the structures of collaborations become large and unwieldy with collaborations forming sub-sections of collaborations and with individuals representing a variety of diverse interests and agendas across the collaborative context. Inevitably, different modes of governance feature simultaneously. This is not usually a result of "bad design," but rather that the sheer amount of concerns that any given collaboration seeks to address makes complexity of structure inevitable. Finally, in practice, the structure of collaborations is continually changing, partly because external pressures (such as changing public policy) and changes within the partner organizations (such as restructuring or staff turnover) have a direct influence on who can and should be involved, and partly because inevitable changes to the collaborative purpose imply different stakeholder involvement.

The characterization of collaborations as ambiguous, complex, and dynamic contexts suggests that leadership must somehow be concerned with influencing whole collaborations and

organizations, as well as individuals, and that there can hardly be a clear consensus of who should be influenced by whom (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a).

Collaborative Contexts as Paradoxical Phenomena

A final defining characteristic that we wish to propose is that collaborative contexts are inevitably paradoxical and characterized by inherent contradictions and tensions. The concept of paradox has been used extensively in organization theory (Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011), and, in that context, most researchers draw on Cameron and Quinn's (1988) and Smith and Lewis's (2011) definitions of paradox as "something that involves contradictory, interrelated, mutually exclusive elements that are present and operate equally at the same time." In the field of collaboration, researchers have argued recently that mainstream theories cannot capture adequately the complexity of collaborative contexts (e.g., Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Das and Teng, 2000; de Rond and Bouchikhi, 2004, Vangen and Huxham, 2012; Vangen and Winchester, 2013; Vlaar et al., 2007; Zeng and Chen, 2003). They have begun to use paradox and similar concepts to better frame issues, and highlight and describe interesting tensions, oppositions, and contradictions in ways that are both conceptually appealing and practically useful.

Empirical research has shown that when collaborations are successful, they can be very inspiring and rewarding for those who govern, lead, and manage them. However, complaints about making them succeed in practice are endemic. One overwhelming conclusion is that collaborations are complex and prone to failures, and, rather than achieving advantage, tend toward collaborative inertia in which the rate of output is slow, and even successful outcomes are achieved only after much pain and a hard grind (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). This understanding that collaborations are simultaneously appealing owing to their many potential benefits and

12

unappealing owing to the challenges associated with achieving success in practice is an indication that they are inherently paradoxical in nature (Connelly et al., 2006).

The paradoxical nature of collaborations stem from the aspiration to achieve advantage from collaboration between heterogeneous organizations that remain legally autonomous while they engage in coordinated collective action to achieve joint goals. The differences between heterogeneous organization partners—including their areas of expertise, assets, know-how, priorities, and values, their embedment in different hierarchical structures, policies, and cultures, and operations within different domains—constitute unique resources that, when brought together, can create the potential for collaborative advantage. The realization of collaborative advantage, however, rests vitally on partners retaining their autonomy and independence while drawing advantage out of their differences through the creation of working arrangements that simultaneously protect and integrate partners' uniquely different resources, experiences, and expertise for the furtherance of collaborative goals (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010; Vangen and Huxham, 2012). Hence, collaborations can be perceived as paradoxical in nature because gaining advantage rests on the simultaneous *protection* and *integration* of partners' uniquely different resources, experiences, and expertise in ambiguous, complex, and dynamic contexts.

This characterization of collaborations as paradoxical phenomenon has obvious implications for both the nature of leadership and leadership agency, which will be discussed further in the sections that follow.

Constructs of Leadership

As alluded to earlier, collaboration can and does take place in wildly different contexts. One finds collaboration in distinctively diverse policy contexts (e.g., crime policy, social services,

and urban regeneration), differences with respect to the types, number, and views of collaborative actors, and/or variances in the purpose and scope of collaboration. Although one may be able to observe such contextual differences either from afar or in real-time, defining and enacting collaborative leadership by context alone is insufficient. Indeed, the intersection of "objective" context with individual, subjective perceptions plays a role in the style and substance of leadership. Collaborative actors have their own definition of the world that surrounds them, which consists of their definition of the problem, their image of other collaborative actors, the nature of their dependency on others and vice versa, and the advantages and disadvantages of working together. These perceptions are stable and difficult to change. One's perception of an issue often determines a preferred approach to collaborative leadership.

