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# HOW DO FOLLOWERS EXPERIENCE SHARED LEADERSHIP AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE? Understanding the relationality, processes and practices informing such collaboration.

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# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

## HOW DO FOLLOWERS EXPERIENCE SHARED LEADERSHIP AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE?

Understanding the relationality, processes and practices informing such collaboration.

by

**SYBILLE ERIKA SCHIFFMANN**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in fulfilment for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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Secondly, my mother Ute Schiffmann, from whom I have inherited tenacity, who would have been so proud of this achievement, and who herself would have loved to have had more opportunities for academic study.

## Author's Declaration

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At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

This thesis has been proofread by a third party; no factual changes or additions or amendments to the argument were made as a result of this process. A copy of the thesis prior to proofreading will be made available to the examiners upon request.

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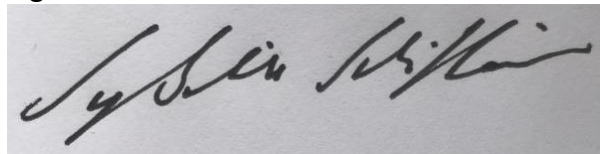
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**How do followers experience shared leadership as a lived experience?  
Understanding the relationality, processes and practices informing such  
collaboration.**

Within shared leadership research culture, the aspiration is to explore “leadership as a dynamic interactive influence process” at the group level, supporting goal achievement (Pearce and Conger, 2003, P.1). However, the motivation of much research has focused on performance improvement, whereby discrete leadership variables are examined, using reductionist methods, to determine relevant linkages to team effectiveness (Denis et al., 2012. See also Fairhurst et.al, 2020).

In expanding understanding of shared leadership from a follower perspective, enabling a fuller appreciation of how that has been experienced and operationalised over time, an immersive, participatory action research study was conducted, to facilitate a processual view of shared leadership; one that embraces relational aspects of shared leadership and considers its dynamic emergence within a hierarchical leadership setting. Unconventionally, Relational Cultural Theory has been applied to enable a more meaningful and nuanced consideration of this leadership phenomenon (Fletcher, 2012).

This expanded consideration of shared leadership has produced four main findings:

- The follower “voice” has been meaningfully expressed regarding experiences and actions, occurring throughout such collaboration.
- A more processual understanding of the shared leadership undertaking itself, reveals how the cultivation of interdependence enables the dynamic operationalisation of expertise in relational and reciprocal ways.
- The shifting nature of power dynamics has been explicated, as well as recognising the degree of interdependence occurring between followers and their leaders.

- Learning History methodology was innovatively applied to facilitate a more processual understanding of shared leadership, facilitating new theoretical and practical understanding.

This study challenges some of the negative connotations that may surround conceptualisations of followers and followership (Uhl-Bien, 2018), as well as actively elevating and emotionalising their experience, which is uncommon (Reitz, 2014).

Finally, this study, through its positive conceptualisation of share leadership effectively challenges the myth of individual achievement that pervades much organisational life (Miller, 2012).

# Table of Contents

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<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Author's Declaration .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>1.1 Introducing my thesis. ....</b>	<b>17</b>
<i>1.2 Inquiry approach and motivation. ....</i>	<i>19</i>
<b>1.3 Rationale for this study.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>1.3.1 Positioning this shared leadership study within the wider field of leadership studies. ....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>1.3.2 The research opportunities presented within the shared leadership arena. ....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>1.3.3 Why this study matters.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<b>1.4 The Research Question and Overview of the Study Objectives. ....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>1.5 Why this study matters and how it may support organisational improvement. ....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>1.6 My research opportunity. ....</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>1.6.1 Why this Housing Association became the preferred research site for the study of shared leadership.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<b>1.7 Introducing Key Concepts for this Thesis supporting Leadership in the ‘Plural’. ....</b>	<b>31</b>
<i>1.7.1 Locating the leader follower relationship at the heart of this study. ....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>1.7.2 Relational leadership within followership. ....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>1.7.3 Relational Cultural Theory. ....</i>	<i>33</i>
<b>1.8 Research Timeline supporting the construction of the Learning History. ....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>1.9 Overview of findings and contribution. ....</b>	<b>37</b>
<i>1.9.1 My contribution to knowledge. ....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>1.9.2 How is this thesis structured? .....</i>	<i>40</i>
<b>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Introduction: Exploring leadership in the plural.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>2.1: How and why shared leadership and followership are positioned together within this study.....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>2.2 Overview of key trends favouring the emergence of shared leadership as topic of study.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<i>2.2.1 Drivers informing our changing, conceptualisations of leadership. ....</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>2.2.2 Locating leadership before it was shared. Theoretical antecedents of shared leadership. ....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>2.2.3 Predominant, theoretical perspectives that privilege the individual leader. ....</i>	<i>48</i>



2.2.4 Locating Shared Leadership in terms of its historical influences and antecedents. ....	49
2.2.5. Key, historical influencers of the shared leadership phenomenon. ....	50
<b>2.3 Positioning shared leadership within pluralistic leadership research. ....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>2.3.1 The expansion of the field of shared leadership. ....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>2.3.2 The promise and the limitations of shared leadership. ....</b>	<b>54</b>
2.3.3 Unifying the shared leadership field-Implications for the study of shared leadership. ....	55
2.3.4 Distinguishing key ontological and epistemological issues relating to the ‘project’ of shared leadership. ....	58
2.3.5 Problematising shared leadership. ....	59
2.3.6 Research implications raised by these theoretical positions. ....	61
A lack of emphasis on the relational / processual perspectives of shared leadership. ....	61
2.3.7 Recognising the uncertain and negotiable nature of authority within shared leadership environments. ....	62
2.3.8 Considering shared leadership within its constitutive context. ....	63
2.3.9 Acknowledging the presence of leader follower power dynamics. ....	64
<b>2.4 Empirical studies supporting shared leadership. ....</b>	<b>66</b>
2.4.1 Positivity bias in shared leadership studies. ....	67
<b>2.5 The Lived Experience of Shared Leadership: Processual Exceptions. ....</b>	<b>68</b>
2.5.2 The second research perspective. ....	69
<b>2.6 The expansion of the field of shared leadership. ....</b>	<b>70</b>
2.6.1 Considering Cell 1. ....	71
2.6.2 Summarising the research opportunities within the shared leadership field. ....	71
<b>2.7 Revisiting the leader follower relationship: Trends in Shared Leadership studies. ....</b>	<b>72</b>
2.7.1 Recognising the potential ontological mismatch in the study of shared leadership. ....	73
2.7.1 Considering power within leader follower relationships. ....	74
2.7.2 Acknowledging power dynamics within the leadership relationship. ....	75
2.7.3 Considering power within shared leadership and the implications for this study. ....	76
2.7.4 Considering the predominant absence of followers in the leadership literature. ....	78
2.7.5 Challenging the primacy of the formally appointed, individual leader, in favour of an expanded view, that examines the leadership relationship. ....	78
<b>2.8 Assessing the potential of other pluralistic/relational leadership perspectives to contribute to an understanding concerning the nature of Shared Leadership. ....</b>	<b>80</b>
2.8.1 Considering emotion within Relational Leadership. ....	81
2.8.2 Assessing research potential within the relational leadership ‘between space.’ ....	83
2.8.3 Considering emotion within the leadership relationship. ....	84
2.8.4 Re-igniting the ‘Relational Space’ within shared leadership. ....	84
<b>2.8.5 Additional concepts supporting an expanded view of shared leadership. ....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>2.9 How action research supports this study’s research objectives. ....</b>	<b>87</b>

<b>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY CHAPTER.....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>3.2 Establishing a supporting philosophical position for this study. ....</b>	<b>91</b>
3.2.1 Positioning shared leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon. ....	92
3.2.2 Reframing the study of shared leadership from a followers' perspective. ....	93
3.2.3 The contribution of a phenomenological position for this study. ....	93
<b>3.3 The methodological strategy for this study. ....</b>	<b>94</b>
3.3.1 Emotionalising the leader/follower relationship. ....	95
3.3.3 Why all this is relevant to me as a researcher. ....	98
<b>3.4 Participatory action research .....</b>	<b>100</b>
3.4.1 Extending epistemology.....	100
3.4.2 Presentational knowing. ....	101
3.4.3 Practical knowing.....	102
3.4.4 The role of learning histories in action research.....	103
3.4.4.1 Learning history versus case study .....	104
3.4.5 Embracing the 'spirit' of co-operative Inquiry. ....	105
3.5 Initiating a Co-operative Inquiry. Overview of my approach.....	106
3.5.1 Exploring my positionality as a researcher. ....	107
3.5.2 Action research orientations.....	109
First person inquiry .....	109
Second person inquiry.....	111
Third person inquiry.....	111
3.5.3 Participants in this study.....	113
3.5.4 Negotiating access to the group and adhering to ethical principles of action research.....	115
3.5.5 Building mutual trust with my fellow researchers.....	117
3.5.6 Differentiating participants' role as co-researchers within this study. ....	119
<b>3.6 Data collection techniques.....</b>	<b>121</b>
3.6.1 Other data collection techniques supporting Co-operative Inquiry.....	122
<b>3.7 Research approach and analysis. ....</b>	<b>127</b>
3.7.1 Phase 1.....	128
3.7.1.1 Phase 1 supporting organisational learning.....	129
3.7.2 Addressing concerns of validity within this study. ....	130
3.7.3 Embracing contradiction, mistakes and learning in learning histories. ....	132
3.7.4 Managing the integrity of the story. ....	132
3.7.5 Reflexivity: Avoiding collusion during the action research process. ....	133
3.7.6 Considering insider/outsider voices in this research process. ....	134
3.7.7 Acknowledging power differentials within such encounters. ....	136
<b>3.8 Overview of the learning history artifact and its dual purposes. ....</b>	<b>137</b>

3.8.1 Key design principles informing the artifact. ....	137
3.8.2 How this Learning History was structured. ....	138
<b>3.9 Conclusion. ....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4 ENTERING THE RESEARCH FIELD. ....</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>Overview of the field research process and how that relates to analysis of findings.....</b>	<b>142</b>
4.1. Chronology of the action research process aligned to strategy planning. ....	144
<b>4.2 How this chapter is organised. ....</b>	<b>150</b>
4.2.1 Entering the research field to co-create this learning history. ....	151
4.2.2 The Reality of Action Research. ....	152
4.2.3 Experimenting with the learning history format ....	153
4.2.4 My application of the learning history method in the field ....	153
4.2.5 How the learning history guide was organised. ....	160
4.2.6 Ending the action research cycle ....	161
<b>4.3 How I sought to access the different ways of knowing in action research.....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>4.4 Accessing different ways of knowing through the application of Participatory Action Research ..</b>	<b>164</b>
4.4.1 Why does this matter for this research study?.....	164
4.4.2 Accessing experiential knowing in this study.....	165
4.4.3 Emotionalising the leader/follower relationship.....	169
4.4.5 Accessing experiential knowing: Relational dynamics revealed at the site.....	171
4.4.6 Identifying the negative effects of power dynamics.....	174
4.4.7 Emergent themes related to this collective leadership experience: .....	175
Exploring power dynamics. ....	175
4.4.8 Evidence of relational leadership practices that facilitated collaboration.....	175
<b>4.5 Accessing presentational knowing.....</b>	<b>177</b>
4.5.1 Travelling into the unknown. ....	179
4.5.2 Having a Say .....	181
4.5.3 Accessing participants' feelings concerning their experience of sharing leadership.....	183
<b>4.6 Accessing Presentational Knowing. Other group processes.....</b>	<b>187</b>
4.6.1 Visioneers and Discoverers' "Key Moments of Truth":.....	189
4.6.2 Mission Possible.....	190
4.6.3 Functional Reviews. ....	192
4.6.4 Tools for Change: Featuring 7 Cs Relational Leadership Framework (7 Stages of Effective Relationship). ....	192
4.6.5 How this visual road map/high-level review revealed other organisational factors affecting this planning process. ....	194
4.6.6 Deepening the dialogue between co-researchers. ....	194
4.6.6.1 Applying Two-Column reflection: Process and Impact. ....	196
4.6.7 Further reflections on the customised application of Two-Column Reflection.....	199

4.6.8 Evaluating Two-Column Reflection as action research method. ....	201
4.6.9 The pursuit of critical subjectivity. ....	203
<b>4.7 Accessing Presentational Knowing: A deeper dive. ....</b>	<b>204</b>
4.7.1 Capturing the affective elements of the shared leadership experience through visuality. The experience at the third workshop. ....	206
4.7.2 Eliciting powerful affective responses through visuality. ....	209
4.7.3 Evoking affective viewer responses. ....	211
<b>4.8 Exploring the power of visuality in the development of the strategic vision. ....</b>	<b>213</b>
4.8.1 Comparing and contrasting these two presentations. ....	215
4.8.2 Visual analysis of both presentation events. ....	217
4.8.3 Accessing Presentational Knowing: Disseminating research findings digitally through the construction of a web site to be accessed by all involved. ....	218
4.8.4 Identifying issues of accessibility within this learning history. ....	219
4.8.5 Encouraging collaboration in the interpretation of presentational findings. ....	220
4.8.6 Final observations on the role of visuality in the construction of this learning history. ....	221
<b>4.9 Conclusion. ....</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5 RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES INFORMING SHARED LEADERSHIP. ....</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>5.1 Distinguishing RCT from other relational leadership theories. ....</b>	<b>225</b>
5.1.2 Linking RCT to followership theory. ....	226
<b>5.2 Accessing propositional knowing through RCT. ....</b>	<b>227</b>
5.2.1 Establishing this study's fit with RCT's tenets and principles. ....	229
5.2.2 Positioning RCT within the research stream of collective leadership. ....	230
5.2.3 About Relational Cultural Theory ....	231
5.2.4 Aligning RCT with feminist principles and alternative theories of human development ....	232
5.2.5 Expanding our shared leadership perspective(s) of these working relationships, as assessed against the key tenets of Relational Cultural Theory ....	233
5.2.6 Creating a more nuanced understanding of the working relationships occurring within shared leadership settings. ....	234
5.2.7 Understanding more fully how shared leadership may be practiced. ....	235
5.2.8 Cultivating dynamic states of growth and development through relationship. ....	236
5.2.9 Attending to power dynamics in shared leadership. ....	237
5.2.9.1 Power dynamics within the context of social change. ....	239
<b>5.3 Applying RCT within this organisational context. ....</b>	<b>240</b>
5.3.1 What makes this relational mentoring approach different? ....	241
5.3.2 Shifting power dynamics in RCT relational mentoring. ....	242
<b>5.4 RCT relational mentoring framework applied to this organisational context. ....</b>	<b>243</b>
5.4.1 Setting out the conditions of RCT supporting interdependence and a self-in-relation outlook. ....	245
5.4.2 Facilitating a more holistic view of the shared leadership experience. ....	246

<b>5.5 Conclusion. ....</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6 EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONAL CONDITIONS SUPPORTING SHARED LEADERSHIP....</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>6.1 Operating from a self-in-relation position.....</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>6.2 Seeking out the opportunities for growth fostering interactions.....</b>	<b>250</b>
6.2.1 <i>Seeking greater connection with colleagues. ....</i>	251
6.2.2 <i>Embracing the opportunity for mutual empowerment. ....</i>	252
6.2.3 <i>Acknowledgement of the condition of vulnerability with RCT, its potential merits and drawbacks. ....</i>	254
6.2.4 <i>Observing the potential drawbacks of the experience of vulnerability. ....</i>	257
<b>6.3 Exploring relevant relational skills and competencies that informed this work. ....</b>	<b>258</b>
6.3.1 <i>Cultivating the skill of vulnerability at this housing association.....</i>	259
6.3.2 <i>Exploring the RCT skill of (co)-response-ability within this planning process.....</i>	262
6.3.3 <i>Exploring the skill of fluid expertise, informing shared leadership influence and the impact of that on shifting power dynamics. ....</i>	263
6.3.4 <i>Observing the impact of fluidity of expertise on these followers in relation to their leaders. ....</i>	263
6.3.5 <i>Observing the potential for more negative effects of shared influence.....</i>	266
<b>6.4 Fluidity of expertise informing organisational learning.....</b>	<b>267</b>
6.4.1 <i>Fluidity of expertise enabling the expression of follower voice within this endeavour. ....</i>	268
<b>6.5 The relational leadership practice and process of reciprocity-in-action. ....</b>	<b>271</b>
6.5.1 <i>Reciprocity demonstrated as both high-level process and practice. ....</i>	272
6.5.2 <i>Reciprocity-in-action during the strategic building process. ....</i>	274
6.5.3 <i>The expression of mutuality as a relational practice.....</i>	275
6.5.4 <i>Integrating the ethos of mutuality and reciprocity within this undertaking. ....</i>	278
6.5.5 <i>Further reflections on these relational leadership states, skills and practices and their impact on all involved. ....</i>	278
<b>6.6 Recognising the wider influence of power dynamics within this undertaking. ....</b>	<b>280</b>
6.6.2 <i>Reclaiming follower voice through the lived experience of interdependence. ....</i>	283
6.6.3 <i>Acknowledging the limits of follower voice due to power asymmetries. ....</i>	284
<b>6.7 Further reflections on ceding power to support shared leadership. ....</b>	<b>286</b>
6.7.1 <i>Recognising power at the organisational level.....</i>	286
6.7.2 <i>Considering the impact of these contextual factors on relational dynamics. ....</i>	287
6.7.3 <i>Incorporating the principles of shared leadership into corporate policy.....</i>	289
6.7.4 <i>Acknowledging power dynamics in shared leadership practice. ....</i>	291
6.7.5 <i>Working relationally with power and vulnerability. ....</i>	293
6.7.6 <i>The absence of this shared leadership experience in corporate policy. ....</i>	294
6.7.7 <i>The absence of formalised, on-going relational development for senior leaders, or board, in relation to their followers. ....</i>	295

6.7.8 The absence of further opportunities for growth fostering interactions between senior leaders and followers. ....	296
<b>6.8 Reflections on the lack of further opportunities for such growth fostering interactions. ....</b>	<b>297</b>
6.8.1 Hypothesising an alternative scenario to foster growth-in-connection opportunities. ....	299
6.8.2 Accounting for the reinforcement of unconscious power dynamics. ....	301
6.8.3 What may be lost through dis-connection. ....	302
6.9 Conclusion. ....	303
<b>CHAPTER 7 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS. ....</b>	<b>305</b>
<b>7.1 How this chapter is organised. ....</b>	<b>309</b>
<b>7.2 Recognising collective leadership beyond the formal leader. ....</b>	<b>310</b>
<b>7.3 Re-locating this study within the expanded field of collective leadership. ....</b>	<b>311</b>
7.3.1 Considering shared leadership beyond the entity perspective. ....	314
7.3.2 Expanding the relational horizons of shared leadership. ....	315
7.3.3 De-constructing and operationalising Fluid Expertise within this study. ....	317
7.3.4 Locating where Fluidity of Expertise is being enacted. Event 1: The Takeover. ....	319
7.3.5 Locating Fluidity of Expertise between peers. Strategy handover. ....	320
7.3.6 Fluidity of Expertise across the organisational hierarchy. The Handover of strategy to board. ....	320
7.3.7 The role of culture supporting Fluidity of Expertise. ....	321
<b>7.4 Examining the practice of Fluidity of Expertise, informed by vulnerability and reciprocity. ....</b>	<b>322</b>
7.4.1 Exploring vulnerability or the art of “not knowing”. ....	322
7.4.2 Using “not knowing” as a creative stimulus for inquiry. ....	323
7.4.3 Letting go of assumptions and pre-conceived ideas. ....	324
<b>7.5 Deconstructing reciprocity as a key organisational practice. ....</b>	<b>326</b>
7.5.1 Reciprocity informing the progress of the shared leadership relationship. ....	329
7.5.2 The process and practice of 7C s as a relational framework. ....	329
7.5.3 Re-visiting Open Space as a high-level relational process embracing 7 C’s. ....	331
7.5.4 Further Reflections on reciprocity-in action. ....	335
<b>7.6 The changing nature of challenge within a social context. ....</b>	<b>336</b>
7.6.1 The role of challenge informing these relational dialogues. ....	338
7.6.2 Challenge Example 2. ....	338
7.6.3 Dis-connection with shared leadership relationships. ....	340
7.6.4 Reflections on the practice of challenge and the paradox of relational dis-connection. ....	342
<b>7.7 Recognising the shifting nature of power dynamics within this social context. ....</b>	<b>343</b>
7.7.1 The impact of such connection between these followers and their leaders. ....	344
7.7.2 Unintended reinforcement of power asymmetries. ....	345
7.7.3. Exposing the shadow side of this shared leadership endeavour. ....	346
7.7.4 Journey Mapping revealing other negative impacts of this work. ....	347

<b>7.8 Identifying the relational limits of the follower leader connection.....</b>	<b>348</b>
7.8.1 Acknowledging the influence of history on participants' experience of power dynamics. ....	349
7.8.2 Recognising the impact of power asymmetries on follower leader relationships.....	350
7.8.3 Recognising relational versus non-relational, shared leadership practice. ....	351
7.8.4 Recognising the limits of shared leadership practice with wider, staff groups.....	352
7.8.5 Unintended reinforcement of power asymmetries by Discoverers and Visioneers. ....	353
7.8.6 Hypothesising a more relational approach to the launch of this strategy with staff.....	354
<b>7.9 Conclusion. ....</b>	<b>356</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8 ACHIEVEMENTS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND REFLECTIONS. ....</b>	<b>359</b>
<b>8.1 Overview of my contribution to knowledge.....</b>	<b>361</b>
8.1.1 Considering emotion within shared leadership relationships.....	362
8.1.2 Explicating reciprocity-in-action within the follower/leader relationship.....	363
8.1.3 Deconstructing power dynamics within follower leader relationships .....	364
8.1.4 Contribution to methodology and notable developments in the application of learning history methodology.....	365
<b>8.2 Reflections of findings and methods and their limitations .....</b>	<b>367</b>
8.2.1 The universal power of story.....	368
8.2.2 Reflections on methods.....	369
8.2.3. Pragmatic application of co-operative inquiry principles.....	370
8.2.4 Learning History versus mixed methods approach.....	371
<b>8.3 Opportunities for further research. ....</b>	<b>372</b>
8.3.1 Exploring other aspects of shared leadership.....	374
8.4 Addressing power issues within collective leadership settings. ....	374
8.3.2 Evolving the learning history genre. ....	375
<b>8.4 Further discussion of contribution.....</b>	<b>376</b>
8.4.1 Challenging letting go of followership.....	377
8.4.2 Reading emotion: Re-igniting the relational space within shared leadership.....	378
<b>8.5 The operationalisation of Fluidity of Expertise: Expressing vulnerability and challenge at work. ....</b>	<b>379</b>
8.5.1 The operationalisation of fluidity of expertise – The practice of vulnerability. ....	381
8.5.2 Vulnerability conceived in growth terms. ....	381
8.5.3 Practices supporting vulnerability. ....	382
8.5.4 The operationalisation of Fluidity of Expertise: The practice of challenge.....	383
8.5.5 Integrating vulnerability and challenge within shared leadership. ....	384
<b>8.6 Power realised through interdependence.....</b>	<b>385</b>
8.6.1 Identifying the limits of power and influence within shared leadership. ....	386
<b>8.7 Innovating with learning history as a research methodology: .....</b>	<b>387</b>
<b>Facilitating joint reflexivity with participants. ....</b>	<b>387</b>

8.7.1 Accessing presentational knowing in this research process.....	388
8.7.2 Embracing the mythic imperative within learning histories.....	389
<b>8.8 Concluding this thesis.....</b>	<b>390</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>391</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>403</b>
Appendix A-0.....	403
Appendix A INVITATION TO STAFF AT xxxxx HOUSING GROUP TO PARTICIPATE IN A CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY .....	403
Appendix B On the practice of how we work together: Extract from my personal journal at the Board Residential with senior leaders 09.11.16 .....	408
Appendix C On the practice of how we work together: Extract from my personal journal at the Board Residential with senior leaders 09.11.16 .....	408
Appendix D Reflections post workshop 1 with the Discoverers and Visioneers .....	409
Appendix E PROPOSAL TO BOARD FROM THE EXTERNAL OD CONSULTANT .....	410
CREATING VISION, ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY, GENERATING RENEWAL.....	410
Appendix F Questionnaire for Discoverers and Visioneers informing discussions at the Final Workshop 5. ....	416
Appendix G Individual qualitative questionnaire issued four months after completion of the research. ....	418
Appendix H Supporting Timeline informing this shift to a more pluralistic leadership approach.....	425
Appendix I Composition of new collaborative project teams .....	426
Appendix J Role Profile Discoverer.....	426
Appendix K Creative research activities .....	426
Appendix L Discoverer findings informing strategy related to the topic of Profile and Reputation.....	427
Appendix M X to 2023 The Vision: Profile and Reputation .....	428
Appendix N “Why Shared Leadership? Extract from a corporate briefing. The X approach to Shared Leadership 2018.....	429
Table 1 A map of collective approaches to leadership .....	53
Table 2 Key Features and Theoretical Assumptions of Shared Leadership Research ....	60
Table 3 Research participants .....	116
Table 4 Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory.....	244
Table 5 Relational Skills and Competencies .....	258
.....	321
Table 6 7 Cs framework compared against AoC competencies.....	335
Table 7 Relational Practice Versus Nonrelational Practice and Relational Malpractice .....	355
Figure 1 Diagram 1.8 Research Timeline .....	35
Figure 2 My reflections, observations, and participant's quotes .....	124
Figure 3 Mapping and reflecting on key steps/milestones and personal impact of the strategic work they had undertaken .....	125
Figure 4 Key motivations, feelings and experiences related to the groups’ experiences during this work .....	126



Figure 5 Photos of Workshop 2.....	155
Figure 6 Illustration of Two-column reflection being constructed. ....	158
Figure 7 Travelling into the Unknown.....	179
Figure 8 Sailing to 2023 .....	180
Figure 9 Having a Say .....	181
Figure 10 " Still feels new to me...: .....	183
Figure 11 BEING INVOLVED AND CONTRIBUTING TO THE BIGGER PICTURE .....	184
Figure 12 Under Pressure.....	185
Figure 13 Discoverer Key Moments of Truth Map.....	188
Figure 14 Visioneer Key Moments of Truth Map.....	188
Figure 15 Example of completed two-column reflection shared as a PowerPoint presentation visual in workshop 2. ....	195
Figure 16 Two-Column Reflection in Action .....	198
Figure 17 A,B,C,D Further observations on the or customised application of two-column reflection method .....	199
Figure 18 narrative map detailing the key steps in the journey of co-creating strategy, including direct freefall writing reflections/quotes from participants. ....	207
Figure 19 Group Image and Close-Up: Creating the Mock-up of the Front Cover .....	210
Figure 20 Front covers Magazine Mockups .....	211
Figure 21 Close Up visual of a Tardis.....	212
Figure 22 Workshop image depicting shared leadership. ....	310
Figure 23 Image of collective leadership development.....	319
Figure 24 Sail the 7 Cs .....	326
Figure 25 Scharmer's Relational Dialogue Framework.....	330

**TITLE: How followers experience shared leadership.**

**Understanding the relationality, processes and practices informing such collaboration.**

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introducing my thesis.

---

This thesis is concerned with extending and developing our understanding of shared leadership from a followers' perspective, in ways that embrace both theoretical and practical perspectives. Shared leadership as a research stream forms part of an "emerging theoretical umbrella" of collective leadership (CL), where it, like other pluralistic leadership research streams, is positioned (Ospina *et al.*, 2020, p. 442). This is also where its relationship to hierarchical leadership, and its impacts on work and performance for instance, may therefore be examined. Specifically, this thesis is concerned with exploring the lived experience that has occurred, due to the shift to a different, more pluralistic form of leadership and experienced, first-hand, from a follower perspective. This experience is one that has been accounted for by those directly involved and affected by it, who were operating in relation to their senior leaders. These were front-line staff and middle managers, working within a public sector/social sector operating environment and a conventional hierarchical structure, who were actively engaged in the co-creation of organisational strategy with their senior

leadership team and the Board of a social Housing Association in the Northeast of England<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to many shared leadership studies, with their predominant focus on organisational antecedents and performance outcomes, this exploration provides rather richer insights into the nature of this collective experience itself (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012; Wang, Waldman and Zhang, 2014). This shared experience itself is demonstrably complex and dynamic and is one where followers' motivations, attitudes and skills infuse the construction of mutuality and fluidity of expertise, effectively influencing their working relationships with their peers and with their senior leaders (Fletcher, 2012). This shared experience is also underpinned by key organisational processes and practices, that facilitate its effective operationalisation and is also notably informed by power dynamics that affect, not just how leadership may be shared but also delineates the limits, or boundaries of that shared influence.

In this thesis a new, different 'voice' for followers is proposed, one that seeks to redress the balance somewhat in terms of the attention they typically receive in the leadership arena, as compared to leaders and leadership (Bligh, 2011; Collinson, 2006; Ford and Harding, 2018). While recognising that no generally accepted definition for followership exists, this study seeks to recast followers and followership in a much more positive light and away from the more inferior connotations that may be associated with these terms (Jackson and Parry, 2018; Carsten, Harms and Uhl-Bien, 2014).

---

<sup>3</sup> Social Sector organisations are defined as No for Profit organisations , where performance is assessed relative to mission, as opposed to financial returns. Jim Collins: Good to Great and the Social Sectors 2006. The social Housing Association that is the focus of this study is responsible for the management of many local authority properties in the North East of England, hence the reference to and parallels being drawn between public sector and social sector contexts.

The pragmatic application of action research methodology using visual methods, resulted in the creation of a Learning History, whereby original data has been generated, that sheds light on this shared leadership experience, informed directly by the first-hand accounts of those involved. This methodology notably has not been previously applied to explore the lived experience of shared leadership and has proved very fruitful, in providing a more nuanced and fuller account of those directly involved in sharing leadership, with peers and in relation to their senior leaders.