Partner Perceptions

The intermingling of the perceptions of a collaborative partner with the more objective context or setting of collaboration presents many challenges to achieving collaborative advantage. Questions (Who's in? Who's out? Who's important? Who's not?) that get to the heart of one's perception of a collaboration are significant. First, when actors communicate only with actors who have the same perceptions, there is no apparent motive for change-based, transformative leadership. The outcome of the collaborative activity is, in a way, predetermined or at least predictable due to the consistent and unfailing perceptions of the problem context among collaborative actors. There is essentially no collaborative goal to attain. Although solutions to problems may be efficiently derived in a context of like-minded individuals, ultimately it is rigidity and lack of adaptability over time that minimizes collaborative opportunities for joint decision making.

Second, collaborative leadership is apparent in many different collaborative contexts. As Rethemeyer and Hatmaker (2008) show, collaboration for any given actor may exist across multiple policy or issue contexts: social policy, for example, is different from urban regeneration, and community-level issues are approached differently than broader, intergovernmental issues. In whichever ways these contexts vary, collaborative leaders understand the social, political, economic, and technological givens of a situation or situations (Crosby and Bryson, 2005). Collaborative leaders must be flexible enough to tailor their approach to the different interests of their home organization and other adjacent collaborative arrangements. When problems are multi-faceted, or as an actor becomes involved in multiple collaborative contexts, a more complex approach to collaborative leadership emerges (Ranade and Hudson, 2003).

Third, and what exists in most situations, actors do not share similar perceptions of the issue at hand. In order to accomplish joint decision making about solutions to problems, a mutual adjustment of perceptions is essential (Kickert et al., 1997). The overall goal of the leader, then, is to improve the mutual adjustment of perceptions in such a way that actors redefine the problem situation as an opportunity for collective decision making and joint action. Huxham and Vangen (2005) conclude that finding ways to avoid collaborative inertia is an essential part of leadership, requiring the adjustment of styles to ensure that the agenda moves forward. Leadership to foster beneficial conditions for interaction include attempts to create a climate in which doubt, inconsistency, and time for reflection are not seen as negative. One way to change the perception of reality is to encourage collaborative actors to experience a new perspective on the problem at hand. This transformation of collaboration seeks to support the efforts of partners' home organizations to make things happen as they support work to influence goal achievement,

threatening their ability to collaborate. Collaborative leaders have to come to grips with the process of accommodation and adjustment.

Inward and Outward Collaborative Leadership

In exploring the challenges of collaboration, one can distinguish between the inward and outward work of collaborative leaders. As Ospina and Saz-Carranza (2010) describe it, inward work refers to the explicit effort to build, nurture, and maintain collaboration and to coordinate collaborative actors, that is, the task of building community. Outward work includes task-oriented behaviors to achieve collaborative goals independently or through the collaborative actors.

Leadership *of* a collaborative entity, or outward work, is distinctive from leadership *in* a collaborative entity, which is largely consistent with inward work. This distinction is vital for understanding who leads, who follows, from what perspective, and by whom. Surprisingly, the difference is not clear in the literature, which may result in some confusion with respect to how we conceptualize the practice of collaborative leadership. The former, leadership of a collaboration, seeks to achieve collaborative goals or attain some common good. This outward context of leadership includes regulating, inducing, incentivizing, or persuading the collaborative partners as a whole (6 et al., 2006, 5). The collaborative leader in these contexts is thus the person or persons who assume a collaboration-wide perspective, act strategically to effect collaborative interactions, and undertake tasks and behaviors designed to achieve collaborative goals, be they process-or outcome-oriented goals. Thus, leadership of a collaboration is purposeful, goal-oriented, and concerned with the collaboration as a whole. The goals and intent of organizational members become secondary to the collaboration (Milward and Provan 2006).