## 1.2 Inquiry approach and motivation.

This inquiry may be described as a “ Researcher Initiated Inquiry”, constituting high researcher and high subject involvement and carried out on the assumption that richer insights and knowledge could therefore be generated through joint data review and analysis between ‘co-researchers’, working together to explore the research question (Schein, 2008). This thesis adopts first person and second person action research positions predominantly. I will elaborate further on these positions in chapter 3.

Additionally, these different inquiry positions have had implications for the pragmatic application of action research methods utilised in this study, which I will outline shortly. These inquiry positions are also informed by the idea of reflexivity in action research, i.e., the capacity to examine one’s research actions reflexively and to recognise how power may be exercised in research processes, given “a researcher’s power to perceive, interpret and communicate about their research participants” (Reid and Frisby, 2008, p. 96). In view of the democratic ambitions of action research, it was important to embrace the lived experience of these followers and recognise their potential contribution, offering a counterpoint to those dominant leadership discourses mentioned earlier. Therefore, the decision was made to actively engage a group of followers on this ‘shared leadership’ topic of mutual interest, which was examined collectively in group settings,

with a view to enabling both greater equality in the research process and for follower 'voice' to be effectively articulated. With reference again to the pragmatic adaptation of narrative and visual research methods, it should be noted that this was not a co-operative inquiry in the classic, or pure sense. While adhering to the democratic aspirations of AR, the reality of conducting a co-operative inquiry, involving the full participation of this group in considering all aspects of the research purpose and process was simply not feasible, e.g., their formulation of the key inquiry questions, or their participation in session design, or facilitation (Reason and Heron, date unknown). This was due to the demands of their day-to-day roles, combined with the additional work of being actively involved at the time in this shared leadership undertaking. Rather than being full co-subjects in this research I was therefore embraced as an ethnographic visitor to this site and through first person and second person inquiry orientations, I was able to reflect on and question reflexively with this group regarding their firsthand experiences, as they were happening, of shared leadership.

### 1.3 Rationale for this study.

---

The nature of leadership in public sector organisations is changing, i.e., where this study is, broadly speaking, located, namely a social housing association in the Northeast of England. It is argued that, increased complexity within the operating environment at the organisational and sectoral levels, affecting service delivery, calls for a different order of leadership; the nature of which is increasingly collaborative (Ospina and Foldy, 2016).

Such complexity requires instead "a negotiated, team-based approach to leading" that can engage a diverse range of professionals, plus the likelihood of diverse "motivations,

values and practices”, which may not neatly align (Ferlie, 2013, p. 250). The impacts of such shifts in this operating environment are also explored in the report “21<sup>st</sup> century Public Servant” (Needham and Mangan, 2014). Here there are calls for a shift from ‘individual’ leaders to ‘leadership’, the nature of which is much more collaborative and distributed throughout the organisation. This view is shared by others (Ospina *et al.*, 2020), who maintain that heroic and hierarchical leadership perspectives still dominate, despite the emergence of alternative voices relating to more collaborative forms of working in this arena; (See Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Osborne, 2010)

### 1.3.1 Positioning this shared leadership study within the wider field of leadership studies.

Shared leadership is just one in a host of pluralistic, or collective leadership responses, which are now deemed necessary, to meet the needs of these organisations facing rapid change, including increasingly complex technological shifts, which no one leader is solely equipped to navigate (Ulhøi and Müller, 2014a). This study, however, is not concerned with “leadership responsibility (as) disassociated from the organisational hierarchy”, as is the case for research into distributed leadership, network leadership, or complexity leadership for instance (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008, p. 11). There, the focal point, or locus of leadership investigation resides at the system level (Ospina *et al.*, 2020).

Whilst acknowledging shared leadership alongside the many other conceptualisations of pluralistic, or collective forms of leadership “that have emerged as adaptive responses to (the) post-industrial economic revolution”, it is also recognised by some writers on this topic that, the relational dimension of leadership fundamentally informs how shared leadership is characterised; the implication being, at its core “leading has no meaning without following”, whereby such relationships are being directly informed by

asymmetrical power relations (Seers, 2018, cited in: Alexy *et al.*, 2018, p. 26: see also Uhl-Bien, 2006, 2014) see also Uhl-Bien, 2006, 2014).

Similar investigations into what therefore may be described as “differentiated leadership roles” within organisations/institutions, may be traced back to studies by Follett (1924); see also Barnard (1968) (Benne and Sheats, (Benne and Sheats, 1948a)1948) etc. (ibid).

Drawing on Seer’s definition (2018) of shared leadership is therefore useful, because it acknowledges the association with the organisational hierarchy and recognises “the existence of differentiated role relationships within a work unit”, which may range from “little or none to highly differentiated influence” (Seers, 2018, p.27).

### 1.3.2 The research opportunities presented within the shared leadership arena.

As will be explored in the chapter 2 literature review, there is already ample research into the topic of shared leadership. One of the notable perspectives in such research concerns the examination of the key antecedents associated with the study of this shared leadership phenomenon, which amongst other factors, such as support structures, culture and relationship longevity, also includes the not inconsiderable influence and contribution of “hierarchical/vertical leaders”, in the cultivation and support for the formation of shared leadership at the team level (Pearce CL, Manz C and HP, 2017See also Hess, (2015), Masal, (2015), Lewandowski and Bligh (2015)). The logical extension of such hierarchical influence presupposes the presence of power dynamics, which may also be affecting these shared leadership environments, in light of the evidence of such conscious empowerment of ‘followers’, who comprise these team groupings.

The topic of power itself remains generally under-researched within the wider, collective leadership space, as well as within the field of shared leadership itself (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020). As well as the opportunity to explore power dynamics within these shared leadership settings, it therefore also becomes necessary to acknowledge ideas of followers and followership, by virtue of this being a concurrent role, or function of those team members with differentiated role influence, who are operating, both in relation to their peers and their hierarchical leaders. The topic of followership is similarly under-researched, both generally and in the public/social sector, in which this study is located.

Finally, the predominant focus within shared leadership studies has been on the examination of antecedents as vital precursors to cultivation of shared leadership, and performance related outcomes, of which shared leadership was considered a significant predictor (Denis *et al.*, 2012, Wassenaar and Pearce, 2018) (Denis *et al.*, 2012 Wassenaar and Pearce, 2018). As mentioned earlier this study provides a fuller, more processual understanding concerning how, where and the ways in which leadership is actually being shared, or otherwise.

### 1.3.3 Why this study matters.

This study therefore provides a rather unique opportunity to examine the following:

- How such leadership influence is actually being experienced over time, from a follower perspective.
- How, in practical terms such influence may be shared, or operationalised, and its impacts/effects on the working relationships of all involved.



- It is also useful to understand how such shared leadership influence may be practically negotiated, and realised by those involved, with respect for existing organisational cultural norms and prevailing power dynamics.

#### 1.4 The Research Question and Overview of the Study Objectives.

---

My research question and objectives therefore are a response to the rationale provided for this study. This thesis aims therefore to explicate the phenomenon of shared leadership, occurring within a specific organisational context. Specifically, the research question I propose is:

**How do followers experience shared leadership as a lived experience?**

**This is with a view to understanding the relationality, processes and practices informing such collaboration.**

This question calls for a different methodological approach, given the need to understand the nature of the shared leadership experience itself and will be introduced shortly in this chapter.

The following research objectives are a considered response to the issues and questions raised in this thesis. To that end, the attendant topics of followership, relational leadership, emotion, and power are considered as relevant topics, worthy of further examination within the scope of this research. It is anticipated that our understanding of shared leadership as a lived experience from a followers' perspective will therefore be extended, in ways that address both practical and theoretical perspectives. Therefore, three key objectives have been formulated, to address this main research topic in the following ways.

**Objective 1.**

A key objective for this study is to understand more fully the nature of the 'relationality' followers feel and experience, in the context of sharing leadership with their leaders and working with other staff. This objective therefore invites an emotional reading of events, key experiences, and their associated emotional impact. This objective also ties in with the definition of followership, as one "involving an investigation of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process" (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p. 89). Such a processual, relational view is relevant, as this study is concerned with how followers' actually experience leadership, as something other than that "imparted to (them) by a leader from above" (Pearce and Conger, 2003, p. 13).

As explored earlier, followers' experience of a more pluralistic, or collectively conceived form of leadership is therefore of particular but not exclusive interest here. It is also important to acknowledge that the potential scope of this study is therefore expanded, beyond favouring either a leader-centric, or follower-centric perspective exclusively. Instead, an expanded, relational view will be investigated. The relationship itself therefore becomes the unit of analysis.

Nonetheless, as is evident from the analysis of the shared leadership research, that theoretically underpins this study, it may be observed that shared leadership studies have traditionally tended to focus on senior leaders and, or on those in formal positions of authority. Therefore, this study also attempts to redress the balance and address the lack of 'voice' generally afforded to those followers directly operating within a given leadership setting, where shared leadership is occurring.

**Objective 2.**

This links to the second objective of this research, which is to understand more fully the processual nature of shared leadership itself; informing how shared leadership is being operationalised, or practiced, by those involved.

Much shared leadership research has conventionally focused on performance and on establishing causality in that regard (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012). A predominant focus has been the study of discrete leadership variables, and the extent to which they contribute or detract from organisational performance. With this focus on antecedents and outcomes, coupled with quantitative methods, more processual accounts of how, or whether leadership was shared at all, are generally lacking.

By shifting the research focus in favour of constructing a more processual conceptualisation of the shared leadership experience, the complexity and dynamic nature of relating in this way may be effectively demonstrated, thus creating a unique opportunity to learn from such dynamic processes and practices accordingly.

The ontological and epistemological position adopted for this study is therefore a phenomenological/ interpretivist position. This is to facilitate a richer, more processual understanding concerning the nature of the phenomenon that is shared leadership, experienced within a given organisational context.

**Objective 3.**

There has been a unique opportunity to examine a shift or change in terms of how followers and leaders have uniquely experienced that particular 'gear shift', changing the leadership paradigm, from what may be termed an 'agentic' approach, to a more pluralistic one. It is maintained by the senior leadership team within this Housing Association, that a distinct shift has been occurring since 2010/11, in terms of their

recognised leadership culture and practice. This has been marked by a distinct move away from the primacy of the formally appointed, individual leader and their overriding authority and influence, to a 'decentering', in leadership terms, of the *exclusive* influence (my emphasis), or authority, of any given individual, thus favouring more pluralistic, collective approaches to leadership. If we therefore assume that such influence, or authority has shifted in followers' favour over time, it is therefore beneficial to understand how staff have experienced this shift in the context of the power relationship and dynamic they experience, in relation to their senior leaders. This organisation has continued to operate what they term as an "authentic hierarchy", where conventional, functional roles and positions are maintained. It is therefore illuminating to learn how power dynamics have been experienced, both horizontally and vertically, by this strategy building group of volunteers, working in new ways with their peers, and in relation to their senior leaders. Therefore, the influence and impact of such power dynamics will be examined accordingly.

#### 1.5 Why this study matters and how it may support organisational improvement.

---

A real need exists to provide fuller, more detailed accounts into the nature of such collaborative experience generally and specifically from a follower perspective, given their increasing requirements to work in these more pluralistic ways within public sector/social sector settings: be it in partnerships, teams, project settings etc. Generally, there is a dearth of studies that favour this perspective and a lack of studies illuminating the collective leadership space generally: i.e., concerning the nature of those shared experiences themselves, in terms of their impact on staff and/or how these

are being practiced, or operationalised over time. Finally, the influence of power dynamics is not neutral, as such relationships are not occurring within a vacuum (Collinson, 2011; Gordon, 2011). Certainly, my experience as a coach/leadership consultant would indicate otherwise, working as I have, over 20 years, with individual leaders, executive groups, and wider service teams predominantly in the public sector and social sector.

The opportunity to illuminate the collaborative experience, from a follower perspective, and to therefore consider its merits more fully, is of relevance for those senior leaders, who recognise the need to embrace greater collaborative, team-based solutions and therefore devolve more leadership responsibility in public sector organisations, for the reasons already outlined here. Equally, for those staff, who are motivated to explore such team working, this study, (plus accompanying learning history), provides insights, knowledge and information intended to directly resonate with them and their organisational 'realities'. The intention therefore is help them, in the cultivation of their own relational leadership outlooks and attitudes, approaches, and practices-with their collaborators. Finally, for those HR professionals involved in designing organisational and leadership/team development interventions, there is a great deal that may be learned from the planning processes, learning and development interventions, cultural and other contextual factors, that shaped and informed the shared leadership undertaking under examination here.

## 1.6 My research opportunity.

---

The unique opportunity arose to conduct a Co-operative Inquiry with those managers and front-line staff at a Housing Association in the Northeast of England, who were voluntarily engaged in a unique, collaborative, strategic planning undertaking, working with their peers, from across the organisation and alongside their senior leadership team and board, between 2017 and 2018. Significantly, their follower 'voice' would therefore be expressed, through their direct involvement as co-researchers, to create a learning history, that directly reflected their experience (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015). This research decision was itself preceded by a pilot study at the site in 2016, which provided initial insights into the shared leadership ethos, approach and dynamics that had been evolving over time. Therefore, such contextual and cultural factors could also be reflected accordingly within this research.

From a personal perspective, my motivation to study shared leadership experiences at this site was intended to inform my practice, as a coach and leadership consultant/facilitator working in this area accordingly. This would be achieved by answering the question for myself as to what could be learned from the outlook, approach, and application of shared leadership within a conventional hierarchical organisation, as experienced directly by those involved?

There now follows some background information regarding the evolution of shared leadership at this Housing Association.

### 1.6.1 Why this Housing Association became the preferred research site for the study of shared leadership.

This organisation has formally adopted shared leadership for reasons I will now outline.

It is a Housing Association with a prominent social change agenda:

***“Creating Homes. Building Futures.”***

This Northeast organisation provides a range of supported housing services for its communities, that help create wider social impact, i.e., employment, community development outcomes for its tenants etc. In this organisation, as with many social sector organisations, the nature of the work is changing, becoming more complex, more knowledge based too. At the time of the study the housing sector was facing severe funding cuts also. Such challenges, I learned from the Chief Executive, could and were being addressed through more pluralistic forms of leadership, to therefore address these kinds of problems; and in ways that are more systematic, collaborative and which are for the benefit of others.

The Chief Executive instigated a programme of Organisational Development from 2010/11 onwards. A more pluralistic form of leadership was sought, still within a hierarchical organisational setting. This was as a direct response to the findings of an organisational well-being ‘audit’, which were very poor, see Appendix A-0. The Chief Executive therefore decided that the adoption of “shared” leadership had the potential to contribute to the improvement of organisational health and well-being, the aim of which was to provide greater clarity, involvement and support for staff concerning future strategy development and implementation. The intention was to move towards an increasingly ***“leaderful”***, ***“accountable”*** and ***“influential”*** workforce across the

board.<sup>4</sup> This conspicuous adoption of shared leadership under these conditions made this, in my view, an interesting research site for further study.

It is important to note that I am not trying to position this research site as some exemplar 'best practice' case, where sharing leadership has directly contributed to the production of impressive organisational results over time. Other factors may of course prevail here. With regards to the principal research question, having the experience of those directly involved in the shift is, in and of itself appealing. This site was one, where many of those senior executives are still working to this day; namely those directly involved in trying to construct a 'shared' or 'collective' approach to leadership together since 2010-11.

The context of this shared leadership undertaking is significantly positioned against the backdrop of a conventional, hierarchical and governance structure, which provides an interesting tension, reflective of other public/social sector organisations.

#### 1.7 Introducing Key Concepts for this Thesis supporting Leadership in the 'Plural'.

---

**Shared Leadership** is located as a stream of research within Leadership in the 'Plural' (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012) There is a host of literature on forms of leadership that imply plurality in some way, These include: shared leadership, distributed leadership, dyadic leadership and relational leadership (ibid). Having conducted initial empirical research at the site, I formed some initial impressions, that helped me target further my research efforts. The literature of distributed leadership typically features organisational structures, cross-boundary projects, with leadership relayed over time and space. This didn't match this Housing Association's operating structure, leadership

---

<sup>4</sup> Claire Maxwell: The Oasis School of Human Relations September 2014. Published report on the development of the 5 year strategy Towards 2018. This citation seeks to describe the shared leadership model this organisation has agreed to develop at that time and some of its defining characteristics.



or management style, or espoused approach to any great extent. Neither does the literature on dyadic leadership, or where leadership is pooled at the top to lead others. This itself also ran contrary to the intentions of the research site, to share leadership much more widely across the organisation, while creating much more active involvement. Therefore, I decided to initially review shared leadership as a research stream, *which* distinctly marks a shift away from the overriding influence of an individual leader, and favours instead the process of shared influence between groups, seeking to lead one another towards the achievement of group, and/or organisational goals(Pearce and Sims, 2000a). Broadly speaking, this would characterise the focus of this action research study, considering the changing nature of leadership, as a situated, collaborative activity, where frontline staff and middle managers had co-created organisational strategy, working in relation to their senior leaders and board.

#### 1.7.1 Locating the leader follower relationship at the heart of this study.

It may be assumed that leader follower relationship is the essence of leadership theory and practice (Fletcher, 2012). Therefore, as the nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century work changes, so too the “models of relationality” between organisational leaders and followers, to therefore reflect the demands of a modern economy. This operating environment is described as one, where no one person has all the answers and so must be open to influence, learning and interacting with other organisational members (Fletcher, 2012, p. 85). This has informed the principal question of this research study; namely how shared leadership is being experienced by these followers in relation to their peers and to their senior leaders. By answering this question, a greater degree of understanding may be provided concerning how to navigate that relationship successfully, with others, moving forward.

### 1.7.2 Relational leadership within followership.

This is examined within this thesis, in relation to the shared leadership experienced by these followers, who were invited to become yet more “leaderful” and “influential” in key leadership decision-making processes at this organisation. This reflects the opportunity to examine followership, defined by (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p. 89) as,

*“the nature and impact of follower and following in the leadership process”*; where the scope is widened to therefore examine, not just followership, or leadership perspectives exclusively, rather “relational views” (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p. 88). With this relational view in mind, this processual study has explored:

*“how (followers) interact, together, (and in relation to their leaders) “ to co-create leadership and its outcomes”* It aligns with Uhl-Bien’s relational leadership framework set out in 2006 and developed in 2012, in a compilation of writing, where attention shifts to the relationship as the unit of analysis, as opposed to any individual leader (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012)

### 1.7.3 Relational Cultural Theory.

This focus on the relationship as a key concept is also theorised within Relational Cultural Theory. This is a recognised leadership framework, which informed the analysis of key data during this study, see chapter 5 (Fletcher, 2012). It is a comprehensive leadership framework, which has been applied in a range of work settings, including leadership and mentoring settings. In particular the key features of this relational leadership framework subsequently enabled a much fuller reading of the shared leadership

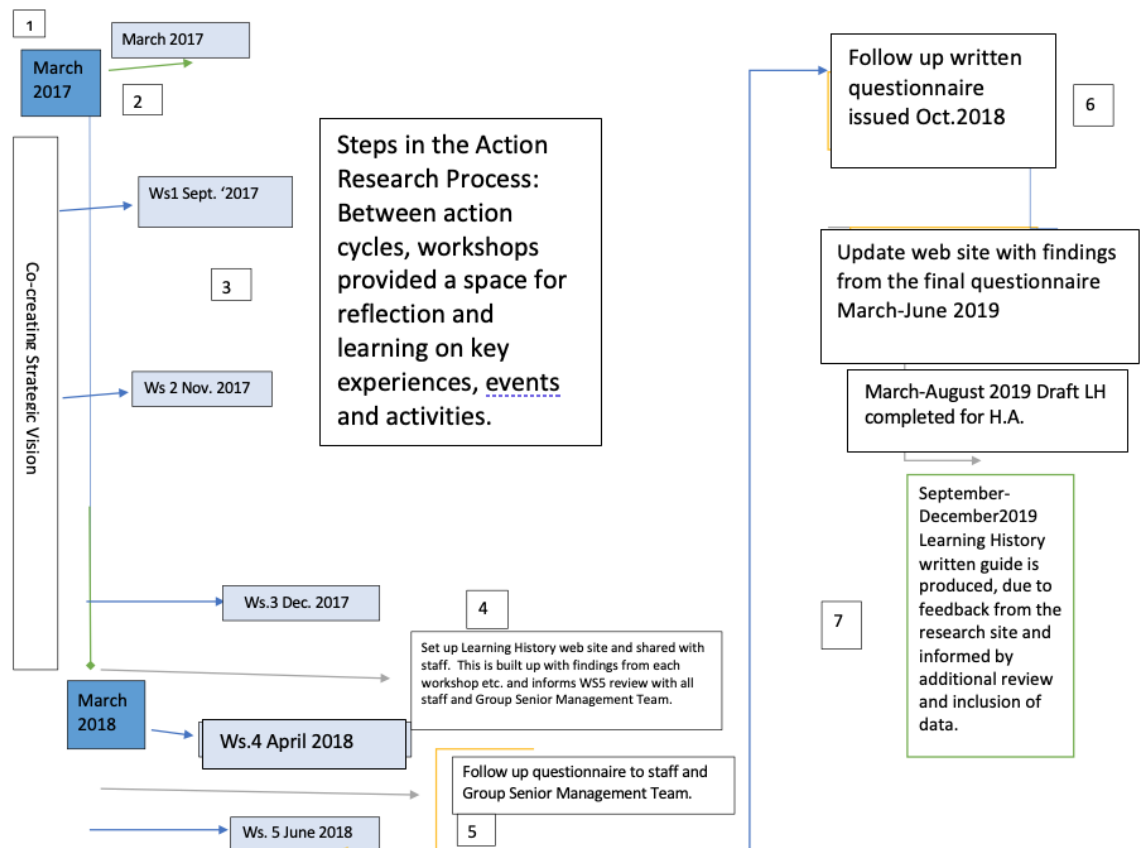
experience within this organisational context. It effectively has enabled the systematic examination of the motivations, attitudes, skills, behaviours, and actions of those engaged in this shared leadership endeavour. It also acknowledges cultural norms, that are specifically influencing the pattern, shape, and application of leadership relationships, occurring within this organisational setting. Significantly, power dynamics are also recognised and how they may be affecting relational interactions.

#### 1.8 Research Timeline supporting the construction of the Learning History.

---

The following timeframe reflects how we organised the action research process and cycles. Broadly speaking, key workshops and other research interventions, e.g., follow-up qualitative questionnaires, took place in parallel with the key events and activities that were occurring, to support the creation of the strategic plan at this organisation. See diagram 1.5, which is supported by a chronology of events.

Figure 1 Diagram 1.8 Research Timeline



### Chronology of this action research process.

1. Prior to March 2017, I had carried out a pilot research study, to become familiar with the organisation, its approach to developing leadership and organisational culture and finally, to establish and develop trust between me as a researcher, the senior leadership team, known as “Group Senior Management Team” and the board.
2. Attendance at the 1<sup>st</sup> Open Event- where the call was made for volunteers from across the organisation, to participate in the creation of the high-level strategic plan and vision for the organisation for the next 5 years.
3. Action research cycles are undertaken within workshops. These take place, in parallel with staffs’ strategic planning activities. In one sense, the timing of these research cycles

of planning, action, observation, reflection, were akin to those 'The Making Of' documentaries related to a major film production.

4. The learning history web site is established and used as a holding site initially to share research findings quickly and easily between all the co-researchers.
5. This learning history major content and themes are subsequently developed, refined, and shared with members of Group Senior Management Team, (The Chief Executive and The Director of Culture), and the co-researchers respectively, prior to a final group workshop. Prior to the final group workshop no. 5, the GSMT and the co-researchers each are issued with an individual, qualitative questionnaire. This was to enable them to reflect further on this undertaking during this final session. From earlier analyses, additional questions specific to the experience of shared leadership, including the relational attitudes, skills, and actions, plus any shifts in leadership practice etc., these were included at this stage. By that stage I had distilled certain relational themes, outlooks, and activities, that were potentially worthy of further examination, and which correlated with key leadership theories exploring relationality.
6. Further, written feedback is provided by staff in response to a final questionnaire issued some months after their completion of the strategy work itself. This specifically concerns how leadership practices have evolved as a result of this collaborative, leadership undertaking. Having further reviewed the data at this point, there is a notable inclusion of additional questions, relating both to sustained shifts in leadership practice, and to the topic of empowerment, or power in other words. Again, analysis of emerging themes from the data by that stage correlated with leadership theories that recognised power dynamics.
7. The final written guide is produced for use by stakeholders within this organisation.

Please follow the following link for the final version. [Learning History](#)

## 1.9 Overview of findings and contribution.

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My key findings are summarised as follows:

**Firstly**, the follower 'voice' has been meaningfully explored; specifically, the shared leadership experiences and actions of this group of Discoverers and Visioneers, occurring over time, and in relation to their senior leaders. The follower voice has been given primacy in this study, which represents something of a departure from those studies which favour the leadership-centric perspective (Kelley, 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2014). Subsequently, this has facilitated a more meaningful and nuanced expression of these follower experiences, feelings, and attitudes, as well as their actions.

**Secondly**, the processual nature of the shared leadership relationship has been examined, i.e., those relational states, outlooks, skills, and behaviours, that in turn reveal how key ideas, such as mutuality, reciprocity etc. have become operationalised, within a hierarchical setting (Fletcher, 2012). This has led to a better understanding of how shared leadership has been operationalised, or practiced, within a localised setting. This again runs counter to those more conventional shared leadership studies, where performance is privileged and the consideration of discrete leadership variables and their contribution to that performance is the main focus of the study (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012; Ospina *et al.*, 2020; Döös and Wilhelmson, 2021).

**Thirdly**, the dynamic, shifting nature of power in this shared leadership context has been explicated. It is one that is revealing of a significant degree of interdependence that exists between followers and their leaders. The nature and extent of such interdependent working relationships has also been explicated and found to be

positively supported in the main. However, in addition, other unconscious influences were also identified, where the follower 'voice' became stifled, at significant points of this collaborative undertaking.

**Lastly**, a less conventional methodological step was taken to embrace learning history methodology, in order to facilitate this richer, processual understanding concerning the nature of shared leadership that was occurring over time. This was with a view to creating a learning history artifact, or guide, that would be informative to both academic and non-academic audiences.

#### 1.9.1 My contribution to knowledge.

My contribution reflects the following propositions:

1. Rethinking of some predominant attitudes and assumptions related to followers and followership, in favour of recognising and embracing their power and potential in new ways. To that end the intention has been to recast followers and followership much more positively and challenge some of the shibboleths that may be associated with these concepts, which may include subservience, and even powerlessness (Uhl-Bien, 2018).
2. In addition, the contribution of emotion in our consideration of shared leadership as a lived experience, is too often underestimated, or even ignored. I am advocating therefore for its usefulness, to profoundly enrich our knowledge and our understanding regarding shared leadership. Such recognition of emotion in this thesis has also unlocked the opportunity to examine power dynamics differently, recognising the highs and the lows, and even the potential barriers to be overcome, in such relational leadership work.

3. The next area of contribution relates to the operationalisation of shared leadership; namely the identification and enactment of those significant shared leadership practices, identified in this study, that support the dynamic operationalisation of “Fluidity of Expertise” between organisational actors, within a hierarchical context (Fletcher, 2012). I am referring to the operationalisation of vulnerability and challenge, which have been examined previously in relation to certain predominant, theoretical assumptions, which carry certain negative connotations. I am advocating therefore for an elevation of such practices in collective leadership development.
4. The conceptualisation of power and empowerment, as experienced by these followers in relation to their leaders within this organisational setting, and in the spirit of mutuality presents a very different proposition, and even a direct challenge to the myth of individual achievement that still dominates our organisations and which: “belies the essentially interdependent nature of the human condition” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 92). This thesis demonstrates the distinct value in cultivating such relational interdependence between followers and their leaders, in ways that reap reciprocal benefits for both parties.
5. Finally, in terms of my contribution to methodology, I have sought to evolve the learning history ‘genre’ somewhat, through an innovative application of this methodology. This was to provide expanded and enriched perspectives regarding the lived experience of shared leadership, as it was occurring within a specific organisational arena. The innovative design and presentation of the learning history artifact was therefore intended to be of some benefit of those directly involved and to also demonstrate a more enriched research palette, from which other researchers could learn.



### 1.9.2 How is this thesis structured?

In Chapter 2, **Literature Review**, the following key fields of leadership literature will be examined, to identify the extent to which they facilitate our understanding, or otherwise, regarding the nature of relating in this way from a follower perspective.

- To that end we begin with a detailed exploration of the field of shared leadership, followed by an examination of followership, as it is represented within this research stream and in general.
- Given this study's focus on the lived experience of followers, other relational leadership perspectives are examined, to consider their potential contribution to understanding the nature of shared leadership.
- Accordingly, this includes consideration of emotion and power dynamics and their contribution in illuminating, or otherwise, the relational leadership 'between space'. This chapter illustrates how the key research objectives supporting the primary research question have emerged.

In Chapter 3, **Methodology**, the Participatory Action Research design will be introduced. Specifically, Learning History methodology will be positioned as directly supporting first-person and co-operative inquiry, as it relates to my ontological and epistemological perspective.

In Chapter 4, **Entering the Research Field**, the 'how', or application of the Learning History Methodology will be set out in detail, accompanied by the resulting Learning History artefact itself. In terms of the application of extended epistemologies and therefore accessing different ways of knowing, key data is analysed with respect to this study's key objectives, by drawing on the extended epistemologies, that make up action research methodology.

In Chapter 5, **Relational Perspectives informing shared leadership**, Relational Cultural Theory is positioned and explored as a suitable theoretical lens, to support a systematic examination of this shared leadership undertaking.

In Chapter 6, **Examination of the relational conditions supporting shared leadership**, the extent of the relational nature of this undertaking is examined in detail. Initial findings are set out that relate to this study's key objectives.

In Chapter 7, **Discussion of Findings** I seek to expand on the relational dimensions informing shared leadership in further detail. This is with a view to understanding how and where shared leadership processes and practices were being practically applied, or operationalised, within this organisational context.