Leadership *in* a collaborative entity connotes a concern with both internal collaborative struggles and the possibilities of synthesizing internal activity in a way that enhances the likelihood of achieving collaborative advantage. The concept of "intergroup leadership" demonstrates that the crux of the collaborative leadership challenge is to bring subgroups together in order to achieve a balance between maintaining their internal cohesion while at the same time acknowledging the potential for external conflict caused by intergroup diversity (Sullivan et al., 2012). Leadership in a collaborative entity intends to create a collaborative environment and to enhance the conditions for productive interactions among network participants. Such leadership facilitates one's ability to create and maintain trust among collaborative actors as a means to build consequential relationships and interactions. Leadership in a collaboration includes facilitating and furthering interaction among actors, reducing complexity and uncertainty by promoting information exchange, changing incentives to collaborate, changing positions, relations, and roles of actors, engendering effective communication among participants and, somewhat paradoxically, helping the collaborative entity to be self-organizing (McGuire 2002).

Conceptualizations of Collaborative Leadership

In comparison to classic leadership theory (which focuses on traits, styles, behaviors, contingencies, charisma, and transformative actions), leadership in the context of collaboration may be conceptualized as an emergent social construct and less as a personal, individualized phenomenon. Sullivan et al. (2012) argue that there is "a wide range of plausible approaches for public managers engaged in leadership for collaboration. These include "great man" theories based on individual traits; contingency models that reflect responses to different situations;

17

transformational approaches that stress "managing meaning"; dispersed and shared models that are intent on turning followers into leaders; and collaborative models that reject hierarchical approaches premised on sovereign sources of power in favour of models that emphasize the process" (45-46). Collaborative leadership also is only sometimes externally conferred. As leaders work both within their own organizations and across various organizational actors, they are challenged in ways that are very different from traditional leadership practice. Rather than wade into a debate regarding whether intraorganizational leadership is different from collaborative leadership (Silvia and McGuire 2010), it is more useful to conceptualize collaborative leadership with a different lens. Instead, one can view collaborative leadership as being relational, which highlights collaboration's social and collective nature (Mandell and Keast 2009).

Relationships have become the conduit for governance (Bertelli and Smith, 2010). Holmberg (2000) suggests that a relational understanding of leadership is an opportunity to focus on processes in which both the actor and the world around him or her are created in ways that either expand or contract the space of possible action (p. 181). In the intraorganizational context, Uhl-Bien defines relational leadership as a "social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e., evolving social order) and change (i.e., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced" (668). She further argues that "Rather than searching for traits, behavioral styles, or identifying particular types of leaders or people management techniques, a relational ontology raises different questions for leadership…how realities of leadership are interpreted within the network of relations; how organizations are designed, directed, controlled and developed on the bases of collectively generated knowledge about organizational realities; and how decisions and actions are embedded in collective sense-

making and attribution processes from which structures of social interdependence emerge and in turn reframe the collectively generated organizational realities" (662).

Some use the term "integrative leadership" to suggest a framework for the design and enactment of leadership in shared-power, cross-sector settings (Bryson and Crosby 2010, Morse 2010). It focuses on the active engagement of stakeholders in forums, arenas, and courts to develop a shared understanding of problems, to determine what to do about them, and to manage conflict and disputes over implementation. Crosby & Bryson (2005) offer a Leadership for the Common Good framework, which characterizes leadership in terms of capabilities that are necessary for remedying public problems in a shared-power world. These capabilities include understanding the social and political context, building work groups, communicating and sharing a vision, and effectively implementing policy decisions, among others. The framework applies to situations "when no one is in charge" (3) and power is distributed across multiple organizations.

Perhaps the best way to conceptualize leadership in collaborative contexts can be in terms of mechanisms that "make things happen" and that lead collaborative activities and outcomes in one direction rather than another. Like integrative leadership, this view offers a very different conceptualization of leadership compared to classic leadership theory. Collaborative leadership is both participative and, when needed, authoritative and sometimes based in collaborative thuggery (Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

The existence of a collaborative relationship in itself does not necessarily lead to better outcomes. Relationships that are conflict ridden, for example, will presumably have less beneficial outcomes than healthier collaborative relationships (May and Winter, 2007). This conceptualization suggests that a collaboration's structures and communication processes are as instrumental in leading to a collaboration's outcomes as is the behavior of the participants

19

associated with it (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a). Collaborative leaders take it upon themselves

to approach network members as equals, share information across the network, share leadership

roles, create trust, and be mindful of the external environment to identify resources and

stakeholders. As such, collaboration may facilitate the "co-creation" of new, innovative ideas

and forge a joint ownership to these ideas so that they are implemented in practice and deemed

valuable and desirable by the key stakeholders (Sorensen and Torfing, 2011).