In Chapter 8, **Review of Findings and Contributions**, I begin with a personal reflection on the impact of this thesis and its contents on my leadership practice. Key findings are set out in accordance with this study's objectives and my contribution to knowledge is expanded upon.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction: Exploring leadership in the plural.**

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Shared leadership may be described as with leadership as a “dynamic, interactive, influence process among individuals and groups” in pursuit of the achievement of group and, or organisational goals (Pearce and Conger, 2003, p. 1). In this chapter a key focus of this literature review is concerned with exploring how the writing on shared leadership broadens our understanding, or otherwise, regarding the nature of relating in this way. As outlined in chapter 1, this research stream was considered significant for this study, being characteristic of the strategic planning ‘pilot’, that was being undertaken by a group of staff volunteers; whereby a process of shared influence between groups, was intended to support the achievement of organisational goals (Pearce and Sims, 2000b). This chapter is structured in the following way:

- Shared leadership as a topic will therefore be more fully explored shortly, with reference to its genesis and theoretical antecedents. Key features, assumptions and anomalies presented in the contemporary, shared leadership literature will also be presented. This serves to position the associated research implications for this study. In this way shared leadership as a research stream, provides a primary, theoretical frame of reference for this research.
- So too does followership, the study of which is defined as “involving an investigation of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process” (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p. 89). Once again, this research stream

characterises those staff involved in this leadership collaboration, insofar as they were operating within a hierarchical framework, and had been invited to share leadership influence accordingly, with their peers and in relation to their senior leadership team and board. Therefore, the topic of followership will be examined, not simply to acknowledge gaps in the overall prevalence of studies in this area, but also to consider this theme, from both conventional perspectives, while also embracing more novel views, i.e., consideration of relational and power dynamics specifically.

- Additionally, examination of relational leadership theory, in particular Relational Cultural Theory, is revealing and serves to highlight a distinct, lack of evidence within the shared leadership field, that could effectively contribute to a more processual understanding of how leadership is *actually* being experienced and operationalised, as a shared phenomenon, by those involved (Fletcher, 2012). A related point concerns the need for a fuller consideration of emotionality within this shared leadership 'space'. To that end this literature review of shared leadership, as a research stream, plus other relational leadership topics, will also demonstrate a distinct lack of consideration for the 'emotionality' of such lived experiences. Feeling and emotion however are embedded in our work lives (Fineman, 2003). Therefore, a fuller appreciation of the emotional dimension of such experiences may provide new insights, concerning the impact, or effect for example, such a change in leadership approach may produce for all concerned.
- With reference once more to the leader follower dynamic that characterises this study, this too becomes significant, when appreciated from an emotional

perspective, as this dynamic is not occurring in a vacuum. Notwithstanding an individual's role or position, this relationship is generally viewed as one founded on a power asymmetry (Shamir, 2007; Shamir, 2012). Therefore, power dynamics informing the leader follower relationship will therefore also be considered within this chapter. This is to present the case for a fuller reading of such lived, experience, which may therefore facilitate better understanding of how people respond to such power dynamics and its impacts for them, operating within a collective, or shared leadership setting.

- Having set out the rationale for an expanded view related to the conceptualisation of shared leadership and followership in this chapter, I will conclude by making the case for the adoption of action research as my preferred methodology. This is in support of an expanded investigation, that accounts for temporal, processual, emotional, and contextual factors accordingly.

## 2.1: How and why shared leadership and followership are positioned together within this study.

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A key premise of this study, as outlined in chapter 1 is that leadership responsibility is not being considered in isolation and separate from the hierarchical governance structures that inform it (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008). This in turn has implications for the conceptualisation of shared leadership and followership being used here.

Firstly, shared leadership in this study seeks to acknowledge the senior leadership influence, benign or otherwise, on those teams, (and vice versa), whose members are actively involved in sharing leadership responsibilities and decisions, that historically would be the purview of senior executives and board. As will be explored later in this

chapter, such influence, or power in other words, is often positively conceived, or simply regarded as neutral.

Related to this point concerning influence, and the conceptualisation of followers/followership accordingly, this also frequently fails to recognise the extent of their “vertical” influence within the organisational hierarchy, and the impact of prevailing power dynamics within the follower leader relationship. Therefore followership, as will be explored within this chapter is characterised as inherently relational, similarly to the characterisation of shared leadership, which therefore enables the leader/follower dynamics and associated power dynamics to be examined (Seers, 2018, cited in Alexy et al., 2018: see also, Uhl-Bien, 2014).

Already this raises some interesting issues from a research perspective concerning what may be learned by investigating this dynamic leadership phenomenon; one that is inherently relational and also potentially paradoxical, i.e., where leadership may be shared laterally between peers/followers, who are simultaneously operating/influencing within a hierarchical operating environment. Also, it is the dynamic nature of this leadership phenomenon itself that presupposes the requirement of a more longitudinal approach to its study, to capture the changing nature and shifts informing how, the ways and whether leadership was being shared at all between these followers and in relation to their senior leaders. This last point starts to build the argument informing the choice of action research methodology utilised for this study, which will conclude this chapter.

## 2.2 Overview of key trends favouring the emergence of shared leadership as topic of study.

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A significant proportion of leadership theory and practice, towards the latter end the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has privileged “singular, formal leaders” and the potential ways they may impact organizational life (Wang, Waldman and Zhang, 2014, p. 181). This has involved the examination of certain “behavioural qualities”; for instance, qualities such as “consideration (of others), the initiation of structure and inspiration” etc. (ibid). Over time this position has shifted, and a broader perspective has emerged, whereby the process of influence within organisational life is recognised and attributed only in part, to a formal leader. Such a shift is evidenced for instance by research that attempts to move beyond exclusive discussion of unitary perspectives; i.e., beyond a place that hitherto has typically encapsulated ideas about the individual hero, or the romanticised/idealised, leadership figure (Avolio, Walumbwa and Weber, 2009).

### 2.2.1 Drivers informing our changing, conceptualisations of leadership.

Pearce and Conger in their work refer to the environmental factors, or “conditions”, signaling “the acceptance of this seemingly radical departure from the traditional view of leadership as something imparted to followers by a leader from above” (Pearce and Conger, 2003, p. 13). They refer to increasingly demanding, fast moving work environments and job complexity, as factors affecting the need for greater collaboration amongst work groups, as opposed to exclusively relying on a given leader.

Other writers such as (Gronn, 2003), (Fletcher, 2012), and (Arena *et al.*, 2017), for instance, have characterised the modern leadership operating environment as increasingly complex terrain to negotiate. This is due to an array of macro

environmental factors driving change and forcing organisations, (plus their leaders), into increasingly complex, interdependent networks and relationships for example. Subsequently, at the organisational level, are to be found those specialist staff, with their skills and expectations of working within a postindustrial knowledge economy. All these facets of the modern workplace may therefore add to the notion of shared leadership, as the proposed solution to address such adaptive challenges<sup>5</sup>, in flexible, responsive, and collaborative ways. (See Carson, Tresluk and Marrone, 2007; Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002; Pearce and Manz, 2005; Seers, Keller and Wilkerson, 2003).

### 2.2.2 Locating leadership before it was shared. Theoretical antecedents of shared leadership.

Before examining those precursors to what is now understood as a recognised research stream in the leadership field, it is perhaps important to first understand how such leader-centric views came to dominate the leadership arena in the first place. This helps to explain why the notion of the singular leader, exerting one-way influence on a group, in pursuit of a particular goal, has had such enduring appeal. A good place to start may be to identify how and where such ideas first became institutionalised.

The start of the 20th century marked out a significant moment in the study of management and leadership. (Pearce and Manz, 2005) argue that by that stage, with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, notions of leadership become firmly recognised and emphasised, namely 'command and control', i.e., vertical leadership, with authority exercised in a top-down way by a senior leader. Informed by the 'scientific' management principles of Taylorism, this particular conceptualisation of leadership becomes further integrated into the everyday workings of organisational life (Taylor,

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<sup>5</sup> Adaptive challenges are described as: "Changes in societies, markets, customers, competition, and technology around the globe..... forcing organizations to clarify their values, develop new strategies, and learn new ways of operating" (Heifetz and Laurie, 2001).



1911). This is due to the demarcation of managerial and worker roles and responsibilities, reinforcing such notions of command and control and giving us a world, where managers provide orders and guide other workers, who then willingly follow them (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Pearce and Conger, 2003).

(Pearce and Conger, 2003) develop this vertical leadership point too, referring to the organisational writing of Fayol and Weber, as key European contributors to the notion of the individual leader, exercising *their* power and formal authority in a top-down manner.

### 2.2.3 Predominant, theoretical perspectives that privilege the individual leader.

Such structural considerations go at least some way to explaining the enduring emphasis on studying the singular, formally appointed senior executive leader, that persists even to this day. The prevailing focus on the study of the individual leader is reflected in 3- of the 4 theoretical approaches comprising Bryman's historical review of leadership theory(Bryman, 1996).

These begin with:

- i. The exploration of **traits**, popular from the 1940s and reconstituted in followership studies from the 80s, where leaders' traits become idealised by followers, within the leadership relationship.
- ii. Then emerge studies on **leadership style**, i.e., those behaviours, or key leadership activities, where concern for employees is favoured, alongside the clear articulation of followers' duties. Even when contingency approaches start to acknowledge other

situational variables, that may inform the best way to flexibly exercise leadership, style still dominates.

- iii. By the 80's a new leadership approach becomes popular, an approach, which is itself closely identified with **transformational, or charismatic leaders** and leadership, i.e., those who are visionary in their approach to articulating organisational 'reality' for the benefit of others.
- iv. Notably, a shift starts to occur and by the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there is a growing interest in exploring leadership for instance as a more **"social process, where leaders emerge from groups over time"** and where such 'moments' in the life of the group members start to be more fully investigated (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007, p. 43). This denotes a more processual perspective on leadership, one that represents changing work practices and values, consistent with a knowledge intensive economy, as mentioned earlier:  
  
"where neither people nor information can or should be controlled in the way they used to be" (ibid).

#### 2.2.4 Locating Shared Leadership in terms of its historical influences and antecedents.

With reference to the previous bullet point 4., such idealistic disregard for the primacy of the formally appointed leader is itself arguably not new. It may be traced back to earlier works, where the historical influences, or antecedents, informing the shared leadership research stream may be located. (Bolden, 2011) argues that the 20<sup>th</sup> century environment, which favoured the leader-centric approach, may have promised, (if not actually delivered), sufficient order and control, enough presumably to satisfy those in charge and shareholders.

As previously outlined, such conceptualisations even to this day, remain hard to shift. Importantly, they are nonetheless countered by writing that contests that primacy, of the formally, appointed, individual, leader. Significantly, these counterviews comprise the historical influences, or antecedents, informing the shared leadership stream. They also represent a high degree of fragmentation in the body of writing that falls within the scope of Management and Organisation Studies, which can partly explain the confusion, in terms that attempt to describe this leadership phenomenon, as research has gone on.

#### 2.2.5. Key, historical influencers of the shared leadership phenomenon.

Such historical influence informing shared leadership as a research stream may be traced to Follett's work for instance(1924). Here, the importance is stressed concerning the reciprocal influence informing the leadership relationship. In addition, she strongly advocates for the presence of self-managing/self-governing, work communities, within organisations.

(Mayo, 1933) and (Barnard, 1938), in their writing on human relations, acknowledge the social and psychological needs of employees. By attending to staffs' intrinsic motivation, their wider participation in leadership roles may therefore be encouraged. (Drucker, 1954) and (Vroom and Yetton, 1973), in turn, explore the development of participatory management and decision making. They outline the role for managers in creating a conducive environment; one that effectively supports such participation.

(Benne and Sheats, 1948b) prioritise rather the relevance of functions and how, as a consequence, the leadership function may subsequently be distributed within groups. (Gibb, 1954) too, in a similar manner, describes leadership dynamically on a spectrum, spreading from individual leadership to that of a wider, more distributed arrangement.

He refers in his work, concerning the leading theories of his time that, “ leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group” (Gibb, 1954, p. 884).

(Bowers and Seashore, 1966), once again highlight a more dynamic, distributed arrangement. Their empirical study focuses on peer leadership and its potential, positive effects on organisational outcomes.

Finally, (Katz and Kahn, 1978), similarly emphasise such organisational advantages, or benefits. They start to illustrate the potential for competitive advantage for those leaders, who share influence in a reciprocal manner. This emphasises the purpose, or rationale of sharing leadership, i.e., to effectively achieve improved, organisational outcomes. This last point concerning organisational performance will be expanded upon further in this review, given that it has distinct, implications for methodological approaches in shared leadership studies, that seek to establish causality in the pursuit of improved, organisational performance.

Such historical influences offer credible alternatives to the ‘romance of leadership’, whereby the contribution of individual ‘leaders’ to organisational performance is over-emphasised, and where other contributory factors, especially the contribution of other people, are largely disregarded (Meindl, Erlich and Dukerich, 1985).

## 2.3 Positioning shared leadership within pluralistic leadership research.

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Broadly speaking, shared leadership sits within a body of organisational research, where leadership is expressed as something other than belonging to an individual and their associated behaviours in a formally appointed position (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012). In fact, shared leadership has previously existed as a descriptor among a plethora of terms describing pluralistic forms of leadership. These have ranged from dispersed, devolved, distributive to...collective, co-operative, and relational” (Fitzsimons, Turnbull James and Denyer, 2011, p. 313). These terms have often been used interchangeably in studies, which has obscured important theoretical differences between them. As has previously been outlined, precursors have been identified as contributors, to this ever-expanding body of research. See also the work of (Bales and Slater, 1955), (Hodgson, Levinson and Zaleznik, 1965), and (Hosking, 1988). However, a key moment for the significant emergence of study of plural forms of leadership is identified as occurring from the mid 90s onwards (Pearce and Conger, 2003).

### 2.3.1 The expansion of the field of shared leadership.

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It is notable that the overall research field, in which shared leadership is located, has itself shifted considerably, between 2012-2018. The terrain in which shared leadership is located is now conceptualised as “Collective Leadership”, which is an “emerging theoretical umbrella term” ; one that embraces “scholarship on the shared, distributed, pooled and relational aspects of leadership, its emergence and relation to hierarchical leadership, as well as its impact on work and performance” (Bryman et al.,2011;Denis et al.,2012, Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012, Yammarino et al., 2012 cited in: Ospina *et al.*,

2020, p. 442). The possibilities for the study of shared leadership, as well as for these other areas of scholarship have therefore expanded accordingly. In the special issue that considers the development of Collective Leadership, since Denis *et al.*, published their 2012 review of the field of pluralistic leadership, a new theoretical framework is proposed, to map, or position these new developments accordingly. Two key dimensions are outlined.

- The first is concerned with the locus of such collective leadership, namely the answer to the question: Where is such collective leadership located?
- The second dimension focuses on how this pluralistic phenomenon is conceptualized.

**Table 1.** A map of collective approaches to leadership.

		View of collectivity	
		Collective leadership as type	Collective leadership as lens
Locus of leadership	Leadership residing in the group	Cell 1: 'Collective' refers to plural forms of leadership and leadership resides in interpersonal relationships Dual/co-leadership Shared leadership Social network leadership Team leadership	Cell 3: 'Collective' refers to a theoretical lens and leadership resides in interpersonal relationships Practice theory studies (including leadership-as-practice) Relational leadership
	Leadership residing in the system	Cell 2: 'Collective' refers to plural forms of leadership and leadership resides in systemic dynamics Multiteam systems leadership Distributed leadership Network leadership Collective leadership practices Complexity leadership	Cell 4: 'Collective' refers to a theoretical lens and leadership resides in systemic dynamics Collective constructionist leadership Discursive/communicative leadership (some) Critical leadership studies

Source: Authors' elaboration.

*Table 1 A map of collective approaches to leadership*

This presents new opportunities for researching shared leadership and facilitates a better integration between theory and research methods, chosen to develop our understanding of this phenomenon accordingly (ibid). This expanded view of the shared

leadership research landscape considers leadership occurring within the interpersonal relationships of the group, “ usually leaders and followers, or co-leaders” (Ospina *et al.*, 2020, p. 445).

### 2.3.2 The promise and the limitations of shared leadership.

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The field of shared leadership arguably holds forth many promising possibilities, firstly to understand the significance of this shift, from the dominant “leadership paradigm..., where leadership is considered, as a property of the individual, to (instead) viewing leadership as a property of the collective” (Cullen-Lester and Yammarino, 2016, cited in: Zhu *et al.*, 2018, p.834). Also, according to key meta-analyses on the topic, shared leadership arguably plays a vital role in determining team effectiveness (See D’Innoncino, 2016, Nicolaides *et al.*, 2014, D. Wang *et al.*, 2014).

However, the field of shared leadership more generally has been fragmented, due to a lack of coherent conceptualisation of shared leadership itself (Zhu *et al.*, 2018, +). This has resulted in varying definitions and interpretations of shared leadership, plus associated measures. In turn, this creates substantial differences in our understanding of the effect, or impact of shared leadership on a given “team outcome across studies” (D’Innoncenzo *et al.*, 2016: cited in, Zhu *et al.*, p.835).

Examples of this fragmentation and inconsistency within the field are set out as follows:

- At times for example shared leadership is defined according to how many are engaged in leadership action and the degree of involvement of the collective versus a single leader.

- Elsewhere, examining the locus, or source of leadership influence within a team is privileged.
- Other studies attempt to measure team members adoption of certain leadership behaviours
- Others again; the extent to which leadership is being decentralised across the organisation.

One key research challenge this immediately presents “is determining how to measure shared leadership” (Hoch and Kazlowski, 2014, p.393). Another issue raised by this disparity in the conceptualisation of shared leadership, which is directly relevant to this study’s objectives, concerns the need for a recognition of broader contextual factors that may inform where, whether and/or how shared leadership is occurring at all.

### 2.3.3 Unifying the shared leadership field-Implications for the study of shared leadership.

Similarly, to the unifying framework offered by Ospina et. al, (2020), to facilitate greater consistency in the study of collective leadership overall, in their shared leadership review, Zhu et al., (2018) specifically set out 3 sets of common characteristics occurring across shared leadership studies that may start to unite this fragmented field.

Adapted from Zhu et al., (2018, p. 837)

1. **The locus of leadership influence:** Characterised by “horizontal, lateral leadership influence among peers” adopting leadership functions, which would conventionally have been carried out by a designated leader.



2. **Leadership action carried out beyond the individual at the collective / group/ team level:** Characterised by consideration of leadership as an “emergent group-level phenomenon”.
3. **The extent to which leadership influence is decentralised:** Characterised by a wider distribution of “leadership influence or roles.. across team members”.

As with the broader collective leadership framework outlined previously, inherent in this categorisation of shared leadership is a recognition that shared leadership is not a static, but rather a dynamic phenomenon that occurs over time. This points to the requirement for research methods that can reflect this spatial/temporal perspective informing the emergence, or otherwise of shared leadership, achieved through ‘live’ observation of this phenomenon, conducted “over a meaningful period of time” (Seers, 2018, p.26: see also Fairhurst et al., 2020).

Additionally, the dynamic nature of this shared leadership phenomenon is not limited to a recognition of its occurrence over time, but also understanding how, where and the ways in which such leadership influence is being shared laterally, vertically, or even not at all. For example, despite the increasing interest in shared leadership in disciplines including, management, organisational behaviour, health and education etc., our ability “to conceptualise, measure and indeed practice what constitutes shared leadership is at best rudimentary” (Lord et al., 2017, p. 445). Once more this is significant for this study’s objectives, in terms of developing our understanding about the nature of relating in such shared leadership settings, and particularly how such shared leadership practice is being cultivated and actually carried out over time.

If we therefore also assume that shared leadership must be studied as a dynamic, relational phenomenon over time, it becomes necessary to recognise the constitutive

context in which it is occurring. This is in order to more fully appreciate how such a phenomenon has emerged at all and what factors have prompted its emergence, e.g., cultural, structural, organisation factors etc., as well as the influence of formal leaders in championing, or impeding its progress. Despite the focus of many shared leadership studies on exploring its antecedents, by comparison to the significant amount of research that examines shared leadership outcomes, that research which examines the antecedents of shared leadership is “still in its infancy” (Zhu et al., 2018, p.847).

A key antecedent of particular interest for this study relates to one of the foundational concepts of shared leadership; namely the concept of empowerment, which therefore invites a recognition of power dynamics occurring at some level.

“Empowerment concerns the devolvement of hierarchical power, usually to followers, rather than describing the dynamic social processes involved in sharing leadership” (Wassenaar and Pearce, 2018, p. 172)

In other words, “empowering leadership or empowerment in the act of sharing leadership” (ibid). This is significant because it recognises that such shared leadership occurring within groups is predicated on the ‘letting go’ of power and control on the part of senior leaders to others. This relates specifically to this study’s third objective regarding how staff have experienced such a shift in influence, or authority in their favour, over time; in other words, how they experience power/empowerment in relation to their peers and their senior leaders.

#### 2.3.4 Distinguishing key ontological and epistemological issues relating to the 'project' of shared leadership.

As outlined earlier, the unit of research analysis for shared leadership is located, theoretically speaking, at the level of team. This “ emergent phenomenon” is referred to for example as “team based shared leadership literature” (Fitzsimons, Turnball James and Denyer, 2011, p. 315). It has been defined as “a team process where leadership is carried out by the team, rather than solely by a single designated individual. (It draws on) “the knowledge of a collective” (ibid).

Unlike in vertical leadership, “shared leadership flows through a collaborative process” (Ensley, Hmielski and Pearce, 2006, p. 220). Leadership studies that explore such group dynamics have evolved **from:** ideas supporting self-leadership within teams, (i.e., teams with no formally designated leader). This is defined as “a process through which people influence themselves to achieve the self-motivation needed to perform (Houghton, Neck and Manz, 2003, p. 126). Subsequently the focus has shifted in turn **to :** self-managed teams; in other words collective team leadership, i.e., where everyone is a leader (Fitzsimons, Turnball James and Denyer, 2011).

Notably, certain conditions and assumptions are emphasised, that may support effective transition to this state. One example concerns the fact that self-leadership is viewed as a necessary precursor to effective team leadership (Houghton, Neck and Manz, 2003; Bligh, Pearce and Kohles, 2006). This therefore necessitates other significant conditions and assumptions, such as intervention on the part of more qualified, senior managers, or a supportive workplace and, or a certain degree of autonomy on the part of ‘knowledge workers’ for example (Pearce, 2004; Pearce and Manz, 2005). This also assumes that the members of self-managed teams are enabled to take on such shared leadership responsibilities (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012). Such

conditions and assumptions therefore presuppose the positive influence and overarching support of senior leaders. Such a view is notably elaborated upon in the contemporary writing on transformational leadership, that features the deliberate support for, and the cultivation of, employee motivation (Burns, 1978; Heifitz, 1994). This is identified as the basis on which shared leadership can build and raises a central, ontological assumption, in relation to the shared leadership 'project', regarding shared cognition. This point will now be examined in greater detail.

#### 2.3.5 Problematising shared leadership.

At this stage it is important, to consider this, plus other significant, ontological, and epistemological issues, raised in the shared leadership arena. These may help to distinguish and to explicate certain theoretical assumptions, associated specifically with this pluralistic, leadership area. Shared leadership and distributed leadership studies for that matter, appear firmly rooted in exploring entity-based perspectives of relational leadership; reference Uhl-Bien's Relational Leadership Theoretical Framework (2006): see also Bolden (2011). The emphasis is largely concerned with the study of individual leaders and followers. The significant, ontological, and epistemological issues characterising such leadership research, are now summarised in the following table.

*Table 2 Key Features and Theoretical Assumptions of Shared Leadership Research*

Features	Theoretical Assumptions
1. Studies <b>privilege individual</b> leaders in relation to their followers, their “perceptions, intentions, behaviors, personalities, expectations, and evaluations relative to their relationships with one another (e.g., Hollander, 1978 etc.)” (Uhl- Bien,2006, p.655).	To that end, with the predominant focus on individual leaders comes <b>the assumption of ‘knowing’ minds</b> , to which they have access: “mind contents and knowledge are viewed as properties of entities, as individual possessions” (Uhl- Bien,2006; p.655)
2. <b>“Subject-object” view of relationships:</b> “Social relations are enacted by subjects to achieve knowledge about, and influence over, other people and groups” (Dachler and Hosking, 1995, p. 3)	If it is assumed that leadership can be defined as something other than a socially constructed phenomenon, it follows then that <b>leadership can be explored in some objectively determined, straight forward manner</b> (Ladkin, 2010).  <b>Causality is thereby inferred</b> due to such influencing potential. <b>Instrumentalism is strongly implicated therefore, with regards to performance for example.</b>
3. Also, <b>“these entities can be distinguished from other entities,(i.e. people), and the</b>	This assumes that <b>other organisational factors are being treated neutrally or</b>

environment (Dachler & Hosking, 1995)”  (Uhl-Bien,2006; p.655).	may even be assumed to positively impact the ‘entity’, or leader under discussion.  For example, in many shared leadership studies, working conditions, situational variables, resources are often simply assumed to be enabling and support the effective sharing of functional roles and responsibilities (Fairhurst <i>et al.</i> , 2020)
4. Shared Leadership is located in the human relations school of management theory, with studies that focus for example on the activities of leaders contributing to shared leadership, that are valued by staff (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012)	A key assumption is that leaders ‘care’ for their staff (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012). It is concerned with ideas of reciprocity and mutuality through relationships, to achieve better performance, morale and motivation (Burns, 1978; Bennis and Nanus, 1985)

### 2.3.6 Research implications raised by these theoretical positions.

A lack of emphasis on the relational / processual perspectives of shared leadership.

With reference again to Table 2, point 1, as knowledge is assumed to be constructed and maintained by individuals, the basic unit of analysis resides at the individual level. This would appear to rather limit the investigation of relational perspectives. It is therefore unsurprising to learn that there is a notable absence of the processual, or more finely grained examinations concerning “the nature of shared leadership in

organisations and the processes associated with its emergence and development” (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012, p. 231; Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020). This point is somewhat borne out by considering the state of collective leadership research between the period 2012 and 2018, with reference, in particular to the methodological approaches applied (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020). Of 935 appraised articles 35% were shared leadership studies. These overwhelmingly qualitative studies, (85% of all collective leadership studies submitted), predominantly utilised the following more conventional research methods: Interviews 39%, secondary data 30% and surveys 20% (*ibid*). Specifically, within the shared leadership arena, only a tiny proportion of studies were ethnographic in nature for instance, engaging directly with the shared leadership phenomenon, as it was occurring, within a given context and over time. This somewhat limits a more nuanced view concerning how shared leadership may be experienced by those involved as it is occurring and relating to its operationalisation in the workplace.

Another conclusion of such Cartesian logic is that findings may in turn be understood fully and shared by others, thereby enabling the process of seamlessly influencing other ‘knowing’ minds. This may support arguments concerning research validity, in the hope of creating generalizable truths about leadership, regardless of individuals or their context. Such logic is however disputed by other writers on the topic, from a psychodynamic perspective for instance, where unconscious and affective processes are found to be at play in the leadership relationship (Fitzsimons, Turnbull James and Denyer, 2011; Fitzsimons, 2013).

2.3.7 Recognising the uncertain and negotiable nature of authority within shared leadership environments.

With reference to point 2, within Table 2, the intentions of such leadership influence in studies are often positively conceived, e.g., directed at improved performance. This underlines the processual point made earlier in point 1. If the desirable leadership ends are achieved it is argued that, “the means, i.e. the processes preceding them, these are rarely questioned” (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007, p. 63). In the pursuit of explaining, controlling, and predicting the factors affecting such leadership outcomes in these studies, insufficient attention is therefore being paid, either to how the undertaking itself occurred in a given context, nor indeed to its purpose and the legitimacy, or otherwise, of such an undertaking. See also Table 2 point 3.

Also, while it is recognised that while the occurrence of shared leadership may be positively encouraged and facilitated by those in positions of authority, it may also be impeded wittingly, or otherwise by directive, or even coercive leadership (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018) Despite the predominance of qualitative studies that make up the extant Collective Leadership literature, a positivity bias persists in the field, one that is characterised by “depoliticized relations and goal convergence, short-term ( e.g. devoid of historical influences), and separateness from hierarchy...”(Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020, p. 604). See also Table 2.3.4 point 3.

### 2.3.8 Considering shared leadership within its constitutive context.



Arguably, other contextual factors may in fact affect the achievement, or otherwise, of such desired leadership outcomes.

“ Leadership’, (is) a collective process which encompasses not only leaders but their followers and the context in which they come into contact (Ladkin, 2010, p. 5). Speaking from a phenomenological perspective: “Reductionist methods are ill-equipped to provide adequate insight into how leadership arises”, in particular settings and circumstances (ibid).

Therefore, such leadership relationships, when appreciated within their unique and rich, constitutive context, still have considerable potential, to acknowledge other hitherto, missing aspects. Factors informing that constitutive context may include organisational history and culture, thereby affecting individuals’ experiences as leaders and of sharing leadership (Avolio, 2007). (Ulhøi and Müller, 2014b) in their review and synthesis of shared leadership, echo this view and in turn refer to specific workplace strategies that may encourage how such sharing of leadership may therefore arise, or be maintained. Such strategies may include active promotion of bottom-up participation in organisational decisions, opportunities for knowledge sharing and collaboration etc. Such antecedents can affect the very strategy and operations of the organisation and may therefore play their part in how leadership is shared, or otherwise (ibid).

#### 2.3.9 Acknowledging the presence of leader follower power dynamics.

With reference to Table 2, distinguishing between hierarchical and other forms of pluralistic leadership, including shared, may itself be problematic, due to authority and knowledge being distributed, and roles and responsibilities becoming equivocal and increasingly negotiated (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020). Simply assuming that leaders are always acting in the best interests of their staff fails to acknowledge the presence of work place power dynamics. Also, staff in turn may, despite all best efforts, act in ways, other than those serving the interests of the dominant social order, acting instead in their own self-interest. Followers have been known, on occasion, to act in other, less desirable, opportunistic ways in response to their leaders (Kellerman, 2007; Collinson, 2006; Gordon, 2011).