Leadership Media

Collaborative leadership is not simply a function of the skills (O'Leary and Vij 2012) or

behaviors (McGuire and Silvia 2009) of the leader. To be sure, there are various ways that a

collaborative leader can make a difference in achieving goals, external or internal, through a

particular type of personality. However, leadership is not just a trait; it is enacted through various

media: structures, processes, and participants.

The literature on collaborative structures such as networks is voluminous and varied.

Mandell and Steelman (2003) examine collaborative structures in terms of interorganizational

innovations, such as partnerships, task forces, or coalitions. Others argue that networks can

assume different structures and thus result in different kinds and quality of outcomes (Provan and

Milward 1995; Provan and Kenis 2008). Leadership clearly is a function, to some degree, of the

structures through which leadership is enacted. The process through which leadership occurs is

another consideration for determining the role and purpose of collaborative leadership.

Nevertheless, process can wear down collaborative efforts, and in some cases, also make it

difficult to cope with the power of external forces such as key agencies or overcome policy

barriers. Changes in governing structures and reorganization, of sorts, may directly affect

changes in process. The way that successful leadership works through these collaborative obstacles is a key to collaborative action (Mandell and Keast 2007).

Extensive processing has its own trade-off costs in preventing network outcomes. Slow progress, painful experience, lack of achievements, and even complete collaborative collapse describe collaborative inertia. Once in the throes of moving the collaboration agenda, there are process costs and sometimes limited "policy energy" that need to be taken into account (McGuire and Fyall, 2014). Collaborative actors can spend hours in task forces or work groups that add to the more formal plenary partner meetings. Even when collaborative inertia is somehow overcome, it nevertheless comes at the expense of protracted human relations processing, as partners try to respect the multiculturality of collaborative structures and processes. Consensus, the major mode of decision making, means letting everyone put their agenda on the table as collaborative leaders seek to unpack complex political, financial, technical, and regulatory issues.

Participants in a collaborative entity also play a role in enacting leadership. The role of a leader (or manager) "is not given a priori to one actor" (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004, p. 11). Several actors can take on collaborative leadership responsibilities with leadership activities sometimes conducted simultaneously by more than one actor. Since collaborative actors represent the values and preferences of their home agencies as well as those of the collaboration, collaborative leaders often face a conundrum: choosing between serving their individual agencies' missions and the mission of the collaboration (Thomson and Perry, 2006).

Leadership Agency

The two previous sections have developed conceptualizations pertaining to the context of collaboration and the inherent relationships in which leadership takes place, as well as leadership constructs that transcend the individual leader qualities and traits. We suggest that the defining characteristics of context as well as pertinent leadership constructs enhance understanding about: what leadership is being enacted on behalf of (sphere of influence), who may be perceived as a leader, and the type of leadership activities that may thus be effectively employed. In this last section, the focus is on leadership agency and the conceptualization of challenges encountered by those who seek to make things happen in collaborative contexts.

For What (Not Whom) Leadership Is Enacted

Both the different defining characteristics of context and relevant leadership constructs enhance understanding about for what leadership is enacted. For example, the distinction between "collaboration entities" and "looser collaborative contexts," and the distinction between the constructs of leadership "in" versus leadership "of" suggest something about the nature of relevant leadership agency. For example, with reference to context, when a collaborative entity is identifiable, leadership agency can, in theory at least, be enacted on behalf of the whole entity towards the achievement of joint collaborative goals and thus opens up the possibility for leadership 'of' the entity. In the case of collaborative entities, leadership agency may be conducted more selectively on behalf of an organization or a sector represented in the entity with the view to ensure that specific goals at the organizational or sector level are achieved via the joint collaborative agenda. This, then, is consistent with the construct of leadership "in." While leadership "of" is only applicable to collaboration entities, and while relevant leadership agency

differs with respect to leadership in and of, this distinction has not previously been made explicit in the literature on collaboration.