Another implication of such an assumption is that employees won't engage in any opportunistic behaviours, that may encourage them to deviate from the ambition of such shared leadership, acting instead in their own self-interest. Subordinates, however, have been known to act in other, less desirable, and more self-serving ways, in response to their formal leaders (Collinson, 2005; Kellerman, 2007; Kelley, 1998).

There are other writers who dispute such ontological assumptions associated with this model of team-self leadership, i.e., where shared cognition is assumed and is therefore associated with a notionally seamless shift, from individual to team level management functioning. Consider Fitzsimon's work, which offers a relational-systemic reading of the study of shared leadership, from a psycho-dynamic perspective (Fitzsimons, 2012). He asserts that such a journey, from individual to team leadership, is not without its difficulties. His PhD study of a CEO attempting to share leadership with his organisational team is described as somewhat fraught; revealing the adoption of systemic and unconscious strategies, to cope with collective anxieties and stresses they experience (Fitzsimons, 2013).

## 2.4 Empirical studies supporting shared leadership.

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As outlined previously the shared leadership research stream notably attempts to establish causality in pursuit of improved performance, achieved through the investigation of discrete leadership variables, plus associated attempts, through models/modeling, to establish variance. Typically, it has favoured the use in the main, of quantitative methods, surveys etc. (Glynn and Raffaelli, 2009). Additionally, exploration at team group level is characterised for instance by questionnaires, investigating individual leadership styles; be it transformational, or directive etc. and the influence, or impact of that, considered within the group as a unit, or whole (Pearce and Sims, 2002). Processual exceptions will be explored in due course, whereby such accounts demonstrate greater insight into how shared leadership is being experienced and operationalised.

Concerning relevant empirical studies on shared leadership within Management and Organisational Studies up to 2011/2012, there appears to be a tightly knit group in writing terms, who have produced seven key, seminal studies in this regard (Fitzsimons, Turnball James and Denyer, 2011)<sup>6</sup>. Once again, certain discrete leadership behaviours are primarily investigated at the group level, in relation to understanding how improved performance may therefore be achieved. One such study that illustrates this point concerns shared leadership processes, e.g., trust, efficacy and performance (Avolio *et*

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They are (Avolio et al.1996;Carson et al.2007;Ensley et al.2006;Mehra et al.2006;Pearce and Sims2002;Pearce et al.2003;Sivasubramaniam et al.2002)

*al.*, 1996), where the relationship between the leadership behavior at team unit level is explored, with reference to measuring high team functioning.

#### 2.4.1 Positivity bias in shared leadership studies.

Notably, all these studies also seek to assess the significance of “vertical versus shared leadership for team outcomes, using survey methods to measure leadership behaviours at the level of the team” (Fitzsimons, Turnball James and Denyer, 2011, p. 316). This reinforces the point made earlier, regarding the assumption of positive, supportive, leadership environments. This therefore leads researchers to seek the answer to the question: “Which is better (i.e. vertical, or shared leadership for team outcomes)?”: as opposed to seeking to understand: How do they actually interrelate? (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020)

Interestingly, similar attempts to demonstrate causality is once again evident in a later meta-analysis of 42 Shared Leadership studies (Wang, Waldman and Zhang, 2014). This is where the relationship of certain leadership variables is explored, e.g., charismatic leadership, with respect to team effectiveness, etc. Such variables are singled out as potentially more relevant than certain others, in supporting the creation of team effectiveness (Wang, Waldman and Zhang, 2014). Shared leadership here is specifically defined as an emergent quality of “mutual influence and shared responsibility” within the ‘membership’; where each leads and is being led towards the achievement of mutually recognised goals (Wang, Waldman and Zhang, 2014, p. 181). Certain conditions that favour the cultivation of shared leadership, such as team attitudes and behaviours are recognised here but again, the contextual factors that are considered in this review are specifically limited to an appreciation of task complexity and team type,

e.g., student or work teams. Other contextual factors are not considered and there is no sense given concerning how such team effectiveness is realised in practice.

## 2.5 The Lived Experience of Shared Leadership: Processual Exceptions.

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It has been somewhat exceptional therefore to read studies, that shift the leadership focus from the individual to a collective construction process, thereby richly accounting for patterns, activities, how roles are understood and enacted, informing decision making etc. To illustrate this point, I would like to briefly outline two processual perspectives accordingly.

**2.51 The first perspective** is a practice based view of post heroic, shared leadership (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007) This particular, processual account seeks to construct a collective identity of leadership. In so doing it starts to give some sense of the actual experience of living shared leadership, the highs, the lows etc. It provides a critique of those empirical, functional studies, conceiving of shared leadership as the practical management of task and role division and develops these arguments further. It is observed that such functional studies, featuring the roles and ‘doings’ of leadership, these typically don’t indicate whether leadership was really shared at all.

This study also acknowledges that there may be “organizing processes going on in the whole organization”, which contribute to the wider recognition of shared leadership as something, that has been occurring informally in organisations for years (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007, p. 44). Such a phenomenon it is argued, reinforces the need for research to turn attention away from the exclusive attention on the senior

leaders and to therefore understand more fully the nature of that social interaction, or influence process more widely across the organisation (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007). This serves to reinforce the ontological position outlined earlier, challenging many of the predominant, theoretical assumptions within shared leadership conceptualizations.

#### 2.5.2 The second research perspective.

Laloux's (2014) collection of organisational case studies provides notable, contextual, relational and practice-based insights on the 'project' of sharing leadership. He sets out the pioneering, work practices being undertaken by self-managed, self-organising teams that comprise "Teal Organisations" across the world. Once again certain insights may be gleaned concerning some of the actual human experience, both the positives and the challenges of such an undertaking.

There is for instance an emphasis on Self-Management, informed by peer relationships, without hierarchy being imposed or consensus being imposed either on teams.

Wholeness at work figures also and is characterised by embracing something other than our rational presentation of a narrowly defined professional persona. Within these organisations the emotional, the intuitive and the vulnerability of human beings are actively being embraced within the workplace.

Evolutionary Purpose denotes the fact that organisational members actively listen to and inform the organisation moving forward, in line with their values and their sense of purpose.

Laloux also gives attention to the problems and challenges that may arise with this way of working, given the shift in influence, or power dynamics. Examples of work-based practices include:

- How to deal with openness and transparency concerning each person's performance, or coping with the rapid pace of change, and managing conflict etc.
- How such challenges are positively reconciled is well documented, through actual accounts of processes and practices developed by those involved in this self-managing arena.

Other notable processual studies include the study of shared leadership emerging and how that is being shared in teams; (See Carson, Tresluk and Marrone, 2007), or the practice based view of shared leadership in a public organisation where dialogical practices are explored over time , (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011)

## 2.6 The expansion of the field of shared leadership.

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There now follows some other examples of this expanded "Collective Leadership" terrain in which the study of shared leadership is located.

The following examples of this expanded view include those studies that feature in the special issue on Collective Leadership outlined earlier in section x. To that end and in line with the proposed research focus for this shared leadership study, the following dimension becomes particularly relevant:

### 2.6.1 Considering Cell 1.

This refers to “ Research that understands ‘collectivity’ as focusing on plural forms of leadership and where leadership resides in interpersonal relationships, (i.e. dyads and groups)”, including shared leadership studies (Ospina *et al.*, 2020, p. 449).

Note how the research focus has expanded within this setting. Consider for instance, (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016) Leadership as Practice study, which demonstrates how leadership has shifted from individuals to relationships, that remain nonetheless humanly embodied and identifiable “ within distinct relationships and patterns of interaction among concrete social actors” (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016, p. 445). Consider also the work of Reid and Karambayya (2016), where dualistic leadership is expanded to embrace “a dynamic reciprocal process involving multiple parties and collective outcomes” (Reid and Karambayya, 2016, p. 611). Attention is also being paid here to wider organisational processes affecting dual leadership as well as the relational dynamics affecting it.

Such overall developments in the field of Collective Leadership studies signal further, exciting possibilities for this research study, to therefore consider shared leadership, as it is occurring within its rich constitutive context; recognising its historical/cultural/structural antecedents, with regards to a fuller appreciation of its emergence and also with consideration to the ‘How’s’, or the ways leadership is being shared, or otherwise through relationship, practices etc. or otherwise. Linked to this point, how followers are affected by the experiences of such relational dynamics becomes therefore another, important, research consideration for this study.

### 2.6.2 Summarising the research opportunities within the shared leadership field.



As explored earlier in this literature review, the intentions of leadership influence, which figures in shared leadership studies, is often positively conceived, i.e., in support of and directed at improved performance; (See section 2.3.3). In line with these more recent developments in the shared leadership research field, there is still more opportunity to examine in greater depth the actual experience of those, who are directly involved in sharing leadership.

This with a view to creating new insights and understanding, concerning the nature and practice of shared leadership practice itself, the context in which it is occurring and the associated feelings and emotions, attitudes, and actions, related to this shared undertaking. In this literature review it is also acknowledged that the topic of power is often treated quite uncritically within this research stream generally. A more processual reading, concerning how power dynamics are experienced, by those within a specific organisational context, might also therefore be revealing, e.g., exploring how it directly affects those working within a new 'sharing' dynamic. These points will be developed now from a follower perspective.

## 2.7 Revisiting the leader follower relationship: Trends in Shared Leadership studies.

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Returning once more to the essential elements constituting the leadership relationship, principally power dynamics and the inherent power asymmetry occurring between leaders and followers (Shamir, 2007; Shamir, 2012). It is therefore worth noting that shared leadership studies still principally favour those senior leaders, or those in formally appointed roles/positions of authority, and *their* effect on shared leadership. With reference once more to influence, the assumption is that it emanates from these

‘knowing’ minds, occurring between peers, laterally and vertically throughout the organisational hierarchy in both directions (Pearce and Conger, 2003). However, that influence current runs mainly in one direction. There are still relatively few proverbial ‘salmon’ moving upstream; or more specifically studies seeking to ‘reverse the lens’ and explore ways in which shared leadership from the followers’ perspective may, say for instance, impact the “roles and practices of formally appointed leaders” (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012, p. 230; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This theme is explored in considerable depth in Uhl-Bien’s subsequent 2014 review of followership; a study which generally acknowledges a significant lack of writing on the topic (Uhl-Bien, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

This review culminates in a clear theoretical definition of followership:

“involv(ing) an investigation of *the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process*” (Uhl-Bien, 2014;p.89). Here too the potential scope of exploration is expanded, beyond leader-centric, role- based views. Specifically, a “clear progression from leader centric to follower-centric, to relational views” is therefore proposed (Uhl-Bien, 2014;p.88).

#### 2.7.1 Recognising the potential ontological mismatch in the study of shared leadership.

Processual studies therefore seek to understand:

“how leaders and followers interact together in context to co-create leadership and its outcomes” (Uhl-Bien, 2014; p.99).

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<sup>7</sup> Scholarly articles on followership only account for 14% of all leadership articles, between 1990 and 2014 in the title *Leadership Quarterly*.

Despite this expanded theoretical perspective being set out, it is nonetheless acknowledged that there are certain, inherent limitations to this viewpoint, as “we still know little about these issues due to certain ontological disparity” (Uhl-Bien, 2014; p.96). The focus on the individual’s observations/perceptions continues to be out of kilter with the ontological concern of observing leadership and followership ‘live’, in action, through behavior and processes (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). This reflects points made earlier with regards to researching shared leadership generally but is once again reflected here within the followership field.

This further justifies the choice of research topic, where followers will become elevated, or privileged in terms of research focus and through the consideration of their experiences of shared leadership, as it is occurring over time, and in relation to their peers and their senior leaders.

#### 2.7.1 Considering power within leader follower relationships.

The topic of power itself remains largely ignored in many leadership studies (Gordon, 2011; Collinson, 2011). Where it is explored, the power of leaders over followers is privileged. However, as far as the scope of this study is concerned, those followers, who volunteered to collaborate, to co-create organisational strategy, were being invited in good faith, to exert real influence, or power, over the strategic direction of travel for their organisation. However, this still raises important questions as to whether and, or to what extent that power is being shared with peers and in relation to their senior leaders? This is what this study intends to explore.

While this shift in influence is being acknowledged within the scope of this study, conceptualisations of followers and followership, when they do occur, are more often

associated with deference, inferiority and even subservience, in relation to their leaders and leadership (See: Carsten, Harms and Uhl-Bien, 2014; Jackson and Parry, 2018).

Notably, for others writing on this topic, the power divisions are becoming increasingly blurred, due in part to the influence of technology and access to information on the part of followers more generally (See: Belk, 2013; Kellerman, 2007). This somewhat reflects French and Raven's (1959) taxonomy of social power, viewed now from a follower perspective, where those traditional sources of leadership power including: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert have been subsequently augmented by the inclusion of and additional source, namely informational power.

#### 2.7.2 Acknowledging power dynamics within the leadership relationship.

Two authors have created ripples within this relatively undisturbed leadership pool, as far as consideration of power is concerned. This is with reference to both relational and shared Leadership research. Both authors present different but complementary views. Raelin (2016) declares a complete collapse in our ability to coherently, or effectively define leadership-and by implication followership- from a theoretical perspective. He sets out the multifarious positions of "pundits and scholars" and declares this "humanly constructed" idea as malleable in the extreme (Raelin, 2016, p. 132). His practice-based view instead aspires to recognise new forms of leadership practice, which he terms 'collaborative agency'. This reframing of the leadership debate aspires to be collaborative and inclusive, recognising the potential of both individual and collective agency. Among the many potential benefits and consequences of such new practice, is the critical recognition, that the legitimacy of anyone's action within such new, participatory spaces, may remain somewhat predetermined by existing power relations, controlled and influenced predominantly by "hegemonic elites" (Raelin, 2016, p. 148).

He appreciates that this can “cause either conscious or unconscious self-muting” among those who are “disenfranchised” (ibid). His proposed solution for making progress with the practice of collaborative agency in this environment, is interesting. He seems to encourage the creation of a ‘voice’ for all, through participant directed learning. This is where “agents”, (by which we may assume all organisational actors), model highly tolerant and empathic behaviours, and commit to on-going organisational learning, prompted by reflective practice and facilitation, to therefore reframe and “challenge existing assumptions and beliefs” (Raelin, 2016, p. 149). Significantly, how that collective action is legitimised, or activated, and in due course experienced by those involved, remains unanswered, however.

### 2.7.3 Considering power within shared leadership and the implications for this study.

Turning then to Gordon, who readily appreciates the insufficient coverage of power in more traditional leadership literature and in turn in more dispersed theories of leadership’ particularly at a “deep structure level” (Gordon, 2002, p. 151). Essentially, deep structures, (as opposed to surface structures, such as those identifying a given role, or structural grouping within an organisation), these are described as “forms of constraint that are less readily identifiable.”(Gordon, 2002, p. 152). See also (Clegg, 1989; Deetz, 1985; Pentland, 1999). The unifying features of all forms are effects, reflecting the ‘codes’ of behavioural order. “These codes, or deep structures differentiate people on the basis of power” (Gordon, 2002, p.152). An illustrative example concerns how people respond to those with a (perceived) “higher status than themselves”, acting deferentially etc. and reinforcing “on-going power relationships” (ibid).

Gordon offers an alternative research framework. With reference again to those 'deep structures', the taken for granted nature of power in organisations is reconsidered. For instance, those reified 'truths' and practices that have been traditionally advocated by "dominant power holders" and that have largely remained undisputed, these become increasingly problematic in a dispersed leadership arena (Gordon, 2002, p. 160). In fact, the potential of power to be distributed at all in dispersed leadership itself becomes problematic. Gordon asserts that in team-based leadership theories a key assumption "implies that the organisational elite will willingly transfer the power of leadership to team leaders" ... (with no subsequent) "influence on the nature of this transference or its ongoing management" (Gordon, 2002, p. 156). To counter that assumption he cites the work of both Foucault (1970) and Haugaard (2000). This is to specifically point out the ways in which people's behavior can be "unobtrusively constrained by historically constituted codes of order", i.e., "deep structures" and from which it seems almost impossible to escape (ibid).

Exploring power within pluralistic forms of leadership could undoubtedly constitute another entirely new topic of study. However, its influence may still be acknowledged at some level within this study's scope, as potentially affecting the dynamics of shared leadership. It may therefore be recognised, as something "historically constituted in (people's) knowledge of how they are supposed to act in a given situation" (Gordon, 2002, p. 156). In this way power infuses the organisational climate. Like air, it surrounds and pervades those who have experienced this shift from a more conventional form of leadership, potentially with observable results (Foucault, 1980). The extent to which the influence of power was being realised will be reviewed within the research findings within this study, from both a follower and from a leader perspective.

#### 2.7.4 Considering the predominant absence of followers in the leadership literature.

Overall, the dearth of literature on the topic of followers is itself quite significant (Ford and Harding, 2018). (Gilani *et al.*, 2020)) refer to their Scopus search, revealing that “in Leadership Quarterly, 83% of article titles used the word leader and just 8% follower”, (which is in line with what) “Bastardo and Van Vugt (2019) had reported to the end of 2017 (Gilani *et al.*, 2020, p. 346). Such an absence of studies exploring followers and followership, coupled with the more negative connotations associated with this topic, does not position it in the best possible light. Some authors go as far as asserting that there is a clear reluctance on the part of some younger executives to even identify or seek association with the term “follower” itself (Kempster, Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2021).

#### 2.7.5 Challenging the primacy of the formally appointed, individual leader, in favour of an expanded view, that examines the leadership relationship.

It seems fortunate therefore, to be able to locate some notable exceptions to these prevailing trends in this research field. Significantly, Uhl-Bien and Fletcher, who feature in the 2012 compilation of studies, “Advancing Relational Leadership Research”, are both leading exponents of more relational approaches to leadership and followership generally (See also Uhl-Bien 2018). They therefore contribute a more balanced view, with regards to the conceptualization of followership theory, defined “as a relationship in which outcomes are jointly determined “i.e., co-produced” by those acting as leaders and those acting as followers (Shamir, 2007, cited in Uhl-Bien, 2018). This is significant

as the interdependence between leaders and followers is subsequently emphasised, as opposed to highlighting any dichotomy between the two. This is also relevant because the relational perspective itself represents an important shift beyond conventional consideration of power dynamics, or positions; where power is conventionally regarded in relation to “the power that leaders have over their followers” at some level (Gilani et al., 2021, p.344); be it from a personal perspective, or even where such power becomes legitimised by followers (Bolden et al., 2011).

A key premise of this study is that leaders and leadership do not exist in isolation. It is therefore their ‘relationality’ that is being examined here; a relationality that may be examined further, beyond the more conventional analyses, regarding discrete characteristics, behaviours, or actions pertaining to a given, individual leader. ‘Relationality’ when considered for this study supports the presence of followers and therefore followership, as central to co-creating leadership reality. In that respect this study seeks to redress the balance somewhat, as well as trying to understand some of the actual experience of relating in this way.



## 2.8 Assessing the potential of other pluralistic/relational leadership perspectives to contribute to an understanding concerning the nature of Shared Leadership.

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This shift to a relational perspective examined earlier raises an important question: What exactly might other relational leadership views add to this shared leadership 'project? Such relational perspectives were first set out by Uhl-Bien in 2006 for instance, in her relational leadership theoretical framework. These were extensively developed, in collaboration with Ospina in 2012, in their co-edited compilation of writing on this topic, with the following consequences.

Attention shifts to the relationship as the preferred unit of analysis, not individuals. Leadership is considered as a social influence process, emanating from two distinctive positions. An 'entity' based view of relational leadership locates the attention of such exchange and influence processes firmly in individual's perceptions and cognitions. The other, 'relational' view is recognised as being far more fluid and dynamic, whereby persons and organisations are continuously constructed and reconstructed, made "in" processes and not the makers "of" processes (Hosking, 2000). This re-positioning, or re-configuration of relational leadership has strong parallels with the subsequent theoretical dimensions and perspectives informing the Collective Leadership research, that was set to emerge some years later (Ospina, 2020).

Concerning the relational leadership field, its dynamic repositioning raises many, new, research possibilities; achieved for example through the dynamic creation of multiple meanings and "perspectives that continuously emerge" for those involved in the co-creation of leadership (Bradbury and Lichtenstein, 2000, p. 552). For instance, adoption of such relational approaches can potentially enrich what is understood as real by

appreciating and accommodating different “relational and historical/cultural settings (Dachler and Hosking, 1995, p. 4).

Such relational orientations it appears can also offer a distinctly egalitarian opportunity, in a post-heroic sense, to conceive of multiple, new and different readings of ‘self’ and other, for those involved, e.g., new leader identities, or moves away from the rather masculine myth of “individual achievement” etc. (Fletcher, 2012, p. 92). Importantly, encompassing the idea of self-in relation, interdependent relationships and inter-subjective meanings are acknowledged as co-evolving, or constructed in relation (Hosking, 2006). In summary, there appears to be enormous potential to enrich our understanding of shared leadership further, from a followers’ perspective, through the adoption of such relational approaches in research.

#### 2.8.1 Considering emotion within Relational Leadership.

This relational leadership territory appears creatively charged and full of research potential, to thereby to accommodate a fuller reading of the lived experience, e.g., concerning the feelings and emotions of those involved. However, this appears not to be quite the case in practice.

Q. *“What is it like to be within relation (my emphasis) where leadership is being constructed?”*

A. *“I see no accounts of leader and follower experiences in this context”*

*(Reitz, 2014, p. 33)*

Reitz (2014) makes these observations as a direct response to the body of relational leadership literature, set out in Advancing Relational Leadership Research (2012). She points to a significant trend; namely a particular favouring of, or preference for more cognitive and linguistic studies generally across the relational leadership terrain, with the notable absence of the experiential, “non-linguistic processes of relating”, e.g. those concerned with the affective and embodied sense of relational leadership, (Reitz, 2014, p. 32). Such rare and alternative views are offered by Bathhurst and Cain (2013) and Ladkin (2013a) for instance. Even where affect, or emotional processes are explored in this collection, they are studied from an ‘entity’ perspective as discrete variables, located at the individual level, in pursuit of determining positive impact, or otherwise, in the quality of a given leadership relationship (Ashkansay, Paulsen and Tee, 2012). With reference to Reitz’s relational concerns, the challenge this poses for this research study of shared leadership, is concerned with how to ignite, and therefore depict, this particular leadership space as something other than:

***“colourless and bland, full of processes but lacking in emotional turmoil, excitement, conflict or warmth”*** (Reitz,2014;p.33)

### 2.8.2 Assessing research potential within the relational leadership 'between space.'

With reference to the various research assumptions, that characterise the study of shared leadership and followership, discussed as part of this literature review, it would appear therefore that relational themes such as emotion and power, could potentially ignite that relational leadership space. However, these topics are not really addressed, either within shared leadership research, or within Relational Leadership Theory. This is specifically in ways that offer a fuller 'processual' account, or understanding of the dynamics informing the lived, felt, shared leadership experience as it is being co-created. Reitz's remarks (2013) concerning relational leadership space confers the value of emotions as an acknowledged means of social expression.

She reflects the views of other writers on emotional dimensions/aspects of leadership relationships; those who recognise the extent to which "feeling and emotion are embedded in cultural learning...and practices, of which work organisations are inevitably a part" (Fineman, 2003, p. 9). Feeling and thinking are not considered separately. They interpenetrate (Fineman, 1999). Exploring therefore what Fineman and Hosking refer to as the "emotional textures", that constitute the rich context of organisational life, these may potentially reveal important insights about key events and experiences, and how they are socially situated, or appropriated by those involved. In the case of this research study, this may enable a fuller understanding concerning how those who are sharing leadership are being directly affected by it (Hosking and Fineman, 1990; Fineman, 1999; Fineman, 2000).

### 2.8.3 Considering emotion within the leadership relationship.

The important role emotions play in such interactions and dynamics is acknowledged (Ashkansay, Hartel and J, 1995). The scope of such investigations can therefore feasibly extend beyond observance of particular types of emotion, or even beyond recognizing only the more negative effects of emotion in the work place, e.g., “emotional contagion in the human interactions that take place” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 670).

Perhaps, the potent influence of positivistic social science still dominates, “ with its emphasis on discrete, observable, scalable, behaviours and depersonalized structures” (Hosking and Fineman, 1990, p. 594). In an Academy of Management Special Topic Forum, that explored the latest trends in writing concerning emotions and affect in theories of management, this influence is certainly noticeable (Ashkansay, Humphrey and Insead, 2017). Of the eight special feature articles, all but one present themselves as functional studies pertaining to the role of specific emotional variables, or grouping of variables, i.e., “employee affect”; a catch all term relating to all employees’ moods and emotions (Barsade and Gibson, 1998). These emotional studies again stress antecedents and outcomes, seeking again to prove causality, with links made to specific behaviours, or aptitudes for instance, affecting organisational performance/outcomes.

### 2.8.4 Re-igniting the ‘Relational Space’ within shared leadership.

With reference again to this study’s scope, there still appears to be a significant opportunity to more holistically, explore the emotional journey, or lived, felt experience itself, concerning the undertaking of sharing leadership, thereby giving fuller ‘voice’ to those directly involved. In other words “ to actively confront the emotion of organizing”, the sharing of leadership in pursuit of organisational outcomes (Hosking and Fineman,

1990, p. 594). This also acknowledges that organisational context is influential, or socially-contexted, and informs how such feelings and experiences may be expressed, within given organisational circumstances (Hosking and Fineman, 1990).

This approach is more readily encapsulated within those rather liberating accounts concerning “what it’s like at work”; accounts ranging from: Heller (1974) to Herzog (1980) and Terkel (1985). These are writers who provide rich accounts, directly from those involved around experiences of work, demonstrating “subtle textures and the episodic form or emotions” (Hosking and Fineman, 1990, p. 594).

#### 2.8.5 Additional concepts supporting an expanded view of shared leadership.

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An important leadership framework that supports the expanded investigation of shared leadership from a relational perspective is The Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007). As will become evident in the analysis of data set out from chapter 6 onwards in this thesis, this relational leadership framework became significant for this study. This is in part due to its dynamic and flexible nature, thereby enabling its application to this organisational context and the requirement for the ‘live’ observation of shared leadership over time. RCT also complements the conceptualisation of shared leadership, as described within Ospina et al.s’ 2020 framework, which favours leadership as decentered from a given individual, while remaining embodied and distinctly relational in its focus. In addition, this framework has been developed over time and notably has also been usefully applied within hierarchical, mentoring settings. As such this framework effectively considers power asymmetries, plus the attendant relational power dynamics at play. Related to this point, RCT examines relationships as occurring within a constitutive context; one that is directly influenced by hierarchical

roles, cultural norms informing these shared leadership relationships, plus organisational and wider power dynamics that may be affecting such relationality overall.

This framework, as will be examined in-depth from chapter 6 onwards, also explicates both the experience and expression of interdependence, plus associated relational states, skills/behaviours, processes, and practices. Therefore, significantly for this study (RCT) relational ideas such as vulnerability, empathy and empowerment were explored, plus key relational processes and practices, effectively supporting the operationalisation of shared leadership. More specifically, this includes the following relational processes and practices of Reciprocity, Fluidity in Expertise, Mutual Learning, Teaching and Information Exchange (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007).

As will be explored in these later chapters, relational dimensions such as vulnerability will be examined in terms of their valuable contribution to the effective sharing of leadership information, decision-making and learning, in the manner conceived by writers such as Brenne Brown, who advocate for the cultivation of vulnerability as a gateway to greater interdependence through trust and as a gateway to learning (Brown, 2012). In addition, reciprocity is defined as a relational skill and practice informing collaborative, working relationships “leading to consensus as (individuals) share back and forth” (Miller and Stiver, 1997 cited in Lewis and Olshansky, 2016, p. 388). Such examination of reciprocity as a relational practice also offers interesting insights into key microprocesses informing such collaborative practice. These include: key aspects of dialogical practice informed by Sharmer’s Relational Dialogue Framework, including the practice of challenge within this shared leadership setting (2001).

## 2.9 How action research supports this study's research objectives.

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In this chapter the concept of shared leadership and the related topic of followership have been considered in some depth, alongside other related concepts such as emotion, relational leadership, and power. Subsequently, this review has highlighted various anomalies, inconsistencies and even gaps, in terms of how these phenomena have been conceptualised to date. Having considered the direction of travel for the study of shared leadership, and the new research opportunities that have been presented here, to develop a richer understanding of this phenomenon, as it is occurring over time and within a specific cultural setting, it is important to now briefly mention the role that action research can play, in providing more in-depth insights and understanding concerning the nature of these phenomena.

In chapter 3 I will set out the rationale for the adoption of action research as my chosen methodology for the study of shared leadership as experienced by followers.

Action research is significant for this study, as it facilitates direct participation by co-researchers/followers, thereby enabling their 'voice' to be heard, i.e., concerning their first-hand, lived experience of relating in this more pluralistic manner, in the context of sharing leadership with their peers and in relation to their senior leaders and board.

Action research facilitates a greater processual understanding regarding the feelings, experiences, attitudes, and actions of participants concerning their work and their working relationships with others. These are therefore recognised and richly depicted, through the adoption of extended epistemologies, to ultimately inform theory. As will be outlined in chapters 3 and 4 this includes the representation of key experiences and narrative accounts, contained within a learning history methodological framework, as well as the visual depictions and accounts of the same. This methodological approach



therefore enables a broader, richer appreciation of emotional, relational, and power dimensions/dynamics associated with this shared leadership phenomenon occurring within a hierarchical setting. Finally, this research process is ultimately concerned with action. Therefore, key events and actions are also recorded and reviewed by all involved, with a view to ultimately proposing shifts, or changes in shared leadership practice.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY CHAPTER

### 3.1 Introduction.

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In the previous chapter shared leadership as a research stream was examined in depth, to reveal certain limitations in its study, that could effectively enable a more processual understanding concerning the lived, felt experience and operationalisation of this shared phenomenon by those involved.