The leadership literature includes much research on leadership agency without the characteristics of the context—with respect to entities or looser collaborative contexts—always being explicit. However, as we shall elaborate upon below, clearer conceptualizations on context yield a clearer understanding of different types of leadership agency that may most effectively be enacted in different situations.

The Leaders

Whether they are characterized as entities or looser collaborative contexts, leadership agency takes place in the context of multiple, interdependent relationships. Different modes of governance, for example, influence the legitimacy with which individuals may lead. As noted above, in collaborative governance, public agencies acting on behalf of a government have a legitimate and distinctive leadership role. It can be anticipated in these contexts, therefore, that an individual representing a public agency has been formally designated as "the leader." Similarly, different modes with which collaborative entities are governed stipulate the extent to which leadership is legitimately shared, enacted by a lead organisation that is a member of the collaborative entity, or an organization independent of it. Modes of governance thus stipulate who may be formally recognized as being in a position to lead. In contrast, in looser collaborative contexts, no single individual is likely to have an obvious, formally recognised, leadership role. Informal leaders are, however, likely to abound in any collaborative context. Furthermore, the ambiguous, complex, and dynamic nature of collaboration suggests that

perceptions on who may be perceived as a leader will vary among actors and is likely to change rapidly even within relatively small collaborative entities.

In many collaborations, it is difficult to identify the leaders by role, title, or formal position as dictated by governance structures. While much empirical research looks at single leader situations where "leaders" based on such titles are apparently consequential for achieving collaborative advantage (emergency and disaster management, for one example), perceptions on the ground of who is leading may not be consistent with such formal distinctions. Leadership in collaborative entities is about more than just individuals; no single individual is likely to be "in control" or even have a full understanding of how, what, and why things actually happen. For these reasons, a formal and easily identifiable distinction between leaders and followers may not be possible, or even make sense to try to identify these roles at any given time. There are likely to be several leaders (and, by implication, followers) with individuals moving seamlessly between leading and being led.

Viewing leaders as partnership managers suggests a role for coordinating the activities of a collaborative entity (Vangen and Huxham, 2003), which is somewhat consistent with the concept of the Network Administrative Organization (Provan and Kenis, 2008) and the leadership entailed by such a structure. While some aspects of the influence exerted may be indirect, unintended, and even unconscious, partnership managers do also influence the collaborative agenda more directly. Their ability to perform their jobs satisfactorily (to themselves and others) hinges on the progress made by the collaboration. Finding ways to avoid collaborative inertia is therefore an essential aspect of their leadership role. Many enact this by actively pushing the collaborative agenda forward. Some lean towards taking an active lead in

collaborative processes rather than facilitating the members to agree and jointly implement their own agenda.

Collaborative leaders can also be, and often are, public sector agency leaders who lead both their home government agency and a collaborative entity (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Silvia and McGuire, 2010). Government leaders can be steerers of policy making and execution that reflect the desires and demands of its citizens. As we argue, collaborations can rely on various leaders at various times, performing various roles, all of which may be necessary for achieving collaborative success. However, in many cases, the public sector leader alone is held accountable for the satisfactory delivery of public goods and services (McGuire 2002). Williams (2002) identified and categorized the different competencies of a "boundary spanner". The challenges posed to public agency leaders like boundary spanners—a term used to describe key agents, primarily public sector managers and operators (Williams, 2012), who manage within a collaborative context—can face obstacles that are not exclusively external to their organizations. Not only are public sector leaders trying to find their way in collaborations (Durant 1999), but they also have to deal with the impacts of collaborative leadership on the internal operations of their agencies (Agranoff and McGuire, 2010). Collaborative leadership can affect the impact of the public agency's domain, but the degree of diminution of influence by the boundary spanner in complex collaborative contexts is measured somewhat by the degree to which collaborative partners share perceptions of the public sector's role and purpose.

Leadership Activities

As mentioned above, several studies have focused on leadership agency in collaborative contexts but often not making the characteristics of the context explicit, which has yielded some

conceptual confusions. In this final section, we bring together extant research on leadership

activities with the new generative characteristics of context and leadership constructs to provide

a better understanding of the varying type of leadership activities that may be effectively

employed in different context. A general observation that can be made is that, as collaborative

contexts tend to be highly idiosyncratic and dynamic in nature, leadership invariably takes on an

emergent nature wherein individuals carve out their leadership role within existing interacting

organizational hierarchies. Leadership may be an emergent social construct rather than a

personal, individualized phenomenon and may include close attention to the overtness with

which leadership is enacted (Sydow et al., 2011; Vangen et al., 2014). Furthermore, the

ambiguous, complex, and dynamic nature of collaboration suggests that leadership agency needs

to take into consideration multiple levels of action across individual, team, organizational, and

societal agendas and activities (Crosby and Bryson, 2005). More specifically, the paradoxical

nature of collaborative contexts implies that leadership agency is often concerned with managing

tensions (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010).

Leadership Themes

The theory of collaborative advantage is structured around issues that energize those who

manage collaborations, including their anxieties and rewards. Most commonly, issues with goals,

culture, communication, power, trust, and complexity in membership structure tend to get in the

way of partners making any real progress (McGuire and Fyall, 2014). It follows that these are the

kinds of issues around which the attention of the leader is required; there is significant agreement

across the literature that these are pertinent themes. For example, from the perspectives of both

theory and practice, the common wisdom is that it is necessary to be clear about the goals of joint

working if partners are to act together. The problem, however, it that partners rarely have the same goals and needs, so reaching agreement is difficult. Similarly, the need to communicate across different organizational and professional cultures, often with different professional and natural languages, can cause misunderstandings and conflicts, and slow down progress. Issues relating to discrepancies in power and the call for empowerment from partners to perceive themselves to be vulnerable are also common. Potential partners often see themselves the victims of power struggles and power plays. While a high level of trust is essential for success, suspicious, rather than trusting, relationships are the norm. It is common, for example, for partners to hang onto untrustworthy partners either because other alternatives do not exist or because doing so allows them to keep an eye on stakeholders who act in dishonorable or unethical ways. Complexities in membership structures tend to enhance the level of sophistication necessary to deal effectively with issues of goals, culture, communication, power, and trust. Commonly, organizations are involved in many different collaborative entities at the same time, and many of these may have a very large number of members attached to them. Therefore, the sheer complexity is in itself difficult to come grips with, but in addition, collaborations also tend to be highly dynamic. They tend to change shape and purpose frequently so effort put into developing mutual understanding can be wasted. Hard-earned trusting relationships can disappear when individuals move on to new jobs and so on. Getting the buzz from situations characterized by misunderstanding, disagreement and lack of real progress clearly requires more than the willingness to compromise and build trust.

Leadership Enactment

While there is great consistency across the literature on collaboration about the kind of themes that leaders must focus on, what is considered effective in terms of leadership enactment pertaining to different themes vary considerably. The reasons why approaches diverge, however, are not usually explicitly acknowledged or understood. For example, in a context characterized as "collaborative governance," the leader is usually a representative of a public agency and will seek to steer the joint efforts towards the achievement of the goals stipulated in public policy (Skelcher et al., 2005). It may not be necessary to enter into negotiations about goals as partners' commitment may be secured via contractual arrangements. In other contexts, such as collaborative entities governed via a network administrative organization, negotiation of goals may be seen as a vital leadership activity because goal congruence or goal consensus among partners provide the impetus for, and commitment to, the collaboration (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2010; Vangen and Huxham, 2012). Even so, extant research is not consistent with respect to whether a leader could or should focus on the negotiation of goals. For example, research has shown that genuine, congruent collaborative goals exist, if at all in an entanglement of other goals that are both real and imagined; goal diversity is far more prevalent than goal congruence (Vangen and Huxham, 2012). Therefore, a leader who chooses to emphasize communication about goals will face the risk of unearthing irreconcilable difference between collaboration partners. The extent to which the congruence between partners' goals is to be emphasised in thus a matter of concern.

Similarly, issues of power and perceived power imbalances can be tricky to deal with for individual leaders and their assessment of what needs doing will vary from context to context. Like issues relating to goals, power imbalances are likely to exist in any collaborative context.