Informed by the literature review, there are therefore opportunities to investigate:

- Followership within such collaborative contexts.
- The nature of the relationality that is occurring, to appreciate more fully how that is being experienced by those directly involved in such collaboration, as well as the associated processes and practices.
- Other contextual factors that support a better understanding concerning how shared leadership *may* be occurring, or otherwise, over time. To that end, recognition of prevailing contextual and cultural factors that could support, or even impede its successful realisation, are incorporated within this research. This is also with reference to consideration of how such leadership influence and associated power dynamics were being experienced by this group of volunteers, as they shared leadership responsibility.

In view of various calls and recent developments within the literature, it is evident that there is far greater opportunity to apply different methodological approaches, with

regards to the conceptualisation of the shared leadership phenomenon. This chapter considers in-depth my chosen research strategy, and its application in the 'field'.

I will begin by setting out my supporting philosophical position for this study that informs my methodological strategy, a Participatory Paradigm of Inquiry.

The research strategy adopted for this study importantly reflects my motivation and role as a researcher, which is informed by my experience as a leadership consultant and coach. I will outline how this professional background and motivation is therefore aligned to those ontological and epistemological perspectives, that will be presented in this chapter.

Next, I will position the learning history as an accepted methodology within the action research tradition. Here I will consider my approach to entering the research field and how I sought to effectively negotiate the relationship between me as the 'researcher' and the 'researched' in an inclusive, collaborative manner. I will also set out my choice of supporting research methods, which were both novel and consistent with the extended epistemological palette, within this research paradigm. The way these research methods informed my analytic strategy is also significant and will therefore be expanded upon in Chapter 4. Even though participatory action research represents a distinct shift away from positivist perspectives, the challenge remains to mitigate against potential bias, given the nature and dynamics of the research relationship itself. I will therefore set out my research strategy, to validate findings, embrace reflexivity in our joint analysis of this shared leadership phenomenon and to ensure that the integrity of this story was maintained.

Finally in this chapter, I will position the learning history as a working document, to further illustrate the rationale supporting its application, both as a tool to stimulate

learning and reflection, and as a research text supporting the exploration of shared leadership as a lived experience by followers.

### 3.2 Establishing a supporting philosophical position for this study.

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**IF** it is assumed that leadership, (including shared leadership), can be defined as something other than a socially constructed phenomenon, it follows then that leadership can be explored in some objectively determined, straightforward manner (Ladkin, 2010). As discussed earlier in chapter 2, section 2.3.4, the significant ontological and epistemological issues that characterise much of shared leadership research, reflects a dominance within leadership studies favouring a Western based tradition of “research methods based in positivistic ways of knowing” (Ladkin, 2010.p.4). Approaches more frequently applied in the natural sciences go some way to explaining how leadership generally gets “broken down into its component parts”, as well as the ways these constituent elements are favoured and subsequently measured using “psychometric or ideographic indicators” (ibid). It follows that, where the emphasis such positivistic studies place therefore, is **primarily focused** on the study of individual leaders, this does not recognise the collective nature of leadership, with the result that followers and the constitutive context remain largely ignored. Such a predominant trend starts to explain the similar research pattern that characterises many shared leadership studies, with their focus on individual leaders and individual followers etc.

In fact, the lack of consensus, or definitive clarity from so many writers, whatever their philosophical tradition, concerning the topic of leadership, itself somewhat paradoxically points to a “socially constructed phenomenon constituted by different people in particular circumstances”. (Ladkin, 2010 p.2). It is unsurprising that such a

lack of agreement or alignment, has resulted in a growing and often contradictory body of dispersed, or pluralistic leadership theories, in which this shared leadership study sits (Raelin, 2016).

### 3.2.1 Positioning shared leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon.

***“What kind of phenomenon is leadership?”*** (Ladkin, 2010, p.3)

Rather than asking ‘What is Leadership?’ this question places the enquiry as coming from a different direction, in this case a phenomenological perspective. By acknowledging the subjective nature of knowledge and recognising the lived experience of those involved, such an ‘inside out’ approach offered by phenomenology may therefore illuminate, the research topic under consideration here, concerning how shared leadership is being experienced from a follower perspective. The experience of those being led cannot be dismissed for one thing, in favour of an exclusive focus on the leaders.

As examined in chapter 2, this shift in thinking in the leadership literature moves away from the narrow, reductionist focus on the individual leader, whose qualities, characteristics, or actions are being directly linked to the impact on the achievement of tasks. However, as previously noted there is a turning point in the 90’s, when many writers start to advocate in favour of post-positivistic approaches; thereby moving beyond discrete identities and functions of leaders and followers and turning our attention instead, to the more “relational and ‘invisible’ aspects of leadership, that do not lend themselves to clear identification and quantification” (Ladkin, 2010, p.5)

### 3.2.2 Reframing the study of shared leadership from a followers' perspective.

In this *space between* leaders and followers, the unit of analysis becomes the relationship itself (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Conventionally, such “leadership space is depicted as somewhat colourless and bland, full of processes but lacking in emotional turmoil, excitement, conflict or warmth” (Reitz, 2014, p. 33). Consequently, this leadership relationship, when appreciated within its rich constitutive context, still has considerable potential to be reignited; thereby potentially recognising qualitative, experiential, emotional and other hitherto missing aspects. These are aspects, which are largely ignored by those, who seek to define, assess, measure, and manipulate key leadership variables, mimicking lab conditions. Such attempts, by their very nature separate the leadership ‘beast’ from its ‘habitat’. The justification of objectivity, through attempts to generalise and, or replicate findings associated with this approach, therefore become untenable. Such framing is limiting in its scope and cannot facilitate the ‘fuller’ story to be told.

### 3.2.3 The contribution of a phenomenological position for this study.

By virtue of its socio-constructionist stance, exploration of such relationality facilitates a fuller consideration of organisational context, process, and emotion for instance (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Specifically, this philosophical field supports a recognition of key qualities integral to this research; namely the subjective nature of knowledge, the lived experience, the human processes of sense making. Significantly, it does not attempt to position reality as fixed, out there, yet to be discovered. Rather, it recognises “historical values” ; that accumulated experience , or effects of history, infusing our very capability to know (Howell, 2013, p. 29).

Phenomenology favours a rich “understanding... not about how we know the world but (about) our very essence, our understanding of the world **is** who we are” (Howell, 2013: p.56). This is both potentially quite liberating and significant, not least in terms of ‘giving voice’ or expression to those, who may otherwise not be typically heard in the leadership discourse, in this case the followers, who figure in this research study. As identified earlier within the literature review, there is much opportunity in research terms, to relate to the actual experience of those affected by such ‘relational’ shifts, to more collective forms of leadership, to understand how such relationships are experienced, and how this affects the co-construction of leadership.

### 3.3 The methodological strategy for this study.

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The participatory paradigm of inquiry adopted for this study makes for a more dynamic and changeable reading of reality, as it depends on the construction of ‘reality’ at a local level, informed directly by the experience and reflective practices of those involved. Like Critical Theory it is recognised that individuals never completely escape their social and historical structures and that this too can inform findings. Merleau-Ponty reinforces that point, referring to the fact that human beings are born into a “historical and cultural situation where objects are already clothed with meaning” (Walsh, 1985, p. 531). “Man is born into a world of historical and cultural objects”, e.g., churches, spoons, streets etc. (ibid). The onus on us as human beings, is therefore to become aware of that reality. In the case of this study, it is to become aware of the ‘reality’ of the leadership relationship, that is actively being shared between followers and in relation to their senior leaders; a

relationship that precisely is 'clothed' in specific social, historical, and cultural meanings, of direct significance to those experiencing it.

**"...the world becomes visible to itself *in and through man*" (Walsh, 1985, p. 531)**

How we become aware of that leadership reality, this highlights a key element, namely the "body subject", informing such exploration (Walsh, 1985, p. 529). This relates to a vital aspect of the research strategy adopted for this study; one that favours recounting the lived, felt, emotional experiences of those directly affected by the sharing of leadership within organisations. It therefore distinguishes this approach, ontologically and epistemologically speaking, from the perspective and primary intention of "critically disputing actual social realities", that characterises critical theory for example (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009, p. 144).

### 3.3.1 Emotionalising the leader/follower relationship.

"(W)e have been held captive by the computer metaphor for information processing. If our research is to have a strong external validity, we must consider the emotional basis of work and its relationship to the cognitive questions we have been asking."  
(Walsh, 1995, p. 307).

The corporeality of Merleau-Ponty it has been argued, informs our reality as much as our cognition, "as we move through the world as opposed to just thinking about it" (Ladkin, 2010, p. 57). This represents a move beyond the assumed primacy of mind, a view that has long dominated "Western philosophical thought, which privileges rationality and reason" (Fineman, 2003, p. 11). Reason has been lauded by Aristotle, whereas emotion has been viewed as a form of weakness by many over time, "of



interference, 'sand in the machinery of action' " (Elster, 1998, p. 284). Different perspectives however have emerged that recognise and value emotion as a means of social expression, recognising the extent to which "feeling and emotion are embedded in cultural learning ... and practices, of which work organisations are inevitably a part" (Fineman, 2003, p. 9). For Fineman and others emotion relates to three distinctive positions. For him they are neither an interference, nor servants to rationality. *Rather they intertwine* (my emphasis). "They both interpenetrate; they flow together in the same mould" (Fineman, 1999, p. 11).

Additionally, Fineman's approach to an emotional reading involving individuals in workplace settings, is also not to fixate on biological or psychological determinism; rather to look instead to "the social and relational context of emotion" (Fineman, 1999, p.3) He aspires to a reconciliation between perspectives, to therefore "account (for) individuals' biographies and unconscious processes", while not ignoring the fact that social structures and wider cultural/economic processes" influence such emotional research also (ibid). He asserts that the individual/organisational/social distinctions need to be considered "interrelationally", in parallel, drawing variously on the work of Giddens (Giddens, 1984; Giddens, 1991) and Foucault (Foucault, 1970; Foucault, 1979), in support of his argument.

Such elevation of emotion is critical in action research terms, given that experiential knowing, becomes an essential foundation to feed into and inform, all other epistemological dimensions of such research. A recognition and integration of emotion is consistent with the ambitions of action research, given its function as a:

"response to the conditions in which we live and work" and the "way we think, what we do, and how we relate to others in the world" (Kemmis, Mc Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 7).

### 3.3.2 Co-operative Inquiry.

This methodology presents a powerful research platform, where such multi-faceted perspectives may be richly expressed and shared. It represents a break, or a discontinuity from the positivist worldviews and methods outlined earlier in this chapter. This participatory and dialogical relationship with the world, represents a distinct shift from objectivity (Reason and Heron, 1986). A key aspect of this methodology is a recognition of “wholeness”; one where the interconnected nature of things is therefore acknowledged (Skolimowski, 1985, p. 25 emphasis in the original).

This points not just to a recognition of context and emotion that may therefore be utilised, to generate understandings of how shared leadership is experienced by those involved, it also requires, non-hierarchical, *full* participation of all those directly involved, working co-operatively to co-create, to co-generate these new understandings. This is coupled with intention and agreement, to own and identify with this subject, in an empathic way, in order to explore the subject and therefore themselves deeply. Critical subjectivity is the quality of awareness, the kind of knowing that is required, as opposed to objective consciousness (Reason, 1988). This precisely enables individual, subjective experience to be honored, while becoming critically aware of the “constrictions and distortions of past distress” that may have been experienced, or awareness of political factors that impinge our understanding, or expanding our focus of attention to other domains of experience (Reason, 1985, p. 12).

Finally Co-operative inquiry is intensely practical “seek(ing) knowledge in action and for action”.. “practical knowledge of new skills and abilities” ; in this case, better shared leadership practice with others. The criticality, which aspires to objective consciousness while integrating the subjective aspects of such an endeavor, this is, in many respects,

more demanding on those involved, when compared to the approaches to understand pieces, traces of leadership experience, utilised within the positivist scientific tradition. “Good co-operative enquiry is both wholeheartedly involved and intensely self-critical” (Reason, 1985, p. 13).

### 3.3.3 Why all this is relevant to me as a researcher.

I have reflected as to why I was so readily drawn to this participatory paradigm of inquiry. This choice largely reflects my professional background and expertise in the field of leadership consultancy and coaching, as well as drawing on my creative experience as a documentary film maker and broadcaster, previously producing social action ‘features’ for TV and radio.

It is therefore perhaps no accident that I would be readily drawn to this research paradigm, given its roots are at some level a reflection of my own values and motivation. Historically such collaborative inquiry has given voice to underrepresented, marginalised groups and thereby enabled them strengthen their capacity to transform their lives accordingly (Park, 1993) . With reference to my leadership work within predominantly public sector operating environments, my approach has always been relational and collaborative, as opposed to adopting a directive “sage on the stage” approach, e.g., by offering some targeted expertise as the panacea, or universal solution to what may essentially be defined as particular, local and all too often complex problems (Grint, 2008). My role has therefore been to actively engage with teams, over time, at all organisational levels, to facilitate change and transformation. This has also always involved recognising the constitutive context; specifically, those key cultural/historical influences, that may inform or even impede progress. This, plus a recognition of the impact it has emotionally on those involved in ‘leading’ change, with others, these

have all become vital ingredients for my consultancy work. Action research methodology therefore provides the right platform, given its recognition of context, to develop my approach and practice accordingly.

At a more focused level, this recognition of notable, historical, experiences events and their associated impact, plus working with the emotionality, that characterises all coaching work, once again helps to explain why I have been so motivated by the opportunity to embrace feeling and emotion in this research study (See also Rogers, 2012; Western, 2013). Such recognition of emotion in this study can usefully provide vital signposts to understanding the shared, lived experience leading in this manner itself by those directly involved and affected by it.

Finally, and with reference to the extended epistemologies that characterise action research, the creative, storyteller in me, was therefore extremely keen to experiment with the multi-media learning history form; both as it has been applied as a research methodology and as a research text (Amidon, 2008).

Storytelling in organisations has gained renewed interest, given its capacity as a “powerful form of sense making to exchange and consolidate sometimes complex knowledge” (Peters and Thier, 2019, p. 957). It offers the potential to elicit empathy, or an emotional connection, “share tacit knowledge... build trust, engagement and collaboration.....and spark action” (ibid). Storytelling in action research enables a synthesis of multi-faceted information and emotion, and thereby to facilitate learning, or (un)learning accordingly.

### 3.4 Participatory action research

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A more detailed account will follow on the process of creating a learning history and the resulting product. Firstly, it is important to outline further important aspects of the core paradigmatic features of participatory action research, that have informed my research approach. The epistemological framework contextualises the choice, as well as the application of methods used during the research phase with staff.

Participatory action research, shares goals and approaches similar to other ethnographic studies, e.g. the pursuit of rigorous effort to really understand subjects and contextualizing others' stories effectively with respect to their history, culture and social conditions (Guba G E foreword in Stringer, 1999). However, the relational distance, the 'over rapport' cautioned against in postmodern ethnography simply collapses in participatory action research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The pursuit of objectivity in the more conventional research sense is simply deemed inappropriate. Instead "critical subjectivity" is pursued (Reason and Marshall, 1987). Here 'reality', or rather 'realities' are constructed locally and even more importantly, they are informed by the critical, subjective experience and reflective practices of participants involved in the action research process (ibid). I will set out later in this chapter how we sought to achieve such critical subjectivity during the research process.

#### 3.4.1 Extending epistemology.

(Reason and Heron, 1986) set out the epistemological framework that seeks to creatively expand the bounds of knowledge discovery beyond the "propositional", associated with the abstract theorising of academia (Reason, 2003, p. 20). Their extended epistemology becomes activated through experiential knowing, which justifies the significance of capturing the 'lived' experiences of those who are sharing

leadership, with peers and in relation to their senior executive teams. Experiential knowing is achieved through “direct face-to-face encounter with a person, place or thing...knowing through empathy and resonance”, that is almost ineffable (Reason, 2003, p.21). This enriched approach to the pursuit of knowledge has connected me, the investigator, to my fellow co-subjects in very interesting ways, which will be elaborated on further in my methods section and in chapter 4:

The pursuit of experiential knowing therefore brings to the fore the emotional basis of work. Drawing on that emotion serves to illuminate the research topic being investigated. Emotion in this research environment becomes a valuable means of social expression because feeling and emotion are embedded in our work lives (Fineman, 2003). They are particularly revealing about important insights and critical incidents and how they are socially situated, or appropriated by those involved (Fineman, 1999; Fineman, 2000). Such an emotional reading of key events, or critical incidents has been vital to the construction of this inquiry and the resulting learning history findings.

#### 3.4.2 Presentational knowing.

Another form of knowing in this research is the presentational, specifically the generation of material informing a learning history, that has been produced in parallel with this organisational activity of co-creating strategy. Seeley and Reason (2008) strongly advocate for the recognition of “presentational knowing” as part of generating evidence in action research, and expressing that in diverse ways, to support learning. For the co-researchers involved in this research study, the generation of such presentational knowing, stories, key accounts, visualisations of events etc., therefore has facilitated tacit knowledge to be articulated, by “encompassing intuition and

reflection, imagination and conceptual thinking”. (Heron, 1992, p. 158 cited in Seeley and Reason, 2008, p.4).

In addition, embracing such presentational knowing has therefore provided a rare, creative opportunity to depart from, what may be described as the ‘exclusive’ reporting approach and style of a management consultant’s report, concerning this process of sharing leadership. Typically, this would feature an executive summary, aimed especially at senior executives and boards. Instead, we have sought to co-create a multi-media document, or research text, which combines information directly from participants’ interviews, experiences, stories, and visual depictions concerning this experience. This supports critical reflection on and recognition for the collaborative development of this learning history. The original intention was that this research text would, in due course, be disseminated with third parties, beyond the research group, to support further, organisational learning and develop shared leadership practice accordingly etc. (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015). This is discussed later in this chapter. For now, it is important to note that, the design approach and subsequent format and style of a learning history has sought to support the explicit, direct involvement and parity of influence of those involved, as opposed to privileging my views.

### 3.4.3 Practical knowing.

Beyond propositional knowing, the other vital element of extended epistemology concerns practical knowing (Heron and Reason, 2001). Such knowing becomes a consummation of all the other forms of knowing (Heron, 1996). Where the main intention, or inquiry goal is “practical and transformative within a domain”, this may result in “rich..descriptions” for this purpose, including the skills acquired, plus any other

“situational changes and personal transformations” (Heron and Reason, 2001, p. 183). The rich accounts provided within this learning history, regarding key shared leadership experiences, supporting processes and collaborative practices, speaks to this aspiration. Any situational changes refer, in this context, to the wider influence and impact of these shared leadership experiences, processes practices, as they have been applied with others from this organisation. This is with reference for instance to the influence on corporate policies and plans for this Housing Association, affecting how and where such shared leadership work usefully could be effectively coordinated and performed in future. As to the transformational nature of such an inquiry, the intention was that this could also be expressed through participants’ reflections regarding how these dynamic leadership experiences and collaborative relationships had affected “the world (they) live and practice in” (Kemmis, Mc Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 7). This in turn leads to practical action, know-how and positive changes etc. related to their subsequent leadership outlook and approaches (ibid).

#### 3.4.4 The role of learning histories in action research.

A Learning History “is a process (and a product) that results in a jointly told tale in multiple narratives, with illustrations and reflections on strategies... results, what happened and why” (Guba, E G foreword in Stringer, 1999). It is participative, dialogical, and collaborative in nature for all ‘co-researchers’ involved. It is revealing of organisational dynamics and may be informed by documents, experiences, observations, reflections, visual artifacts etc. As a methodology, it is well suited to the longitudinal nature of this study. As a research text, it therefore supports the extended epistemological considerations referred to earlier, where key experiences and



narratives, stories, quotes etc. can inform the Learning History artifact ([www.learninghistories.net](http://www.learninghistories.net), 2017).

The roots of Learning Histories go back to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which has a teaching and research culture of “learning by doing”, with a view to “translating ideas into action” (MIT, , 2022). The ambition of our learning history has certain parallels with the research methodology as it was originally conceived and applied, within innovative business units/pilots, whose staff were interested in developing new approaches and thereby extending their effect, or impact, more widely across the organisation and beyond (Kleiner and Roth, 1996). The goal of learning histories is to therefore capture and share what ‘we’ as innovators have learned (Gearty, 2014). Additionally, learning histories are relevant in support of change and are established practice within Organisational Development. This heritage provided in turn some compelling arguments to engage staff in this proposed research approach, i.e., in order that organisational members could thereby learn from this innovative and experimental undertaking, to support their changing leadership ‘practice’. How I engaged co-inquirers for this study will be elaborated on in due course in this chapter.

#### 3.4.4.1 Learning history versus case study

There is an important distinction between a learning history and a case study. Learning histories may be summarily referred to as a case study depiction of action research (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015, p. 1). Like the case study, the learning history calls on qualitative research approaches, e.g., semi-structured interviews, grounded theory etc., more so than for other action research undertakings.

The generalised, abstracted description that characterises a case study, contrasts significantly with a learning history. The emphasis in learning history is rather on

personal voice and story, combined with richer, more finely grained detail. Additionally, the process of creating a learning history and the inherent learning approach in such an undertaking, again differentiates it from case study approaches.

Significantly, the intention remains, that however unique these stories and voices are, they are also universal (Gearty, 2014). This supports the relevance of this learning history to support both individual reflection and organisational learning. In the introduction to the resultant learning history, the potential audiences for this work are outlined. By aligning itself closely to specific nature of these personal experiences a learning history is seeking to overcome a general outline of “best practices” and instead embrace the “thinking, experimentation and arguments of those who have experienced the same situation” (Gearty, 2014, p. 3)

Importantly, it highlights the opportunity to learn from such direct personal experiences in a more dynamic way, initially from the perspective of those directly involved. Third parties therefore in due course may recognise and understand, not just the local conditions, but rather the thought processes, the creative experimentation, motivation, and actions of those directly involved.

#### 3.4.5 Embracing the ‘spirit’ of co-operative Inquiry.

The ‘spirit’ rather than the ‘letter’ of co-operative inquiry is arguably reflected within this methodological strategy. As is common in other co-operative inquiry research, I have been working with people, who likewise, share an interest in exploring more fully the experience of shared leadership, how and whether it may be effectively shared (Heron and Reason, 2001) . Together, we have sought to understand and make sense of the ‘world’ creatively, i.e., in which such an approach to leadership is happening and

to “find out how to do things better” (Heron and Reason, 2001, p. 179). This related to staffs’ developing knowledge, know-how and skill, through actively sharing leadership responsibility, and in their developing a broader understanding of how to subsequently apply this ‘practice’ further, with others in the future for example.

### 3.5 Initiating a Co-operative Inquiry. Overview of my approach.

I was invited by the senior leadership team (Group, Senior Management Team), to explore shared leadership at it was occurring over time, given my research interest and my professional expertise as a leadership consultant, coach and facilitator. My starting position therefore could best be described as “partial co-subject “, an “ethnographic visitor to the culture” (Heron and Reason, 2001, p. 182); see also (Marshall and Mc Lean, 1988) . This is where this study departs from the strict adherence to the discipline and practice of a co-operative inquiry. There has been parity of influence with co-opted inquirers concerning the content of the learning history. This is evidenced by the joint co-creation, regular review, and reflection of content, at key points for example. However, to be a ‘true’ Co-operative Inquiry, all active subjects are fully involved as co-researchers in all research discussions about **both content** and **method**, at key reflection points (Heron and Reason, 2001). In the case of the overarching theme and purpose of this inquiry, my overriding interest in this collective leadership topic, albeit shared by the senior leaders within this organisation, was not necessarily at the forefront of participants’ concerns. This study was therefore positioned as a unique opportunity for further learning and reflection on this leadership experience, as it was happening over the six-month period. Please refer now to the ‘call out’ for research volunteers to take part in this study. See appendix A.

In terms of applying the action research method, whereby all co-researchers agree, both the content and the format of the data findings, this also has not been strictly the case in this action research study. At the outset, given my professional expertise and interest as a researcher, a learning history was therefore proposed by me as the most suitable method to effectively capture learning from this unique, initiative at this organisation. I proposed a learning history therefore as an action research practice that is particularly well suited to “capture and share” the different perspectives of a group, that has been, in this case, innovating the process of strategy creation (Gearty, 2014, p. 1) . The resulting ‘artifact’, which was critically reflected on at key intervals with these participants and in due course other stakeholders, is thereby intended to enable stakeholders, to shift from their current state, to the future they desire; a future that is inclusive of others (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015) . The resulting discussions and debates that ensued both during the research period and beyond were therefore intended to “facilitate coordinated action for a new future” (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015, p. 1). To this end it was originally negotiated, with the co-opted inquirers, to capture the learning from this shared leadership initiative, in this manner, to contribute to organisational knowledge, and to inform the developing practice of working in this manner more widely.

### 3.5.1 Exploring my positionality as a researcher.

All types of action research disregard the conventional research notion of the ‘outsider’/expert, entering the research field to objectively represent and record events. Significantly, action research recognises the capacity of individuals to play an active role throughout the research undertaking, while being concerned with recognising and positively changing their practices/approaches within their environments (Kemmis and

McTaggart, 2005). This shift in involvement by participants is described by some as liberating, or empowering (Herbert, 2005).

As demonstrated by the development of two major action research handbooks- *The Sage Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2008) and *The Handbook of Educational Action Research* (Somekh and Noffke, 2009), new insights and greater levels of understanding have emerged concerning the relationships between 'researcher' and 'researched', with implications for the attendant relationships "between theory and practice, and therefore between 'theorists' and 'practitioners' (Kemmis, Mc Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 4).

The challenge for me as a researcher therefore was, how to meaningfully engage with my co-researchers, to become more than just the 'outsider', the non-participant researcher in other words, who maintains an academic detachment in proceedings, while maintaining a primary focus on facilitating the research process. It is also noteworthy that this non-participant researcher position is both privileged by the originators of action research and was subsequently criticised by Kemmis (2012) for instance, for what could be described as "academic disinterest" about what may be emerging through such research and its impact on all involved. To that end my motivation for conducting this action research was not in exclusive service to further my own academic interests. Rather my intention was to complement the interests and pursuits of this staff group, who were actively engaged in this novel, shared leadership undertaking with their peers and their senior leaders. My research approach was therefore broadly in keeping with Carr and Kemmis' (1986) approach to action research, which is referred to as practical action research, which focuses on raising practitioner awareness, of their actions and the ends used to achieve them. This meant that, while the group were engaging in this novel, collaborative undertaking, they could/would

simultaneously review and reflect on their collective leadership practice, paying attention to how the experience itself had affected them as leaders, as well as learning more generally about the successes and failures of this approach. I set out in quite some detail, from sections 3.7.2 – 3.7.7, how I sought to mitigate against my own assumptions and preconceptions about the nature of sharing leadership in this manner. This was achieved through actively engaging my co-researchers in this research process, plus enabling other ‘outsider’ perspectives to review the findings of the learning history as it evolved.

### 3.5.2 Action research orientations.

Before I outline those qualitative research methods that supported this endeavour in section 3.6, I would like to set out my adoption of first, second and to a limited extent, third person inquiry positions.

**First person inquiry** may be described as my “inward inquiry, mindfulness and reflection” , during this research undertaking, whereby I could pay disciplined attention ‘ in the field’ and record my reactions and attitudes towards occurrences and accounts of shared leadership (Hynes, 2013, p. 54) I started the practice of personal journaling, during the pilot study in 2016 when invited to the Housing Association in 2016, to initially observe and interview members of the Group Senior Management Team and their board. This continued throughout the research study, where I would write up my reflections immediately key events, workshops, etc. and reflect on these later in supervision sessions. The initial purpose however was to cultivate a greater understanding about the organisational culture, history and working practices informing their shared leadership approach. During strategic planning meetings with these stakeholders, I would record any notable information related to organisational culture,

to support my background research. In addition, I would also engage in a form of “free fall” writing and drawing, essentially to capture my feelings, reactions, and thoughts on the nature of these interactions themselves as they were occurring. In the spirit of first person inquiry which acknowledges our “relationship with the world and others”, I would later distill and test these reflections-in-action out with this senior leadership grouping and share my observations relating to the nature and open quality of their dialogue as it was occurring (Hynes, 2013, p. 55). This included observations on the quality of dialogue that was inclusive and openly invited challenge, to test assumptions, offer alternative perspectives and generate more ‘thoughtful’ decisions. See appendix B, an extract from my personal journal. This quality of dialogue between peers and leadership groups would once again be reflected in the main research study. During these sessions I also fed back, through use of metaphor, my perception of power dynamics that were being experienced in this setting. (One such example refers to the nature metaphor of a pond populated in teeming life, flowers, insects etc. co-existing together in an established garden. Underneath the surface however there are undercurrents, that can stifle growth, weeds, large fish etc.) See appendix C for an extract of my freefall writing. Such testing out of ideas with others is significant in action research, given my need to be consciously aware of the research question I was posing but also the value I was placing in leading in this collaborative way. This inquiry orientation therefore forced me to also acknowledge with others the trickier aspects of leading in this manner, including just how time consuming and involved a process it can become.

## **Second person inquiry**

This practice of personal journaling also fed into second person inquiry with the research participants. This inquiry with others orientation involves coming together through face-to-face dialogue on matters of mutual interest or concern and comprises the predominant research orientation informing this thesis (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). I elaborate further in section 3.6 about personal journaling, plus the choice of other methods used to support this second person inquiry orientation. Its application is explored in depth in chapter 4. To briefly illustrate its application, I would openly share my reflections on action, e.g., those key strategic planning events participants had engaged in with wider staff and the board. This enabled teasing out many of the issues that would ultimately inform the learning history itself. For instance, I would share my reactions, and reflections to off-line conversations and observed sessions with peers and the board; again, with a view to challenging my own biases about the nature of shared leadership. For instance, my assumptions about whether sharing leadership within a context of power asymmetries would be curtailed was positively challenged by staff, whom I reflected did not self-censor in their group debates around key strategic themes at the full staff planning event regardless of which senior leader, or board member was present. This serves to illustrate what Argris (2006) refers to as the recognition between what is espoused theory and how that theory, in this case shared leadership theory, plays out in action. See also Appendix D.