For example, in context characterized as "collaborative governance," elected bodies and public agencies may be perceived as more powerful than other stakeholders, whereas in other entities, power may typically be skewed in favor of a lead organization. Different perceptions of power abound across different collaborative contexts and hence, how a leader chooses to address power imbalances will differ across contexts. That the enactment of leadership requires adjustment and judgement according to the characteristics of the context and nature of leadership is applicable across the generic themes.

Managing Paradoxical Tensions

The need for judgment is of course a usual requirement of any leader in any context. However, the fundamentally paradoxical nature of collaborative contexts suggests that successful leaders may have to be very comfortable with, and able to deal with, inherent tensions. For example, Ospina and Saz-Carranza (2010) focus on how leaders of successful networks manage collaborations. Following empirical research and the application of narrative inquiry (Ospina and Dodge, 2005), the authors identified two paradoxes: unity versus diversity and confrontation versus dialogue, and show how leaders respond to these paradoxes in undertaking both inward and outward focused work on behalf of the network. Their findings suggest that successful leaders respond in ways that honor both sides of the paradoxes by effectively addressing contradictory demands through inward-focused activities that facilitate interaction, cultivate relationships, and promote openness, and through outward-focused activities that emphasize managing credibility, multi-level working, and cultivating relationships. These conceptualizations offer leaders guidance on how to act, thus potentially removing some of the ambiguity and anxiety pertaining to the tensions.

The enactment of leadership of collaborative entities can in itself be presented as a tension between ideology and pragmatism in leadership activities. It is a tension between facilitative leadership activities focusing on embracing, empowering, involving, and mobilizing partners, and more authoritatively steering the collaboration's agenda via manipulation and politicking (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). The duality of the two opposing roles—and the conceptualization of different activities—is the heart of leadership enactment. Importantly, it is the leadership of a collaborative entity towards the achievement of collaborative advantage that legitimize the "authoritative" side of the tensions. Manipulation of agendas and politicking would not likely be seen as a legitimate form of leadership in collaborative contexts where an individual leads on behalf of selected partners rather than the entity per se.

Leadership 'in' collaborative contexts legitimately assumes a more relational nature. For example, Ospina and Foldy (2010) explored leadership in social change organizations where leaders lead on behalf of their organisation's mission, albeit importantly for the "greater good." Emphasizing leadership that brings diverse actors together to facilitate collaborative work, they identified five leadership practices that create conditions that bring diverse actors together and facilitate their ongoing ability for collaborative work: prompting cognitive shifts; naming and shaping identity; engaging in dialogue and difference; creating equitable governance mechanisms; and weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships. These authors also identified two themes that cut across these practices, that of "minimizing power inequalities" and the importance of recognizing the "strategic value of difference."

Conclusion

This paper has sought to develop practice-oriented theory of collaborative leadership by putting forth conceptual handles that enable future research to more accurately and holistically deal with leadership in collaborative contexts as an emergent but heretofore not well-understood phenomenon. We have drawn on both leadership theory relevant to the context of public sector collaboration and empirical research on collaboration over the last two decades in the UK and the US.

The discussion throughout the paper focuses on providing the conceptual clarity needed to continue collaborative leadership research. Such research often looks at one leader and the typical set of activities designed to further a public program, even though, as we make clear in the paper, leadership assumes different forms and purposes depending on the context within which collaboration occurs. The process and outcomes of a collaboration also depend greatly on the perceptions of the collaborative partners engaged in the process. It is often assumed that collaborative leadership is simply meant to get everyone "on the same page" in order to act on a problem or issue. While needed, it may be more productive to identify, explore, and adjust partner perceptions of the collaboration. Leadership of a collaboration is different from leadership in a collaboration, but each occurs simultaneously; recognizing who the leaders are, why they are leading, and to whom the actions are directed is a necessary part of leadership research. We have tried to offer some conceptual foci for addressing these questions.

The paper does not provide specific propositions for exploring or hypotheses for testing. Instead, it is our belief that too little theory on collaborative leadership is guiding empirical research and that basic conceptual confusion has seeped into our understanding of such

leadership. This paper offers an opportunity to spawn additional theory and continue a

conversation about this relatively unexplored area of research.

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33

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