## **Third person inquiry**



Finally, the aim of this orientation is to generate wider impact through networks and dissemination of learning more widely (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). My engagement at this level has been somewhat limited. That said: I have shared my research thinking, actions, and findings at various stages of this undertaking for feedback and review with the following audiences:

- At a seminar organised with the Group Senior Management Team at this Housing Association, with a view validating these shared leadership experiences and activities with them.
- Engaging academic peers at seminars to explore interim research findings at Plymouth University.
- Presenting my innovative use of learning history methodology at Plymouth University, 2018 Doctoral Conference and winning first prize in the methodology category.
- Presenting my doctoral research at a coaching conference with a focus on relational leadership and its relevance to coaching relationships.
- Co-designing new professional development programme aimed at organisational leaders with an emphasis on collaboration and relational working, which are directly informed by my research.

The learning history artefact itself is also designed to appeal to a range of academic and non-academic audiences interested in the topic of shared leadership. These are detailed in the learning history artefact itself and form part of my reflections in chapter 8 of this thesis.

### 3.5.3 Participants in this study

Out of 26 staff who would go on to co-create the strategy, 14 initially volunteered for this study, 12 of whom initially agreed to participate in a series of facilitated workshops that would broadly run in parallel with the strategic planning work. They comprised two distinct but complementary roles, “Discoverers” and “Vioneers”. Briefly, Discoverers led a comprehensive research effort supporting each of the strategic themes that were chosen for the plan. In turn, Vioneers would take over and lead on the production of high-level statements supporting each of the themes, that would eventually be presented to the board and to the wider staff groups. The invitation to participate in this study and their role profiles are included here. This illustrates how these roles were negotiated with board and subsequently with staff and sets out the follower relationship to the senior leaders and board accordingly. **See appendix E.**

It is important to acknowledge that the process for strategy building had never involved staff from across the organisation to this extent previously. During the first event to launch the ‘call’ for staff to actively participate in this process, staff were advised that they were also welcomed to contribute their own topics and themes as they saw fit. Subsequently, the final group comprised staff with an ICT background for instance, due to the digitalisation agenda at the time. Another topic concerns engagement with customers, hence the requirement for staff members with direct customer services experience etc.

Notably, two of the senior executives from the organisation worked as Vioneers and participated in the final workshop only, alongside other senior executives. Another

observation concerns the fact that this sample group of participants for this study represent a wide, cross section of both functions and organisational level, or position. This was intentional, to provide a diversity of perspectives in support of the research topic itself. The ambition of the “Group Senior Leadership Team” (GSMT), was that those staff, who would volunteer to take on the roles of Discoverers and Visioneers, were those who had some experience of the key high level strategic themes, informing scope of the strategy. Finally, this whole strategic building process would be facilitated/overseen by the Director of Culture, with support from an external Organisational Development Consultant.

*Table 3 Research participants*

Discoverer	Participant 1 People Services Assistant
Discoverer	Participant 2 Finance Team Manager
Discoverer	Participant 3 Welfare Benefits Officer
Discoverer	Participant 4 Property Services Manager
Discoverer	Participant 5 Group ICT Assistant
Discoverer	Participant 6 Asset Manager
Visioneer	Participant 7 Exec. Director Assets and Growth (Participated in the final group workshop 5)
Visioneer	Participant 8 Group Coordinator ICT
Visioneer	Participant 9 Executive Director Finance and Business Support (Participated in the final group workshop 5)
Visioneer	Participant 10 Customer Services Assistant

Visioneer	Participant 11 Group Lead PR and Comms
Visioneer	Participant 12 Community Investment Officer

### 3.5.4 Negotiating access to the group and adhering to ethical principles of action research.

With the research intention of raising practitioner awareness of their shared leadership actions and the ends used to achieve them, I first e-mailed the group of Discoverers and Visioneers, to ask for volunteers who would be willing to collaborate in this research undertaking. As part of my e-mail invite, I sent the following proposal, setting out the following: (See also appendix A).

1. The title of the research
2. An accompanying description of the collaborative research approach and ethos itself, i.e., a description of Co-operative Inquiry and Learning History
3. I also provided some background relating to my academic interest around shared leadership as well as,
4. Details of my previous pilot research undertaking with the Group Senior Management Team and the Board.

In line with core principles of Participatory Action Research to “do no harm”, with respect for the integrity, safety, reputation and interests of those consenting to be involved, in this invitation I also set out the “risks” involved: i.e., that participants’ experiences and findings would, in due course, be shared with their senior leaders and

board. I also set out how I would endeavour to mitigate any risk accordingly. To that end:

- Participants' anonymity would be guaranteed, i.e., data would be de-identified from any one person, or role.
- All relevant data would be validated first by participants and all participants maintained the right to withdraw from the study, and/or withdraw their data from the study at any point.

This is particularly important, with respect to the nature of Learning History research, which are intended to reveal, mistakes, challenges, or issues that have arisen, plus key/critical reflections on and recommendations for improvements, change, or alternative ways forward for practice (Roth and Kleiner, 1998). This was certainly true for this learning history.

Also, with reference to my 'outsider' position, nominally as a leadership consultant, academic, coach etc., that needs to be accepted within a participatory action research arena as one that is more egalitarian, inclusive, and less hierarchical (Locke, Alcorn and O'Neill, 2013). Therefore, to cultivate a sense of openness and inclusivity, integral to the "principle of critical self-reflexivity", in the first participant workshop, I began by openly setting out the assumptions inherent in the design elements of this research undertaking, which included my desire to collaborate with the group, in a highly participative manner, thereby ensuring that their authentic 'voice' would only be shared with their full consent and their participation/perspective relating to key research decisions (Locke, Alcorn and O'Neill, 2013, p. 113) . This also involved the group appreciating that, their responses would therefore be "de-identified", i.e., at times "disconnected from their names/roles", and during my research analysis, for the purposes of the thesis, coded around key themes, such as shared leadership processes,

power, shared leadership practices etc., to therefore protect their individual identities. With reference to maintaining participant anonymity, throughout the data collection process and beyond, key findings were initially collated, post transcription, at the end of each workshop and shared exclusively with participants, for further consideration / reflection at the start of the next workshop. The process for the systematic distillation of themes is further outlined in section 3.7.1 In addition to reflecting on these finding within workshops, as a stimulus for further group discussion and learning, (see also section 3.6 data collection techniques), these findings were also uploaded and securely stored on a holding web site, with restricted access for participants and later on other key stakeholders in this process, i.e. the Chief Executive and the Director of Culture.

#### 3.5.5 Building mutual trust with my fellow researchers.

Participatory action research is however not altogether risk-free. These co-action researchers were fully aware that their shared leadership experiences and accounts would be scrutinised by their peers and by others in due course. However, in view of the cultural climate in which this group operated, which I had observed from the pilot phase of this research onwards, a significant degree of openness in communications across all organisational levels was considered the norm. This open culture was one where challenge and at times dissent from key decisions was therefore welcomed. The group I learned at the first workshop were therefore ready to embrace these risks, “with a view to learning from each other and by working together to transform their practices, their understanding and their situation” (Kemmis, Mc Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 164)

In chapter 4 section 4.2.3, I set out in some detail my adherence to and departure from the principles and application of the learning history as an action research methodology. As an “ethnographic visitor”, or “co-subject” to the field, my role was akin to that of a coach, or a critical thinking partner. This was to enable participants to make sense of and reflect on some of their key actions, events and their first-hand feelings and experiences as they related to this shared leadership undertaking, as it was occurring. To that end I designed 5 face-to-face workshops, held at this Housing Association’s HQ, where the following topics were covered. Each workshop was attended by between 5-10 participants (i.e., a mixture of Discoverers and Visioneers), except for workshop 1, which was attended by all 12 participants, who volunteered for this process. The reason for the fluctuation in attendance was due to other work constraints and commitments. However, because of the nature of action research, these cycles of action and reflection at workshops therefore enabled a degree of reiteration, whereby participants could review others’ responses to these events and in turn add their own responses and commentary, thereby building up the narrative in a ‘bricolage’ style and in a polyvocal manner.

In each workshop a variety of individual and group activities was undertaken to elicit responses, dialogue and learning concerning the following.

- Understanding each stage of the collaborative strategic planning process
- Broader cultural/contextual influences informing this collaborative way of working.
- Individual and group findings/responses to the leadership ‘tasks’ themselves and to the experience of sharing leadership in this way with peers and in relation to the senior leaders and board.

- The processes supporting, or underpinning an inclusive, shared approach to this endeavour, whereby all participating perspectives, or voices could be openly and fully considered.

Broadly speaking, these themes would inform all the workshop agendas.

However, in action research participants' own output also directly influences subsequent sessions. Their own accounts and perspectives would for example in the first three workshops be presented alongside my own reflections on their accounts to stimulate further joint reflections that would be presented in the final learning artefact itself.

See also section xxx two column reflection. This approach served two purposes:

Firstly, it enabled events, activities, and actions to be accurately captured and evidenced.

Secondly, by considering both their and my reflections side by side, this promoted further deliberation and potential insights to be jointly harvested.

This also mitigates to a large extent against potential bias on my part as a researcher, by virtue of our joint sense making of this material, which facilitated further critical review of both my and their perspectives.

### 3.5.6 Differentiating participants' role as co-researchers within this study.

(Heron and Reason, 2001) observe that, given the degree of different expertise, experience, and roles between these co-inquirers and 'experts' at the outset, influence and control should in due course shift from the expert's strong primary influence, which was expressed through my taking a lead in the design of facilitated sessions for instance. This should ideally shift to that of "peer consultant influence" (Heron and Reason, 2001, p. 185). In practice, this was not wholly the case. Despite participants willingness to



'volunteer' themselves for this inquiry process, which would be conducted alongside their main, undertaking to co-create strategy for this Housing Association, they were also somewhat limited in their time to attend workshops, with a view to reviewing their experiences of events, as these were occurring. Notwithstanding the fact that most of these staff were otherwise working full-time, opportunities to provide yet more input and thereby actively influence the method and the content for these workshops, was simply unrealistic. That said participants' contribution to thematic, distillation process was significant, supporting the emergence of themes that would be coalesced into this 'learning' document that make up this learning history. This point is expanded on further, in chapter 8 of this thesis, relating to our reflexivity as co-researchers in this process. For now, it is worth emphasising that, despite my overriding and pragmatic influence in designing and running the facilitated workshops, participants were actively engaged throughout the research process in both reflecting and to a large extent analysing key data, that related to their direct experiences of sharing leadership in this manner. This resulted in a departure from the conventional practice in learning histories, whereby outsider researchers' analysis is presented within a two-column format separately from that of the 'insiders' (Peters and Their, 2019). Although I would provide the key contextualising statements supporting each section, the resulting story is led by the 'voice' of the participants. The resulting conclusions and reflections are an amalgamation of both mine and their voice. As mentioned earlier this speaks to an adherence to both the mythic and the pragmatic imperatives of the form (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015). This is consistent with the learning history as a genre that is evolving and changing in terms of its application in research terms (Amidon, 2008). This learning history form has been utilised in a similar manner to that of Peers' doctoral dissertation (2002) for instance, where he "focused on the use of the genre as a data

collection tool” (p.45) (noting) “its reflexivity as participants were involved in the data analysis phase of this study” (p.45) (Peers, 2002, cited in Amidon, 2008, p.466). Other implications for the analytical strategy for this thesis will be expanded on further in section 3.8 of this chapter.

### 3.6 Data collection techniques

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While designing this research intervention, the following principle guided my research design. It is not simply about choosing the right, or most suitable methods, to capture the experience, concerning shared leadership in this case. What matters is the generation of meaning and its potential for enabling greater collaboration and better understanding between people (Ladkin, 2010). I was therefore mindful of the purpose of such research methods and considered how they would facilitate reflection on and in-action and learning for all involved. This caused me to consider not just *which* methods but also *how* they would be applied with the group and distilled for the purposes of the final research text/learning history.

I learned that there already exists a significant palette of methods that could be creatively applied, to support qualitative research in general. “Accordingly, qualitative researchers (such as myself) deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject at hand” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 3).

The range of empirical materials that were significant for this overall thesis included:

**Historical documents** namely internal, corporate HR plans and board briefings, plus external reports, to therefore contextualise this shared leadership endeavour and support analysis. These documents would also provide important insights related to the

legacy of the shared leadership 'project' within this organisation. This is explored later in this thesis in chapters 6 and 7, with respect to examining power dynamics within this organisation.

**Observation in the field:** I was invited to attend key events. This included: observation of the first full staff event, where the call went out for volunteers, who would become **Discoverers** and **Visioneers**. It also involved attendance at the strategy launch by these staff to the board.

**Group discussions and Interviews:** Group, reflective discussions within the workshops were conducted with the staff group co-creating strategy, as well as follow up, individual, qualitative, questionnaires, to inform the final workshop and beyond. This was to support further reflection on proceedings and to understand the ways in which the experience had shifted participants' leadership attitudes, behaviours, and actions. The adoption of such group techniques was to enable those who had performed collectively to also learn from this experience. This is seen as an ambition of organisational learning, as opposed to pursuing predominantly self, or independent evaluation of these experiences exclusively (Peters and Their, 2019).

### 3.6.1 Other data collection techniques supporting Co-operative Inquiry.

Narrative techniques were adopted, capturing participants' experiences of key, or critical incidents, as they had occurred to them during this strategy planning process. "Freefall Writing" as a technique was used, to contribute to an expanded understanding, which is itself a central idea of extended epistemology that informs action research (Gearty, 2015; Gearty, 2017). Their purpose is to extend our understanding by

embracing tacit knowledge and experience, and using it to elicit new insights to guide our understanding in ways that are otherwise difficult to communicate with others (Nonaka, 2007 cited in Gearty, 2015).

To that end the technique itself involved writing without self-censure, to ‘ “get close to the actual (rather than edited) thought processes and so open a route to reflection and inquiry” (Gearty, 2017). The intention is to access those more unconscious memories, feelings, and thoughts, in order start to consider more fully where motivations may lie and so identify opportunities for learning.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Person Inquiry informing 2<sup>nd</sup> Person Inquiry**

**Personal journaling** on my part was utilised, to provide further opportunity for reflection on my part concerning my perceptions of key events and data. My reflections were subsequently explored with participants in workshops, in the pursuit of such ‘critical subjectivity’, where participants’ accounts are further tested, through dialogue, to clarify and explore further these perspectives against my observations/perceptions. (See also Two-column reflection below).

Such inclusion of personal reflections also supports my earlier comments regarding recognising and working with the experiential dimensions of sharing leadership. Such experiences are therefore researched with greater feeling, empathetically and challenge all involved to go deeper in the way such experience is investigated. For my part this has involved maintaining my reflective journal containing key observations, feelings, perceptions and even some drawing of activities and deploying these intuitive, ‘findings’ at key points with the group, through our discussions and examination of key topics that inform their journey.

**Two-column reflection** is also a commonly used research method in the construction of a Learning History, and in the final artifact itself. It is informed by the process of dialoguing and is presented as participants' quotes, accounts of key events and experiences etc., positioned alongside 'outsiders'/external consultants' reflections and commentary of proceedings (Kleiner and Roth, 1996). It would prove very useful as a stimulus for further reflection on the participants' part, as will be explored in chapter 4.

*Figure 2 My reflections, observations, and participant's quotes*

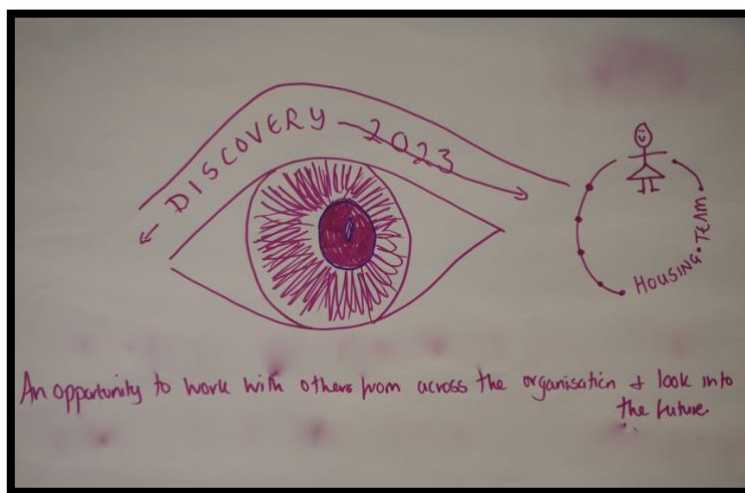


### 3.6.2 Application of visual methods supporting presentational knowing

In addition to the use of various narrative techniques outlined here, a range of group and discrete, visual methods were applied, to explore the following:

[illegible]

*Figure 4 Key motivations, feelings and experiences related to the groups' experiences during this work*



The application of these “visual techniques” is explored in depth, plus any variations, or innovations in their application and the resulting effects, both in chapter 4 and in chapter 8.

However, as raised earlier, inclusion of this visual material in the resulting learning history artifact has provided a rare, creative opportunity to depart from, what may be described as the ‘exclusive’ reporting approach and style of a management consultant’s report, concerning this process of sharing leadership. This may typically feature an executive summary, aimed especially at senior executives and boards. Instead, we have sought to co-create a multi-media document, or artifact, which combines

information directly from participants' interviews, experiences, stories, and visual depictions. This supports critical reflection, as well as recognising the collaborative efforts of all involved in the creation of this learning history.

### 3.7 Research approach and analysis.

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There are two distinct phases comprising the research approach and analysis during this study.

- The first phase concerns how we as co-researchers addressed what are referred to as the **mythic** and **pragmatic** research orientations, that support the creation of Learning Histories (Roth and Bradbury, 2008).

The intention here is to support the creation of a valid and meaningful well rounded 'story', which embraces the **mythic**, (those highs and lows of organisational life, etc., as directly experienced by those involved). From these narratives, key themes and learnings are in turn distilled, coalesced, and communicated more widely within the organisation, which speaks to the **pragmatic** research orientation.

- The second phase of analysis that was undertaken by me uniquely, and away from the site. This marks a distinct departure from the completed learning history that was disseminated to this organisation, that was intended to support the pragmatic imperative of stimulating further learning, reflection, and discussion by leaders there. It was anticipated that this key audience would comprise those aspiring leaders, who in turn would themselves become involved in other, shared leadership endeavours in the future. By this second phase, this learning history which had been utilised as a "data collection tool", would now sit alongside other data gathered during this process, and



thereby inform the “research orientation”, i.e., with a view to ultimately informing, aspects of propositional and practical knowing, related to the topic of shared leadership.

### 3.7.1 Phase 1.

Certain analytical research principles were being applied, in view of the rich, textual, and visual data from the workshops themselves, coupled with supporting corporate documents, plus my field journals. To remain faithful to the data, a process of systematic distillation was adopted, to draw out meaningful themes. This practice, advocated by Roth and Bradbury (2008, p.355,356), is very much like standard qualitative analysis. Additionally, it strongly resembles a kind of grounded theory approach, whereby grounded theory may be constructed inductively from assembled data, as opposed to theory that is deductively deduced, through a process of examining data against existing theories and hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The grounded theory consists of, in other words, those “themes around which the learning history is organized and written”; themes which are directly informed by peoples’ 1<sup>st</sup> hand experiences of issues (Roth and Bradbury, 2008, p.355).

This is because the ambition of a learning history is to generate insights and learning for the benefit of the organisational stakeholders, and not principally to “test... theory by researchers” (ibid). To that end, they advocate for the term ‘distillation’, as a way of describing the emphasis within the analytic process, to remain true to the “essence and character of participants’ narrative” (ibid). In addition, the emotional, or lived experiences of participants during this strategy creation may be usefully embraced in qualitative research.

“Emotions and feelings cue the analysts as to the meaning of events to persons” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 83). The intention was that those key experiences, feelings etc.

expressed by participants in this study constitute a distinctive contributory voice, enabling not just the study of associated leadership concepts, but also to intentionally embrace the unique voice informing that lived experience.

#### 3.7.1.1 Phase 1 supporting organisational learning.

This phase therefore relates to the analysis approach deployed at the organisational level, to support the achievement of those research ambitions required by the organisation. During this first phase, I would record the group workshops, transcribe them, and annotate them accordingly, as I played back my recordings. It was at that point, where my reflections, combined with emergent themes would be distilled and inform subsequent workshop discussions, through the two-column reflection method, outlined earlier. See link to the holding web site for an illustrative example of this approach.

<http://nshglh.simplesite.com/439402290.html>

Ultimately, this would inform the construction of the two-column format in the learning history itself. As illustrated in the web site example, participants could and did comment further on key aspects of the emerging narrative accordingly. Ultimately, these joint findings would be distilled further into the final narrative, i.e., the learning history itself, to serve as a valuable opportunity for learning and insight, for both those directly involved and for other organisational stakeholders, such as the senior leadership team and board. In line with the learning history ethos and approach, reflections, and themes I proposed in workshops were framed as 'draft findings' and subject to further interrogation, on the part of my co-researchers. In this way participants were invited from the outset into this work of sensemaking. The intention through my narrative

approach was therefore to be evocative/exploratory in its telling, as opposed to imposing some distinct 'truth', or meaning on those readers engaged in this process. How the overall learning history method was applied will be set out in chapter 4.

### 3.7.2 Addressing concerns of validity within this study.

As a co-researcher engaged in participatory action research, the aim therefore is not the pursuit of an objective 'truth' or external reality, to systematically, control, explain, or predict specific elements, or key factors, affecting the occurrence of shared leadership, irrespective of context. The locus of the investigation respects the specific local context and conditions, in which such a phenomenon may be occurring. The investigation dynamically positions "self-in relation", or "self in participatory transaction with the ..other" (Howell, 2013, p. 95). This included me as a co-inquirer, working co-operatively within a given organisational context, working with other co-researchers, to collectively generate findings iteratively, in pursuit of an enhanced understanding concerning the phenomenon of shared leadership, as it had been occurring within this organisational environment.

In research terms, the findings that inform the resulting Learning History must adhere to principles of "ecological validity", as described by Bryman (2012.p.48). Ecological validity is an important criterion for the findings of this learning history and their relevance to what is occurring in people's everyday lives. Ciourcel ( (1982,p.15) cited in: Bryman, 2012, p. 48) asks an important question related to validity: "Do our instruments capture the daily life conditions, opinions, values attitudes and knowledge base of those we study as expressed in their natural habitat?" The inference here is that the resulting learning history must, not only be technically valid, i.e., an accurate representation of

the shared leadership phenomenon that has been validated by those involved, but also that it is relevant to people's everyday lives and in this case their work. Such validity in this case is gauged by its usefulness as a practical instrument, to inform reflection and learning about collective leadership approaches, as they have been occurring here, and how they may inform organisational activities in the future.

The meaning of validity, according to Heron (1988) is in accordance with the definition and usage of the shorter Oxford English Dictionary, i.e. the conclusions generated through an inquiry have "the quality of being well founded" and the basis for such conclusions "are the experiences of the co-researchers as co-subjects" (Heron, 1988, p. 41) .

To that end the pursuit of coherence has also been evidenced in research cycling (Heron, 1996; Heron, 1988). Cycles of action and reflection have occurred through facilitated workshops, on the experience of sharing leadership. Key data has been collected accordingly reviewed at each reflection stage, to identify emerging themes. This data and any significant, supporting reflections were also being checked for validity by participants between sessions, via a shared on-line web site.

Developing this point of validity further, this relates to the "narrative imperative" of this Learning History (Roth and Bradbury, 2015), and the incorporation of participants' own words in the overall narrative. An important part of this process concerned capturing these experiences in their immediate aftermath, or as close to their occurrence as possible. As explored earlier, this involved drawing on the extended epistemologies palette featuring narrative and visual methods. Therefore, the timeliness of capturing such experiences is significant, to avoid bias caused by participants' forgetting important parts of their story (Grele, 1988: cited in Bryman, 2012).

### 3.7.3 Embracing contradiction, mistakes and learning in learning histories.

Another important feature of learning histories concerns their polyvocal nature, which leads to the inclusion, not just to a diversity of perspectives, but also contradictory versions of events and even mistakes, all of which are openly acknowledged within this format. Some contradictory accounts of key events do appear in this learning history, plus mistakes acknowledged by staff themselves regarding plans for and the launch of the strategic plan itself. These concerned a lack of inclusivity relating to the planning and the delivery of the presentations to staff related to the plan.

With reference to the validity of this work, gauged by its usefulness as a practical instrument, to inform further learning about such shared leadership experiences, it was subsequently acknowledged by the GSMT, as a direct result of this learning history that too much pressure had been put on staff during this 'project'. To that end steps had been taken to better, resource and support staff, who would be engaged in subsequent, collaborative leadership work of this ilk.

Additionally, these stories have a universal quality and stimulate wider interest (Gearty, 2014) To that end, I learned that this learning history was subsequently being utilised in the recruitment of new board members, to provide them with a validated 'picture' of organisational culture and leadership practice.

### 3.7.4 Managing the integrity of the story.

Insofar as remaining loyal, or faithful to the data is concerned, it is vital neither to jeopardise participants' position, through exposing them unfairly within this narrative, while also not damaging the veracity, or integrity of the story, by presenting biased, or one-sided accounts of key experiences, or activities (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015). This might in turn favour either an academic perspective, an organisational perspective,

or even the participants' perspective exclusively. To that end therefore, we continuously had to check out the assumptions and conclusions we were drawing, through the adoption of the 'ladder of inference', as a method ((Argyris, 1990). This was in order "to link assumptions and conclusions to the 'data' of observable detail" (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p. 54). An illustrative example of that concerns the planning and presentation of the final strategy to staff, where such testing of assumptions occurred. We explored, in workshop 4, the groups' approach to the design of the final presentation of the strategic plan at a full staff event. Using open questions to surface assumptions and challenge perceptions, the group came to a new appreciation of their audience, related to how they had communicated the strategy to them. This enabled them to evaluate what they considered to be the partial success of their approach, and to think through an alternative, more inclusive communication strategy, that may have proved more successful, as a result.

#### 3.7.5 Reflexivity: Avoiding collusion during the action research process.

Avoiding collusion with others is a recognised competence in the field of coaching. Specifically, it refers to the requirement for the coach/facilitator to "act openly and honestly", and to be prepared to challenge, difficult or thorny issues, as they arise. It involves the use "self and personal observations to inform...feedback" (Association for Coaching *Association for Coaching*, 2022). In this research context, it applies to my first and second-person inquiry orientation, informing my questioning orientation outlined previously within this chapter, to test co-inquirers statements and assumptions further on a given topic and/or expand our thinking further.

It also importantly relates to ALL co-inquirers playing ‘devil’s advocate’, in terms of everyone involved being able to challenge the recall of certain processes, or events (Heron, 1988, p. 51). Beyond the pursuit of “critical subjectivity”, all of us in this relational research process arguably can get too comfortable, too attached to ideas, ideals, or perspectives, to even pick up on any flaws or shortcomings in our findings. Being able to avoid collusion therefore involves becoming conscious of our values and our assumptions, with a view to sharing these openly with others, within the dialoguing processes. It is part of the reflexivity that is required by all social researchers (Bryman 2012), where the impacts of research methods are considered, as well as an awareness of individual values and biases. To that end I was developing an increasingly robust approach to drawing out data and testing assumptions with others, by the fourth workshop, which I feel represented a shift in gear in my research strategy. This facilitated a more comprehensive testing of assumptions, with others, as illustrated in section 3.7.3.

A related aspect of reflexivity concerns the requirement to become increasingly attuned to the cultural, political, and social context in which one is researching. The importance of other key, contextual factors informing this collective leadership endeavour is also acknowledged within the learning history itself. This context is also recognised as highly relevant, and in turn informed further analysis relating to key theoretical propositions related to shared leadership as it is subsequently examined in this thesis, (See chapters 6 and 7).

#### 3.7.6 Considering insider/outsider voices in this research process.

Review of the data was not confined exclusively to the ‘insider’ group of co-inquirers. Additional 1:1 interviews with members of the Group Senior Leadership team were held

in support of validating key data and emergent themes. During the fifth and final workshop, key aspects of this undertaking were explored and evaluated, in conjunction with the full Group Senior Leadership Team, including the Chief Executive and a staff member, who didn't directly participate in this process. The inclusion of external voices in the construction of the learning history enables other sources of organisational knowledge to therefore be recognised and where relevant these external stakeholders may offer a degree of challenge to the 'truths' being presented from within the inquiry (Trevalen, 1994).

While not directly challenging the group's findings, it was nonetheless useful to add other perspectives at this stage in the process. Group Senior Management Team (GSMT) were able to offer additional insights concerning the impact of this novel collaborative endeavour and process, e.g., in terms of its merits as an approach to strategy development and in terms of its impact on them personally etc... It also enabled the GSMT to develop a deeper appreciation of this collaborative leadership undertaking and its impact personal, professional etc. on those involved, with a view to understanding how such shared leadership could be developed in future. These findings in turn would inform certain, corporate policies, that were directly related to these discussions, relating to the necessity for "Keeping the Culture of Shared Leadership Alive" within this housing association moving forward.

In certain respects, this inclusion of the GSMT aids the construction of a jointly owned organisational 'narrative'; one where the perspectives of the core inquiry group could therefore influence and be influenced, challenge and be challenged by the perceptions of this shared leadership undertaking, from different stakeholder perspectives, and particularly those with "positional power" and authority to support any proposed changes. This learning history method essentially creates the space for all parties to



have a contributory stake in this history, this learning, and the associated implications for action.

### 3.7.7 Acknowledging power differentials within such encounters.

I had acknowledged the potential for the overriding influence of the GSMT, the CEX in particular, who previously, by her own admission, carries influence that can affect proceedings. To that end I endeavored to mitigate that influence as best as I could in the following ways. The fifth workshop was designed as a Learning Circle (Wade and Hamick, 1999). This therefore gave each staff group equal time to share their experience of this undertaking and to make recommendations for such shared leadership approaches moving forward. I also issued a written, confidential questionnaire for each of the group to complete in advance of the event, which complemented the lines of inquiry being pursued that day and as part of striving to describe “well founded experience” (Heron, 1988, p. 41). The overall feedback was very positive and generated in places other, new insights concerning this undertaking and the impact or effect on staff. I reflected subsequently that what wasn’t openly discussed in this forum were staffs’ concerns about the full staff event, which was significant. Their silence on this issue, perhaps reflected a degree of guardedness, or self-censorship on their part, as those who had co-created the strategy, not to want to reveal weakness or vulnerability in front of their senior leaders. This issue is one which will be considered again in greater depth in chapter 7, under the topic of power dynamics that inform in, that inform systems of inequality which also can include working relationships within hierarchies, and which can have a distinct influence on these working relationships (Fletcher, 2012).

### 3.8 Overview of the learning history artifact and its dual purposes.

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This learning history sets out the key leadership experiences, processes, and practices, in the context of the wider organising processes and activities within this housing association. This is as described and directly experienced by a wider staff group, who volunteered to co-create strategy, and who worked alongside members of the Group Senior Management Team and ultimately the Board. As with others before it, within this learning history, the constitutive environment/context has been recognised, as these conditions, arguably, also inform the success, or otherwise, of this undertaking (Habermas, 1972)

The purpose of this ‘learning history’, from an organisational perspective, has therefore been to explore and to learn from what was a unique experience of staff sharing a significant degree of leadership responsibility, both with their senior colleagues and with each other. From an academic perspective the intention has been that this living document, plus other supporting material, corporate reports, interviews with relevant stakeholders etc., could also effectively support further exploration, relating to the key research objectives for this thesis. To that end, supporting analysis with respect to this study’s research objectives begins in chapter 4.

#### 3.8.1 Key design principles informing the artifact.

This Learning History is constructed like a guide, and as examined in this chapter, it incorporates participatory action research principles in its design, to therefore stimulate further reflection and learning on the part of the readers, related to the experience of shared leadership responsibility and practice at this housing association. Accordingly, it reflects Roth and Kleiner’s Learning History presentation format for the writing (1998).

Learning Histories are a “jointly told tale”, dialogic in format and polyphonic in range, in terms of multiple stakeholder input to the story. They present two perspectives side by side, featuring participants’ own voice, their “campfire narrative always in their own words” (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p. 52). They also include: “evaluative comments, along with questions intended to spark further reaction and reflection and debate by the readers (or audience) of the tale”; principally in this case participants, and their group senior management team (ibid). The structure of this learning history reflects that format. In this way, readers may consider the story from their position, while also ‘testing’ the deliberations and commentary offered by me as a learning historian. To that end the ‘native’ and the learning historian are truly sharing the telling of this story.

### 3.8.2 How this Learning History was structured.

Each section leads with a “contextual introduction that sets the stage” (ibid). The intention here is to “cultivate a reflective, (rather than an), evaluative approach on the part of the reader” (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p. 55). Also, by tapping into this story telling mode, the aim therefore, is to connect with the tacit knowledge, held within this organisation and therefore released through the retelling of participants’ direct accounts of their lived experiences, applied skills and activities. From my personal perspective, the decision finally to adopt this ‘genre’, had been originally inspired by the writing of Studs Turkel in particular, who was a master of the oral history format. He, among others, also served as an inspiration for Roth and Kleiner, in developing their approach and style to the evolution of the learning history as a research form, that develops insight and learning.

The learning history design is ultimately intended to support a ‘slowing down’, or time to think, through a retrospective reflection of past experiences, that are “grounded in

multiple perspectives”, to “develop a new sense of know-why”, that may subsequently inform these leaders’ futures (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p.58). In other words, by considering and understanding the drives, motivations and other factors etc. affecting our actions, we may hopefully reach a new appreciation of our given situation; one that may in turn usefully inform our thinking and, in this case, leadership actions, or practices moving forward.

### 3.8.3 Who were the intended audiences for this learning history.

It was hoped that this story would be of interest to the following audiences for different reasons:

- Significantly, this living history is a first-hand, living account from those leaders, who were directly involved, in the strategic process of planning this organisation’s long-term future. It was also intended to support learning, reflection and ultimately action on the part of those leaders themselves; plus, others in a similar situation, who may be similarly experiencing the highs and lows of leadership responsibility, shared and otherwise, and who seek to develop more collaborative working relationships with others. This is a unique, local account, of how shared leadership was experienced and practiced by these colleagues. Therefore, the intention was to stimulate further reflection and learning, to inform these individuals’ leadership practice, as it grows and changes.
- As described in this chapter, this learning history also seeks to provide certain insights into this organisation’s ethos of demonstrably sharing leadership responsibility more widely, which significantly informs this organisation’s culture. To that end, it has become of interest to those joining the organisation, i.e., new Board members in particular, to help them orientate, or familiarise themselves with this culture. Put

simply, this story can help new joiners to quickly begin to understand: ‘how things are done around here’

- The activities, and high-level planning processes that shaped this work overall, these have been captured here. This story was therefore intended to be of some interest to those with overall responsibility for designing and running such organisational development interventions here and elsewhere, so that the strengths and limitations of such interventions may be further examined, with a view to informing their thinking and future practice in this regard.

### 3.9 Conclusion.

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In this chapter I have explored my research strategy, with reference to the examination of this shared leadership phenomenon. This strategy is supported by a philosophical position that has informed my application of a participatory paradigm of inquiry and the subsequent adoption of learning history as both a methodology and method accordingly. I have considered at some length my positionality as a researcher and how I sought to shift, or integrate my position as a “partial co-subject”, or “ethnographic visitor to this (organisational )culture” and thereby meaningfully engage fellow co-researchers in exploring this shared leadership phenomenon, in ways that were mutually beneficial (Heron and Reason, 2001, p.182). I have also set out in some detail the design principles that informed the structuring and presentation of the learning history artifact, in order that it should appeal to key audiences outlined here.

Concerning my strategy for analysis, qualitative (and emergent) coding approaches of grounded theory have been used to support this process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory facilitates the exploration of rich, finely detailed data in what may be described as 'unchartered waters', to facilitate interpretative understanding of events and experiences (Stein, 1985). In this chapter I have examined the overall review processes in some detail, supporting both initial and evolving distillation of emerging ideas and themes, which were subsequently validated with participants and other stakeholders.

Having set out the research approach and strategy in this chapter, I will now begin in chapter 4 to distill and analyse the data, in line with the action research principles that comprise extended epistemologies, as set out by John Heron accordingly.

“Experiential knowing-imaging and feeling the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process, or thing- is the ground of presentational knowing. Presentational knowing-an intuitive grasp of the significance of patterns as expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms-is the ground of propositional knowing. And propositional knowing-expressed in statements that something is the case is the ground of practical knowing-knowing how to exercise a skill (Heron, 1999, p. 122).

## CHAPTER 4 ENTERING THE RESEARCH FIELD.

Overview of the field research process and how that relates to analysis of findings.

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Before I introduce this chapter in more detail, I should first like to set out, how this chapter, and subsequent chapters in this thesis are being organised. In chapter 3, section 3.8, I describe how the construction of the learning history artifact effectively constituted phase one of this research process. It was therefore intended, on completion and handover of the learning history guide to the Housing Association, that this artifact, in conjunction with other findings gathered during the workshops themselves, would directly inform further analysis, related to the key research objectives of this thesis. These findings are set out in concluding chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis.

### **How chapters 4-6 are structured.**

The supporting analysis that is undertaken across chapters 4-6 is organised according to the principles of extended epistemology informing action research. In line with these principles, each aspect of these extended epistemologies informs the next, i.e., experiential knowing, informs presentational knowing, which in turn informs propositional knowing. Finally, it is assumed that this collaborative methodology supports practical action for change, in support of human flourishing. The following diagram also illustrates this point.

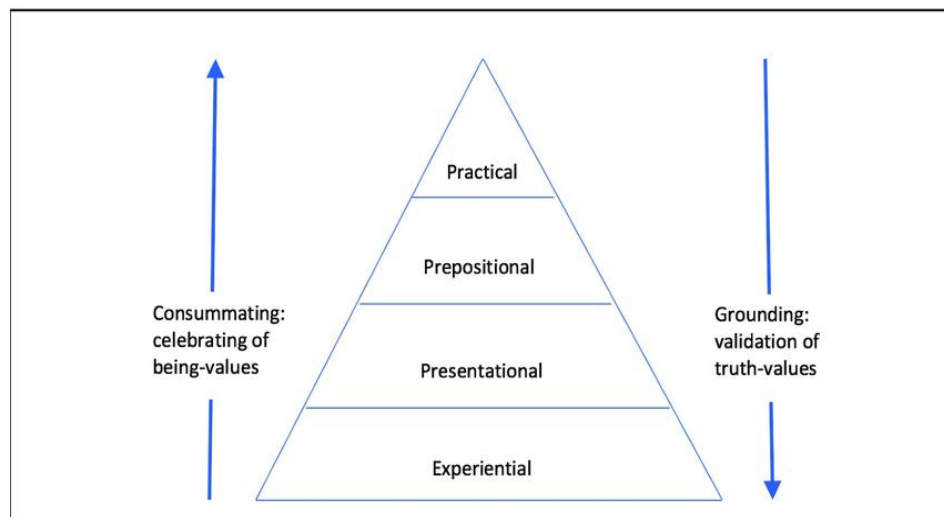


Diagram 4

(Heron and Reason, 1997)

In line with this study's objectives, Chapter 4 is concerned with the consideration of how the experiential/emotional dimension of this collaborative strategy planning was being expressed and captured through this methodology by those directly involved. This is with a view to understanding the nature of the relationality that was being experienced by this group, in relation to their peers and as "followers", operating in relation to their leaders and their board. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, such recognition of participants' "experiential knowing" effectively facilitated the emergence of themes, related to this shared leadership endeavour, e.g., relational outlooks and behaviours, power dynamics etc.

It is also necessary in this chapter to first recognise and to demonstrate the value of other facets of extended epistemologies, i.e., presentational knowing, whereby the use of visual and other presentational methods effectively supported data gathering. In particular, accessing presentational knowing enabled other more subconscious feelings and experiences to be effectively revealed by the group about this shared leadership endeavour.



Subsequently, chapter 4 provides the epistemological foundations to feed into chapters 5 and 6, which in turn focus on the more conventional academic concerns of propositional knowing, or theory. How such propositional knowing aligns with “practical action”, becomes the focus of chapters 7 and 8.

#### 4.1. Chronology of the action research process aligned to strategy planning.

It is useful therefore to recall the main purpose and key activities associated with each workshop and how that aligns to the overall strategy building process. In order to set the scene for this examination of extended epistemologies across chapter 4, it is worth building on the timeline of the strategy building process and detailing how it therefore aligns to the action research workshops I facilitated.

This provides a better sense of how my research methodology and approach, aligned with the overall workshop process, and contextualises this chapter’s findings somewhat.

See high level timeline 4.1. that now follows.

<i>Timeline 4.1</i>	<i>: March 2017</i>	<i>April 2017- August 2017</i>	<i>September 2017</i>
<i>Date</i>			<i>Workshop 1</i>
<i>Key organisational event</i>	Open Space Event Launch of the “call” to participate in strategy planning to all staff	“Discoverers” are appointed and undertake research work developing the strategic themes that have been agreed with all staff at the Open Space event. This “Discovery’ research is presented in due course to “Vioneers”	In this first workshop attended by the Discoverers and the Vioneers, the following topics are explored:  1. Participants motivation to join this strategic planning endeavour, illustrated visually and through discussion.  2. Exploring “Moments of Truth”. The key organisational interventions that led up to this Open Space event and the call for wider groups of staff to participate in strategy planning.  Between workshop 1 and 2, I distil findings, feedback and my own reflections and present these back for further review in workshop two. <b>12 participants attend this workshop.</b>
<i>Supporting research intervention</i>	I attend this event as an observer. I record my observations, reflections, plus off-line conversations, adopting a first-person orientation/ perspective in my field journal.		

Timeline 4.1: September- November 2017 December 2017

Date November 2017

Key organisational event	Visioneers take over the research work from Discoverers and further develop the strategic plan	Discoverers and Visioneers present the draft strategy plan to the Chief Executive and the Board at a Board Away Day.	<b>Facilitated workshop 3.</b>  Further review of strategic planning activities with peers, senior leaders and board is reviewed, using, and building on two-column reflection method. Additionally, participants are invited to creatively describe their experience of co-creating strategy, by creating a visual/narrative poster presentation for a publication, in which this work is featured.
Supporting research intervention	<b>Facilitated workshop 2.</b> Use of Two-Column reflection to explore previous workshop findings, plus my reflections. Workshop participants consider these findings side by side. Visual data, i.e., representations of participants' motivation to join this collaborative leadership endeavour is also included as a stimulus for further reflection. See examples of this adaptation of two-column reflection in chapter 4 section x. <b>6 co-researchers attend this workshop.</b>	<b>Attendance at the strategy launch event.</b> In addition to observing the presentation of this event and its curation by the Director of Culture, immediately post presentation, I conducted a "free-fall writing" activity to elicit participants' reactions to that experience. See chapter 4 section x. <b>All Discoverers and Visioneers attend this launch event.</b>	<b>10 co-researchers attend this event.</b>

*Timeline 4.1: February 2018*

*March 2018*

*April 2018*

*Date*

<i>Key organisational event</i>	Board review of strategy is finalised, in conjunction with the Discoverers and Visioneers.	Strategy is launched at a full staff event.	<b>Workshop 4.</b> Review of the experience and process of the collaborative review of draft
<i>Supporting research intervention</i>			strategy with board.  Review of the experience and process of the strategy launch at the full staff event.  <b>6 Co-researchers in attendance.</b>

<i>Timeline 4.1: Date</i>	<i>June 2018</i>	<i>October 2018</i>	<i>March -August 2019</i>
<i>Key organisational event Supporting research intervention</i>	<p><b>Workshop 5</b> Joint review of Learning History draft content. Workshop preceded by individual qualitative questionnaire issued to all Visioneers and Discoverers, Group Senior Management team and other staff, who didn't directly participate in this strategic planning. See appendix x</p> <p>A "Learning Circle" intervention was conducted to support a learning review of this collaborative strategic planning undertaking, and to ensure full and considered participation by all those involved.</p> <p><b>10 Co-researchers in attendance.</b> <b>All GSMT in attendance.</b> 1 external staff member in attendance.</p>	<p>Follow up final individual, qualitative questionnaire is issued to Co-researchers to enable them to reflect on and review any changes in their attitude to and approach to shared leadership with their wider staff teams.</p> <p>These findings are distilled and uploaded to the web site.</p>	<p>Write up of and joint review of final learning history draft is completed with the research site leadership team.</p> <p>Additional contextual data is provided by the site to inform the final learning history artifact.</p> <p>The Learning History is used to support board member induction.</p>



## 4.2 How this chapter is organised.

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In summary, on completion of the learning history research process, I was able to begin the second research phase of analysis. Therefore, this chapter starts with:

- The analysis of participants' key experiences, accounts, and associated feelings; in other words, accessing experiential 'knowing' from this learning history account.
- There then follows the analysis of presentational 'knowing', drawing on the visual representations of key events, activities etc.

It is important to note that, by this stage, other significant leadership theories, that could inform the topic of shared leadership, became relevant for this study. Specifically, The Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory framework has played a significant role in addressing this study's core objectives (Fletcher, 2012). As will be subsequently explored in chapters 5 and 6, this has involved systematically analysing key aspects of Relational Cultural Leadership theory, in conjunction with leadership themes that have been emerging over time (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015, p. 4). This approach to analysis has some parallels to that described by Miles and Huberman (1994). They begin with thematic 'codes' derived from key literature, in my case key aspects of Relational Cultural Leadership theory, which are then used as comparators to therefore explicate thematic data.

The themes, that were starting to emerge from the research field, from a "research orientation", or perspective, had strong parallels to Relational Cultural Theory (See Miller, 2012, 2022, Fletcher, 2012, Fletcher and Ragins, 2006). Further justification for this choice of analytical framework will be explored in depth in Chapter 5.

Consequently, key aspects of this framework started to inform our inquiry and were shared with co-inquirers. Through subsequent reflective activities, plus follow up written surveys with stakeholders as described in chapter 3, this facilitated further testing of my/their assumptions relating to these theoretical propositions that were emerging, relating to the relational dimensions of this shared leadership experience.

#### 4.2.1 Entering the research field to co-create this learning history.

*“Action Research is a practice-changing practice” (Kemmis, 2009, cited in Kemmis et al., 2014, p.4)*

I entered the research field as a co-researcher with those staff, who led this undertaking. This was to jointly explore the nature of shared leadership as it was occurring, within this context. Therefore, the experience of shared leadership occurring within this context matters also. Action research is a “response to the conditions in which we live and work” (Kemmis, Mc Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 7). This environment in turn conditions the way we “think, what we do, and how we relate to others in the world” (ibid). Such conditioning was surfaced through the conversations, observations, stories, and experiences, relating to the way ‘we do things around here’ and in relation to historical leadership experiences, here and elsewhere. Critical Action Research is a practice-changing practice, where the intended result is practical action, know-how and positive change and not in some abstract way. It may therefore be useful to be somewhat wary of abstract ideas, such as ‘progress’, ‘improvement’, or ‘development’; ideas that are frequently associated with organisations. Rather its contribution is to our history, i.e. for those involved, which means in practice “to changing for the better, the world we live and practise in” (Kemmis, Mc Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 27).



Another important characteristic of this methodology is its starting point, or motivation. Such investigations typically emanate from a “felt concern... or issue” (Kemmis, Mc Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 9). Therefore, the lived, felt experience has been the foundation to drive further investigation, reflection and ultimately action, with others, as well as serving the academic research agenda. The effect on individuals involved has been captured through individual self-reflection and group reflection, concerning the shifts and changes, positive and otherwise, informing more inclusive, collaborative leadership practice with colleagues etc... The focus of investigation has been important at this group level, featuring as it does the shared experiences of practicing this leadership approach in relation to others and the actual, ‘material’, leadership practices that have been applied and developed.

#### 4.2.2 The Reality of Action Research.

I quickly observed during this study that a certain gap exists, between the aspirations of conducting action research and the reality. The high-level map of our journey and progress, which sets out the research steps, timeline, milestones etc., this certainly does not neatly reflect the classic research cycle, or schema of Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect etc., as described by Lewin(1946).

As introduced earlier, this learning history is organised around the key milestones and events that occurred, in order to successfully co-create the strategy, within a set timeframe. The running of these action research cycles in parallel was also motivated from the outset, by a desire on those participating staffs’ part for” an authentic sense of development and evolution in their (leadership) *practices*, their *understandings* of their practices and the *situations* in which they practice” ( author emphasis), (Kemmis, Mc

Taggart and Nixon, 2014, p. 18). Therefore, the research timeframe, responded to participants' desire for reflection on their key experiences, processes and practices, supporting shared leadership. This timeframe was extended somewhat beyond the strategic planning process itself, to facilitate further exploration and review. The final written guide is produced for use by stakeholders within this organisation. See the following link to the holding web site for a final version.

### Learning History

#### 4.2.3 Experimenting with the learning history format

This learning history is underpinned by a website which is unconventional. Gearty contends that learning history "occupies this great big empty space betwixt action research and standard case-based research", and as an emerging genre, it has much greater potential for further exploration and development (Gearty, 2009, p. 142). The fact that this form is still evolving and therefore invites further experimentation, in terms of story design and presentation, has offered considerable appeal. I am a former film maker and this presented a unique opportunity to really embrace these skills through the creative treatment of extended epistemologies within this research; thereby embracing these experiential and presentational stories and accounts, as much developing the propositional, or theoretical agenda further.

#### 4.2.4 My application of the learning history method in the field

A survey by Amidon (2008) suggests that this emerging form, or genre, remains worthy of on-going consideration, as one that continues to evolve and change over time. Such

changes or shifts in the realisation of this form become evident, when the subsequent learning histories of Margaret Geary and others in this research field are taken into account: (See also Burnett and Grinnall, 2013) The stakeholders, subject matter, context, research motivation and approach, these all merge into a unique palette against which these learning histories are drawn differently, while adhering broadly to the guiding principles of action research and the learning history format.

Therefore, our learning history represents something of a break from the research convention in some respects. Like the action research approach adopted for this study, as it was *actually* being applied in the field with *real* co-researchers, the method and approach of applying the 'classic' MIT model, this also differed somewhat in practice.

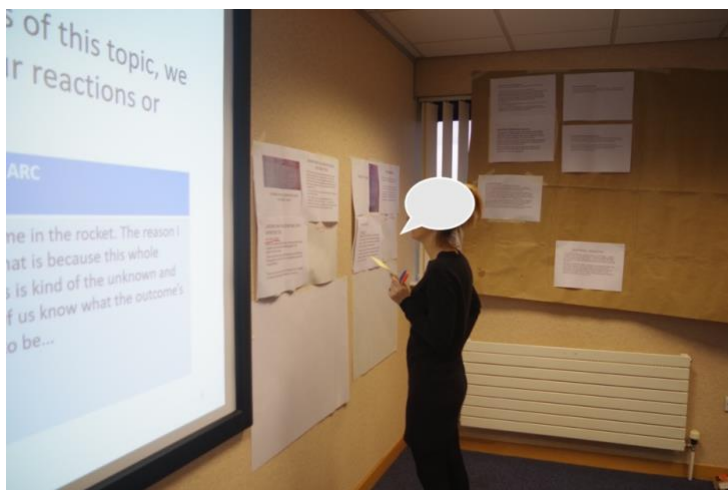
I will outline some of the key deviations from the approach developed by Roth and Kleiner (Roth and Kleiner, 1998). Their steps are outlined in **bold** and my/our approach is set out in **italics**.

**1. MIT: Planning- initially conducted with a multi-stakeholder team, including a team of researchers.**

*ME: I was one researcher and therefore had to build up my initial experience in the field over time, initially through conducting a pilot study with this organisation. This was to begin to understand the culture and leadership practices in evidence at the research site, from a multi-stakeholder perspective, i.e., through semi-structured interviews conducted with the senior leadership team, the board etc. Throughout this research undertaking I also needed to draw on some 1<sup>st</sup> person action inquiry approaches,' journaling' for instance, to share with participants and therefore contribute to the history as it evolved. To that end I would record my reflections after each workshop and subsequently write*

*them up in the form of comments and observations, to be subsequently reviewed alongside, or in parallel with participants' own accounts of events etc. This was in effect to reflect and offer an additional and different perspective, concerning events, or experiences, that were being shared by the group. The technique referred to here is known as dialoguing, which is itself a pre-cursor to two-column reflection and used in action research. See also point 3. Such techniques are commonly used to stimulate further and deeper thinking and discussion around key issues (Gearty, 2017).*

*Figure 5 Photos of Workshop 2.*



**2. MIT: Reflective interviews. These are conducted in order to capture learning through the eyes of a few key protagonists.**


*ME: In addition to having previously conducted reflective interviews with other senior leaders working within this organisation and having been an observer at other organisational events, board away days, staff events etc., the actual process of co-creating strategy was happening in parallel to this learning history undertaking. Therefore, I attended as an observer at key strategy planning events, and at group workshops, which I facilitated. These workshops would typically be held shortly after key strategic planning events. Five workshops were held in total, to enable the participants to describe the high-level process that had occurred, and to jointly reflect, on their new key leadership experiences and activities.*

**3. MIT: Distillation: Thematic analysis of interviews using qualitative methods is carried out:**

*ME: This was happening from the outset during the group exploration of the shared leadership phenomenon itself. These workshops ran mainly in parallel to the participants' creation of the strategy. On the advice of Peter Reason himself, who was consulted at the outset of this undertaking, dialoguing and two- column reflection were key methods, initially applied to group and distil participants' experiences with my/our subsequent observations and reflections. This was to ensure accuracy and to distil further insights accordingly. The group therefore made a significant contribution to this*

distillation process, in order to express the essence, for them, of the meaning and effect of their shared leadership experience. It enabled them to draw out further insights, learning etc. and to ensure the veracity and accuracy of this jointly told tale. An illustrative example of this process, contributing to the grouping of themes and in turn their thematic analysis is captured here.

## HAVING A SAY



### HAVING A SAY

I wanted to have a say on the future of the organization, have a say on my destiny, and if I got the opportunity put my ideas forward I wanted to do that.

sometimes when you are given an idea and they say "Right I want you to see that through", its less easy for you to get enthusiastic about that

We did a review of our department: community investment and we took a very similar approach. Everybody contributed and there was no hierarchy in it at all. That makes you feel as though you've had a say in what you are actually going to do moving forward and you are more bought into delivering that because its your idea and you want to see that through.

E=MC(2). You only get out of something what you put in to it, so that's where that analogy was

It was a nice opportunity to get to meet people I don't normally get to, so it was a nice motivation to join. I sometimes feel that we can work in isolation, where... we're not based here we're in satellite offices. So its been nice to get to know what everyone else does and meet other people from the organization as well.

I didn't really know a massive amount about what was going on with the structure of the organization. Out of the loop it feels quite frequently. So really that's one of the reasons I chose to put myself forward for the discovery work.

I think that's what I always say about working at NS, how everyone is like a big family. It's just lovely to share. One of the reasons I wanted to get involved was I work part time and there's two Amy's in PS so it gets a bit confusing. A lot of people don't even know I work here.

And I always think its really a good opportunity to work with other people across the organisation; being able to share those experiences and other people's roles and how they see things.

MY REFLECTION: Having a Say

Having a say in the future direction of the organization is something that comes up a lot. It could also fit into leading and influencing because it is about influencing the future, leading with others.

People do not appreciate being told what to do. It can be demotivating.

There is a distinct networking theme coming out and being with others from across the organization. This brings a feeling of connection but also it starts to address isolation and increases understanding about what others do in the organization.

## YOUR REFLECTION

↓

FELT GENUINELY LISTENED TO INPUT WAS VALUED

POSSIBLE THAT THOSE WHO HAVEN'T BEEN INVOLVED BEING 'TOLD WHAT TO DO' LEAD HOW DO WE OVER COME THIS?

Good to have my say with the changes that will not really be.

GETTING TO 'KNOW' EVERYONE INVOLVED REALLY HELPED

SOME OF THE ACTIVITIES PUT US ALL ON A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

WE ALL HAD A SAY ON THE STATEMENTS GENERATED THROUGH VISIONEERING 'SENSE' CHECKING

The enthusiasm of our group & the excitement was (in my opinion) also to a massive extent that felt like a massive process

Working with staff of all levels was fab! And to want to do it again is a credit to the managers and the group.

2

Figure 6 Illustration of Two-column reflection being constructed.

**4. MIT: Writing up the narrative alongside the analysis, as per the Learning History format: Reference Roth and Kleiner' s AutoCo Learning History, (1998)**

*ME: A key feature was the use of technology, namely the creation of a Learning History web site to assist in the distillation, validation, and dissemination process of this jointly told tale. On this platform the following would be set out specifically:*

*The organisational context, research scope and approach, the road map of key events and the developing story featuring key experiences, turning points, critical incidents etc as they were occurring. This web site was then regularly reviewed by the participants, either in advance of workshops, or to support further individual reflection activities on aspects of their leadership practice and experiences. Again, this was a pragmatic alternative to managing the rich data that was being generated and then set out in a way that enabled participants to review it equitably and from a distance.*

<http://nshqlh.simplesite.com/439039036.html>

**5. MIT: Validation with original participants to check the accuracy and the validity of the material and to remove any material that might compromise them in any way.**

*ME: To support this stage of the process, we met together with the organisational sponsors (Chief Executive), plus other senior leaders, who had also participated in this strategic planning undertaking, and another staff member. In keeping with an action research ethos, a preparatory reflective questionnaire was issued to participants, prior to the final, as outlined in chapter 1, section 1.5 points 5 and 6. Four months later, a*

*follow up questionnaire was issued, to understand whether and how this shared leadership practice was being continued in their day-to-day work, and to what effect? See appendix F and appendix G for a copy of both questionnaires and with some sample responses. As a reminder: both questionnaires were intended to stimulate further reflection on this experience and questions were augmented, informed by our earlier analyses, to reflect those relational attitudes, skills, and actions, plus shifts in leadership practice.*

*Subsequently, we reviewed key aspects of the learning history web site prototype that was still 'under construction'. This was in order to gather some further feedback and commentary, to supplement the story where relevant. It was at this stage that one of the original participants, an ICT specialist, told me in front of all stakeholders:*

*"You really have captured our story very well". Workshop 5, 2018.*

*This accords with this penultimate stage in a learning history's development; where the original participants, plus additional invited others review the story. Accomplishments at this stage are clarified, in order that "new insights ( become) actionable for future stakeholder efforts" (Bradbury, Roth and Gearty, 2015, pp. 17-18). It was at this final workshop in 2018 that participants shared further learning and insights. Thereafter these responses were incorporated into the learning history content itself, both web-based content and the written guide that followed on after that.*

*Also, a final questionnaire was sent to participants in October 2018 regarding any changes, or shifts, in their leadership practice and their attitude and approach to leadership generally. Their feedback was analysed by me and captured in summary form*



*on the web site itself, with a view to informing further leadership discussion and action.*

See web site for supporting example of key findings on these topics.

<http://nshglh.simplesite.com/439777692.html>

<http://nshglh.simplesite.com/439112117.html>

6. **MIT: Dissemination.** *“ Finally, the learning history is designed for “discussion” in groups”. (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p. 53). The emphasis here is on utilising it as a living history, to enable others facing similar challenges to reflect on the meaning of it for their work.*

*ME: Ultimately the group accessed their accumulated ‘story’ in the form of a written learning history guide, finalised by September 2019 and intended to inform key elements of a “Facilitative Leadership Programme”, which would be attended by some of the original participants in this study. The aim was that they, with others, would be able to further explore key aspects of this unique shared leadership experience.*

#### 4.2.5 How the learning history guide was organised.

The written guide is organised around the key milestones/events in the process of strategy co-creation.

Our collective learning and reflections, were collated under the heading:

**“JOINT REFLECTIONS ON.....”**

Thereafter further questions are posed within each section of this guide enabling readers to learn from the key, shared leadership experiences with a view to relating this to their own leadership practices.

The reflective questions are captured under the heading:

**“DEVELOPING YOUR LEADERSHIP PRACTICE”**

Once again this differs from the presentation format as originally devised by Roth and Kleiner (1998).

Extract from e-mail sent by the Director of People and Culture September 2020 in response to a review of the learning history written guide.

“(The Chief Executive), I and (an OD colleague) all had a good read of it. Our feedback was very positive. We will definitely continue making use of the material whenever an opportunity presents itself. It really helps to remind us about our approach and the impact”.

#### 4.2.6 Ending the action research cycle

Being in a position to utilise this learning history guide, to therefore prompt further review and reflection concerning shared leadership experiences and practices, was in line with the organisational culture, and specifically, this groups and the Group Senior Leadership Teams’ intention to continue fostering this particular approach to the sharing of leadership responsibility within this organisation itself.

*“We continuously develop and maintain our relational culture whilst experimenting with new ideas and approaches”.*

Follow this link to the completed Strategic Vision to 2023.

[Housing Association Strategic Vision to 2023](#)

***March 2020. COVID struck.***

The proposed facilitative leadership programme at this site due to start in March 2020, was hold until the following April 2021. Therefore, the opportunity for wider dissemination, with wider stakeholders, i.e., third person inquiry orientation was not fully realised.

On-going communications with the site were maintained via the Director for People and Culture, both leading up to the first pandemic lockdown and thereafter. However, staff at this organisation were facing unprecedented challenges during this period and had therefore had to focus on meeting the challenges of service delivery, as a priority.

I have reflected further on this topic of dissemination as part of my conclusions for this thesis. As Roth and Kleiner point out: “ Not being heard” is the danger we actively seek to avoid in learning history work” (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p. 56). Such stories, they argue, effectively facilitate surfacing the know-how, or tacit knowledge, “ embodied in this organisation’s culture and its employees’ intuitions, ideals, skills and experience” (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p. 55). They also point to a more general trend that pervades organisations, regarding a lack of dedicated time for collective reflection on (collaborative) action that has occurred due to time pressures, with no “slack built into the typical management process” (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p.47). While unforeseen circumstances disrupted a timely moment for reflection then, this did not mean that the opportunity for further dissemination with other stakeholders could not occur. As mentioned earlier, members of the GSMT committed to continue using learning history as a reminder of their “approach and impact”. This extended to its use as part of the recruitment/induction process for new non-executive board members.

#### 4.3 How I sought to access the different ways of knowing in action research.

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As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, in methodological terms, I began by analysing experiential ‘knowing’, which provides an “essential grounding of the other forms of knowing” (Reason, 1998, p. 426). This framework proved extremely useful when applied to process of data analysis. Ultimately, these epistemological dimensions inform the presentation of the learning history itself, featuring narrative accounts, quotes and visual depictions of key events and experiences, thereby creating an accessible document to be used in organisational learning.

The on-going review and analysis that is characteristic of action research processes, also began to stimulate identification and further exploration of other propositional (leadership) concepts, that were being discovered along the way, as outlined at the start of this chapter. There were key points during this research undertaking when new leadership themes started to be observed. For instance, the significant extent to which this undertaking was relational in nature became apparent; essentially by the second workshop. In due course this would prompt a subsequent review, of Relational Cultural /Leadership Theory, and in particular the supporting practices involved. Notably, at key points in the strategy development, I became aware of how power dynamics/relations were being experienced, by these staff with each other and in relation to collaborative working with the Board. Once again, such initial findings prompted further investigation within the literature. I observed that such dynamics, manifested within this

organisational context, were perhaps more reflective of the more inclusive power relationships, to which writers on this topic, notably Follett and Fletcher subscribe.

#### 4.4 Accessing different ways of knowing through the application of Participatory Action Research

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As explored in chapter 3, the participatory world view informs the ontological position and therefore research strategy adopted for this study, based on the notion of a “fundamental givenness about our world” (Reason, 1998, p. 425). How we therefore come to know this world, “is always interactive and co-creative” (ibid). Significantly, the nature of such knowing is not simply intellectual but directly and “materially grounded in our experience of the world and expressed in the practice of our lives” (ibid).

Importantly, this is not simply the adoption of a solipsistic, relativist position, “limited to a construction of human mind and culture” (ibid): “words and people are what we meet, but the meeting is shaped by our own terms of reference” (Heron, 1996, p. 11).

Merleau-Ponty also acknowledges the lived, or felt dimension informing our perception: “a deeply participatory relation to things... a felt reciprocity” (Abram, 1996, p. 124)

##### 4.4.1 Why does this matter for this research study?

Participatory Action Research, as with other ethnographic studies, rigorously seeks to develop a deeper understanding of subjects, (people and ideas), while recognising their constitutive context, their conditions and history. Therefore, accessing participants’ own lived, felt, experiences, informed by their ‘histories’, can potentially facilitate a

more vital and empathic understanding on our part, when it comes to fully appreciating what shared leadership really involves, at a given moment.

The ambition has been that this research approach differentiates this study somewhat from other shared leadership studies. As examined in chapter 2, many studies focus on the analysis of specified organisational antecedents and outcomes, with purported links being made to discrete leadership variables, that may or may not improve team effectiveness/performance; (See Fitzsimons, Turnball James and Denyer, 2011; Pearce and Sims, 2002; Denis, Langlely and Sergi, 2012). This appears to be deficient, and not simply in terms of not shedding light on any of the processes involved in how leadership is being shared, or otherwise. Arguably, it doesn't fully recognise, or fully account for those involved; for participants' own perceptions and 'historical' experience. These experiences are, in and of themselves, 'clothed' in their own history, culture and particular social conditions and therefore, as can now be observed, may prove insightful, or illuminating in some way.

#### 4.4.2 Accessing experiential knowing in this study.

With reference to this study's first objective, to understand more fully the relationality followers feel and experience in the context of sharing leadership with others, I will begin by reviewing key episodes and accounts, with a view to offering an emotional reading of these events and experiences, which were being informed by history and culture.

As a reminder, adoption of a phenomenological position assumes that a reading of such experiences recognises "historical values" (Howell, 2013, p. 29). Additionally, the accumulated experience or effects of history infuses our very ability to know (Ladkin,

2010). Merleau-Ponty reinforces that point, referring to how human beings are born into a “historical and cultural situation where objects are already clothed with meaning” (Walsh, 1985, p. 531). As mentioned previously, this is significant because it challenges those ontological assumptions explored previously in chapter 2, whereby shared leadership is often considered with little, or no regard to the constitutive context, or other contextual factors.

Illustrative examples that embrace such history started to be observed in participants’ own expressions of feeling liberated and energised, having “freedom *and choice*”, to set the strategic agenda with others at the outset of the strategic planning process, (Reference: The Learning History: Open Space. The Call to Contribute to Strategy). The inference here is that it has not always been the case, when compared to former, collaborative, planning projects (See Learning History: Mission Possible section).

Another illustration of such energetic engagement concerned how quickly staff mobilised in response to the Chief Executive’s invitation at the start of the Open Space event:

***“Well, over to you”***

I noted in my journal the following:

*“After only a few moments hesitation, around 100 + staff gathered in the room literally leapt out of their seats to gather up paper and pens from the centre of the room”.*

They began to formulate ideas together in groups, to contribute to the creation of strategy. My personal observations and notably those captured during off-line conversations with staff, board members and senior leaders in attendance at this launch event, concerned the degree of the high levels of engagement, being demonstrated by staff throughout this launch event. Such observations were arguably being mediated or benchmarked against our own previous experiences of such staff planning events. It was noted by one board member in attendance that, typically in other organisations, such events were frequently much less consultative, or collaborative. He went on to describe how, in his experience as a serving board member with another housing association, participants often remained overwhelmingly silent, when asked for opinions by senior executives concerning organisational strategy in similar, large group forums.

Another 'historical' account of what might well be described as self-censorship, was also neatly summed up by a Visioneer.

*"I worked for a corporate company for 10 year(s) and I quickly learned... to tell them what they want(ed) to hear and when I've come here, I've had to totally adapt my style".*  
(Critical Incident at the Open Space Event).

As I began to observe this 'relational space', where strategy formulation was actively being shared between leaders and followers; where senior leaders, board members and the wider staff cohort worked collaboratively throughout this "Open Space Event", I quickly became aware that this space was far from colourless and bland:



***“full of processes but lacking in turmoil, excitement, conflict or warmth” (Reitz, 2014, p. 33)***

A high energy atmosphere and buzz of activity pervaded the space, with open and honest dialogue and co-operative working in evidence for the rest of that day, between all involved. (The Learning History: Open Space Event).

This demonstration of staff openly expressing their views and actively contributing to the strategic agenda, again provided another important contrast to some of their own, former experiences of such events, both here and within other organisations

***“We got to set the agenda for the day and actually, one of the things we .. talked about was, you might go to a staff conference and shoehorn yourself into something, like a workshop and go: “I think I can talk about what I want to there”, but here you could be really specific” (Participant 12: Visioneer: Community Investment Officer)***

Accordingly, such accounts offer the opportunity to become more richly aware of the differentiated nature of these leadership experiences, being actively shared, between ‘followers’ /peers and in relation to their senior leaders, during this planning process. By recognising that the relationship itself is ‘clothed’ in specific social, historical, and cultural meanings of particular significance to those experiencing it, the nature of the collaborative experience itself may be observed as something that is much more nuanced.

#### 4.4.3 Emotionalising the leader/follower relationship.

Merleau-Ponty refers to the “body subject” , denoting a world of experience and held corporeally, or in an embodied way and which in turn contributes to knowledge (Walsh, 1985, p. 531) Turning again to this initial full staff event, to launch the strategy planning, participants recalled how their strong emotions and pent up feelings were released, **without censure**. These related to organisational topics that were frustrating them, or that really mattered to them and that they felt needed to be addressed. Such expression of tacit experience through feeling in order to “contribute to (organisational) knowledge” is not only potentially constructive, to address organisational issues, it also appeared to be cathartic for those involved (ibid):

*“I think it was the venting part. There was a chance in there and you don’t get that at some events, you get shut down and it’s “no negativity”. I was in a room with a couple of senior managers where there was (other) people (in attendance) and they (senior managers) said: “Come, on, let’s have everything. Let’s get it out here”. That’s quite refreshing”. (Discoverer: Participant 2, Finance Team Manager).*

*“In organisations if things are left unsaid it breeds contempt. It is really useful if it can be brought out in a constructive manner”. (Discoverer: Participant 6, Asset Manager)*

As with the earlier examples in this section, such self-expression may once again be calibrated against earlier organisational encounters, where such former experiences can arguably reflect a certain degree of curtailment, in terms of feeling able to openly communicate with senior leaders.

#### 4.4.4 Accessing emotional experiences as a legitimate form of knowing.

Tapping into this 'emotional' seam of organisational 'life' was significant, in order to explicate the nature of the shared leadership as a lived experience. It also presents something of a departure from the norm.

Such corporeality, as advocated by Merleau-Ponty, informs our reality as much as our cognition, "as we move through the world as opposed to just thinking about it" (Ladkin, 2010, p. 57).

Embracing an emotional reading of this particular organisation's life, represents a move beyond the assumed primacy of mind; a view that has long dominated.

"Western philosophical thought, which privileges rationality and reason"

(Fineman, 2003, p. 11). Reason has been lauded by Aristotle, whereas emotion has been viewed as a form of weakness by many over time, "of interference,

"sand in the machinery of action" (Elster, 1998, p. 284).

This accords with those perspectives raised in chapter 2, recognising and valuing emotion as a legitimate means of social expression. Additionally, by harnessing this emotional dimension as a central epistemological tenet of the research process, this uniquely offers those leaders reviewing and learning from their leadership experiences a different opportunity, to connect with those experiences directly and authentically, Fineman's approach to an emotional reading involving these, or other staff groups, is not to fixate on biological or psychological determinism. Instead, he too invites us to consider "the social and relational context of emotion" (Fineman, 1999, p. 3).

He aspires to a reconciliation between perspectives, to therefore:

“account (for) individuals’ biographies and unconscious processes”,  
while not ignoring the fact that social structures and wider cultural/economic processes  
“ Influence such emotional research also” (ibid).

Notably, these other contextual factors were also observed during this research undertaking to be affecting aspects of the relational dynamics occurring between these ‘followers’, working together, and in relation to their senior leaders and board. These will now be reviewed here, as they have directly informed a further review of key literature, in response to these and other findings.

#### 4.4.5 Accessing experiential knowing: Relational dynamics revealed at the site.

Again, with reference to this study’s third objective regarding the changing nature of power dynamics, the increase in influence and responsibility on the part of staff in this ‘project’ will now be examined. These earlier accounts, described by the group in the learning history regarding their previous experiences of leadership as something other than shared, are interesting. All the ‘historical’ examples described by participants, were characterised by a certain degree of self-censorship, on the part of these ‘followers’, acting in relation to their former leaders. It might therefore be assumed that a certain level of trust and openness was therefore lacking within these earlier relationships. Recognising the contrast between such historical leadership experiences and those under consideration within the study timeframe, itself lends an added potency, or vibrancy to the recounting of those subsequent, collaborative, and generally

more positive, leadership experiences. By acknowledging these broader, historical experiences that inform the group's subsequent perceptions of leadership, be it shared or otherwise, we are moving beyond the boundaries of conventional shared leadership studies; shifting away from the focus on antecedents and outcomes, right to the heart of how notions of shared leadership are actively being constructed, in relational ways.

"Leadership is not something independent of the way we think. Just the opposite: it is dependent on the way we organize what we take for granted as real and true" (Drath, 2001, p. 6).

Considered together, these contrasting experiences of leadership for participants, then and now, starts to denote certain power dynamics influencing these follower /leader relationships. This sense of freedom of expression and liberation described by participants at this initial event in turn becomes a palpable, felt sense of empowerment, on the part of those in the group who would volunteer, to subsequently create and shape the strategy together.

*"I feel it's like we've been given the opportunity to lead the way and give some ideas and input. I found it was really an honour to be asked if people wanted to put themselves forward to help create and evolve ideas and I felt it was an opportunity, not to pass and that's why I wanted to do it."* (Discoverer: Participant 3: Welfare Benefits Officer)

The following was my reflection in response, which informed the dialoguing technique applied and shared with staff at workshop 2:

*“Staff are made to feel special, honoured by being singled out and welcome being given the opportunity to lead.*

*There is also an issue of real power and influence being given to staff, which is a significant and real responsibility”.*

On the topic of participants’ motivation to volunteer as Discoverers and Visioners:  
Workshop 1.

*“I wanted to have a say on the future of the organization, have a say on my destiny, and if I got the opportunity to put my ideas forward, I wanted to do that” (Workshop 1. Discoverer: Participant 4: Property Services Manager)*

*“Sometimes when you are given an idea and they say “Right! I want you to see that through”. Its less easy for you to get enthusiastic about that.” (Workshop 1. Visioner: Participant 12: Community Investment Officer)*

Once again, the following was my reflection in response, which informed the dialoguing technique applied and shared with staff at workshop 2.

*“Having a say in the future direction of the organization is something that comes up a lot. It could also fit into leading and influencing because it is about influencing the future, leading with others.*

*People do not appreciate being told what to do. It can be demotivating”.*

Such unleashing of participants' creative potential to influence strategy was therefore expressed as both motivating and empowering. It also appeared to be somewhat unconventional, insofar as 'business as usual' was concerned.

#### 4.4.6 Identifying the negative effects of power dynamics.

However, this is also not to claim either that such 'empowerment', or freedom to speak up, was experienced as wholly positive either. Distinct feelings of pressure to contribute were expressed by staff, both at the outset, during the launch event and later on during the strategic planning undertaking itself. Also, some participants remarked that certain staff became quite distressed, as they opened to peers and to senior leaders and the board concerning work matters that were negatively affecting them.

*"I remember coming out of that room and thinking that we'd all been patting ourselves on the back about how we look after our staff and their well-being and I remember thinking: "Hang on.. There's people walking out of the building in tears and being chained to their desk" (Learning History, Critical Incident. Discoverer: Participant 4: Property Services Manager).*

Some staff experienced not just the freedom of getting involved in this process but also: *"feeling pressured... you've got a lot of responsibility to get up and fill that bit of paper in... So mixed emotions on that" (Learning History: Open Space Event. Visioneer: Participant 10, Customer Services Assistant).*

*"It has been quite stressful. It's been quite stressful in terms of time, stress and fitting it in around the day job" (Workshop 1 Discoverer: Participant 2, Finance Team Manager)*

*"...it was stressful to try and do it along with what was already going on at work but it was so interesting. You couldn't help but just be involved and look further" (Workshop 1. Discoverer: Participant 4: Property Services Manager).*

#### 4.4.7 Emergent themes related to this collective leadership experience:

Exploring power dynamics.

It was the expression of these experiences that would later prompt further, targeted, research on my part, into the area of power dynamics that could be influencing these, pluralistic leadership relationships, where influence was actively being exercised between parties. Such power dynamics may be recognised and explored by some, (See Follett, 1924; Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010; Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007). However, this is an area that generally is assumed to be "unproblematic" in many pluralistic and relational leadership studies and accounts (See Gordon 2002; Gordon, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2014; Fletcher, 2012).

#### 4.4.8 Evidence of relational leadership practices that facilitated collaboration.

Finally, and with respect to objective 2 for this study, regarding how shared leadership may effectively be operationalised, I learned that the extent of interdependent working relationships in evidence for this undertaking were underpinned by specific relational



approaches, that facilitated such high levels of co-operation. This topic will be explored further in chapter 6.

For now, it is again worth noting that, this was reminiscent of a kind of state, of “power with, as opposed to having power over”, which generally appeared to reflect both an overriding willingness and ability, for staff to operate in a context of interdependence throughout this entire strategic planning process (Follett, 1924). This was exhibited on the part of those involved, who were rapidly shifting to co-operation, together, and in relation to their senior leaders and in due course the board. I learned that such skilled co-operation was being informed, or underpinned, by certain leadership “practices”, that appeared to positively contribute, and reinforce that connection. These were outlined by Discoverers and Visioneers in the Learning History itself (See section: The start of the process of co-creating a strategic vision: Tools for Change: Featuring the 7 Stages of Effective Relationship).

In turn this provided another compelling reason to explore other, relational perspectives; in particular that of Relational Cultural Theory, informing the conceptualization of leadership as practice, as found in the work of Fletcher and others; (See Fletcher and Ragins, 2007; Lewis and Olshansky, 2016; Miller, 2012; Miller, 2022) .

#### 4.5 Accessing presentational knowing.

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Turning now to review the presentational dimension of this action research study. In particular I am referring to how visual methods were applied to stimulate participant's thinking about their leadership experiences during this period. This proved successful in stimulating varied and more in-depth reflections.

During each workshop various visual 'tools' were applied, to access, both individual and group lived experiences. This enabled us to build up various layers of the story, captured in both narrative and visual form, which was also in keeping with the spirit of creating an enriched learning history format, through incorporating such multi-media elements (Gearty, 2017). This shift beyond capturing narrative accounts exclusively and incorporating these visual perspectives, is itself significant in action research. Applying visual approaches, or methods, can therefore facilitate accessing more intuitive, or tacit forms of knowing, knowledge, and expertise. Such approaches are frequently applied in coaching and in my own coaching practice, which invites an "interplay of words and images". It facilitates "connecting with clients at a deeper level and thus externalizing the thinking process" (Bird and Gornall, 2015, p. 4). Using visual depictions also creates the advantage that both parties may engage with the data equally. This invites the notion of visuals themselves as "memory hooks" and "short cuts" (Bird and Gornall, 2015, p. 5). In a coaching context, clients can therefore point to a visual and it prompts further explanation/exploration. This is as opposed to repeating a process or trying to find the best words to describe a key experience, or event. Therefore, mapping the

complexity of a situation is enabled and the nature of the relationships contained within that becomes evident.

A neurological perspective may offer additional insight as to why this might be occurring. David Rock, the founder of the Neuro-leadership Institute refers to the notion of “using visuals ( in order to) “ reduce the energy needed for processing information... (in turn) maximis(ing) the energy left for thinking and performing” (David Rock, 2009 cited in Bird and Gornall, 2015, p.5). The visual cortex is accessed in the occipital lobe at the back of the brain... freeing up more space in the prefrontal cortex for higher-level thinking, tasks and (making sense) of complex ideas; in this case participants’ consideration of their key leadership experiences, during this strategic planning process (ibid).

I therefore designed the workshops themselves to, at times, incorporate visuality, and to therefore stimulate further thinking and deeper reflection, in keeping with these egalitarian, core principles of participatory action research. Such visualisation facilitated the externalizing of the thinking process, enabling all co-researchers to access and navigate the data equally in its presentational form. The following workshop illustrations set out what this approach may powerfully reveal, when applied in practice.

#### 4.5.1 Travelling into the unknown.

*Figure 7 Travelling into the Unknown*

## TRAVELLING INTO THE UNKNOWN



13

In the first workshop, I invited participants to “draw their motivation”, where they would visually outline what prompted them personally to join this strategic planning undertaking.

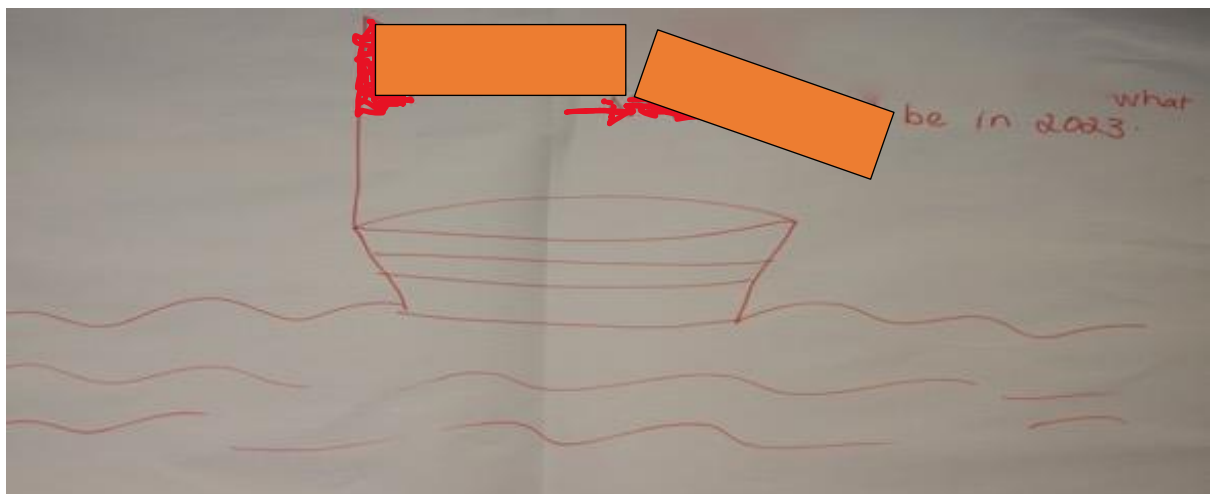
Strong expressions of empowerment were brought out in different ways by many in the group. For instance, having drawn a rocket travelling into space, one participant commented on the fact that they had signed up to a planning process that was emergent, new, and different.

***“For me it wasn’t just the unknown but a strong feeling about being a pioneer. We were the first people doing this”. (Discoverer: Participant 3: Welfare Benefits Officer).***

This, and similar depictions in turn prompted further issues to be raised by them and others consequently including the following:

- They felt that this strategy genuinely had not already been decided in advance. Therefore, the participants involved in this process felt that they would genuinely have a stake, or say, in what would be developed.
- It also meant that they would be at the forefront of this process. Again, with reference to these expressions of empowerment, and in a similar vein, another visual metaphor that emerged in response to this question was that of a ship on water sailing towards 2023 and the 'crew' on board setting the strategic direction. Again, the ship represented the idea of staff leading the process, which in this case they argued, was also a reflection of the pioneering and innovative spirit, or culture at their organisation.

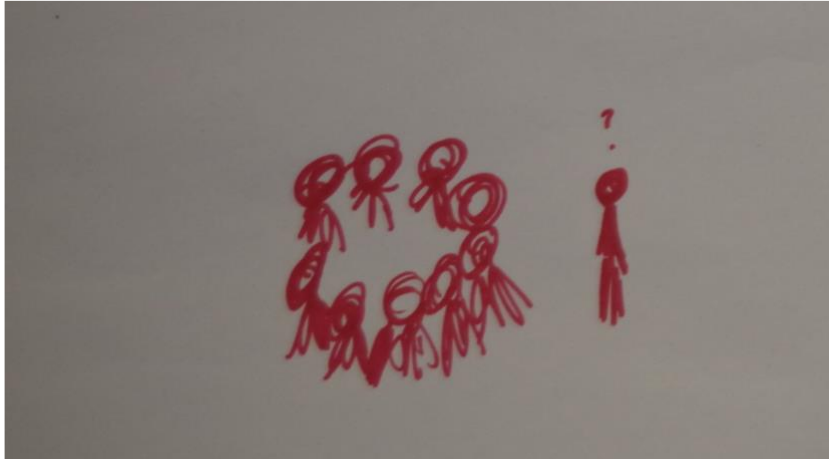
*Figure 8 Sailing to 2023*



#### 4.5.2 Having a Say

Figure 9 Having a Say

## HAVING A SAY



16

The group also commented on how much they appreciated ‘having a voice’ and therefore being involved, and enabled, to therefore influence the organisation’s future direction.

*“I wanted to have a say on the future of the organization, have a say on my destiny, and if I got the opportunity to put my ideas forward I wanted to do that ... (S)ometimes when you are given an idea and they say “Right I want you to see that through” , its less easy for you to get enthusiastic about that “ (Visioneer: Participant 12 Community Investment Officer)*

*“How can you have any sort of view on (don’t want to get political but it’s like voting), if you don’t vote, how can you complain when your taxes go up, sort of thing. That’s really*

*important, I think you have to be really proactive....." (Discoverer: Participant 4: Property Services Manager)*

Such assertions of empowerment are quite reminiscent of that described by Chaleff (1997), who describes the activities, or practices of courageous followers, as those who demonstrably challenge the status quo in their organisations, in relation to their senior leaders. These reflections on power, or influence would also raise other issues, during these workshops. Members of the group at various points during the workshop series would go on to describe as the potential for an emergence of an 'in-group' and 'out-group'; with them as Visioneers and Discoverers forming part of the in-group, having actively collaborated with the senior leadership team and the board. This was positioned in contrast to those wider staff groups, who would eventually be on the receiving end of the high-level strategic plan, presented to them, for sign-off, and essentially as a 'done deal'. Even at the early stages in the strategy planning process, one participant voiced their concern.

*"It is possible that those who haven't been involved will be 'told what to do'*

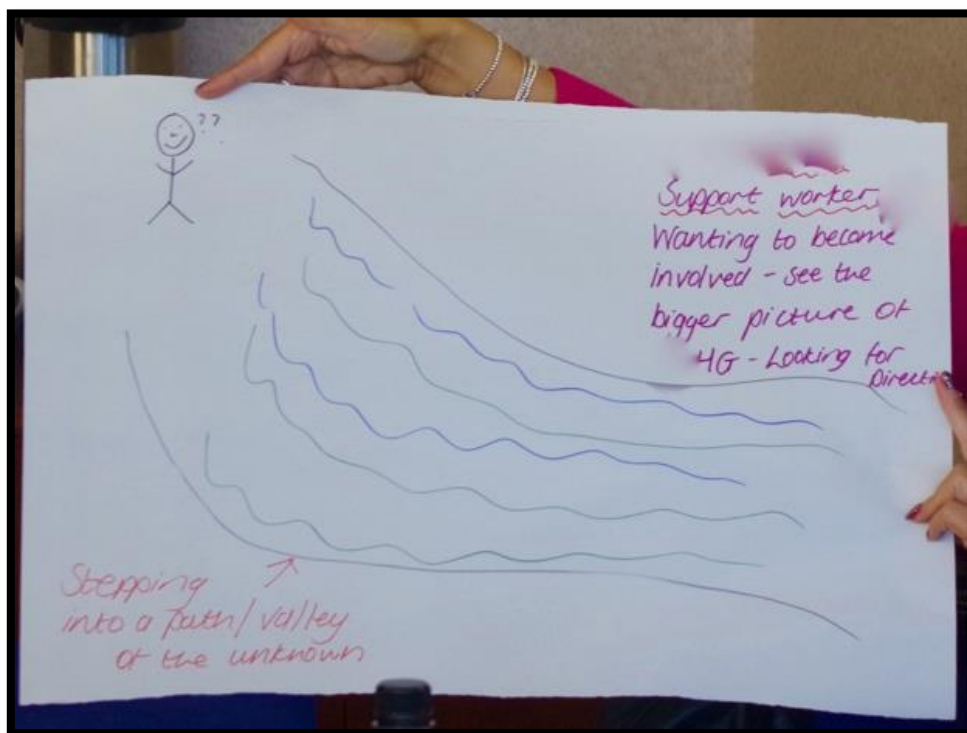
*How do we overcome this?" (Participant 12: Visioneer. Community Investment Officer).*

Having acknowledged that certain power dynamics were being experienced within the group, in light of both their narrative and visual accounts, I would go on to explore this theme of power in greater depth, thus informing further analysis in chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis.

#### 4.5.3 Accessing participants' feelings concerning their experience of sharing leadership

It is evident that these visualisation activities, that featured as part of the field research process, effectively enabled participants to access and openly share their deeper feelings and motivations about this novel work. The following image, or metaphor for example generated early in the research process also brought out feelings of uncertainty; for some, even vulnerability. Analogies were made to stepping into a deep valley, or onto an unknown path for example.

Figure 10 "Still feels new to me...:



*"It still feels new to me still in the unknown bit really, still finding my feet with it".*

*(Discoverer: Participant 3. Welfare Benefits Officer)*

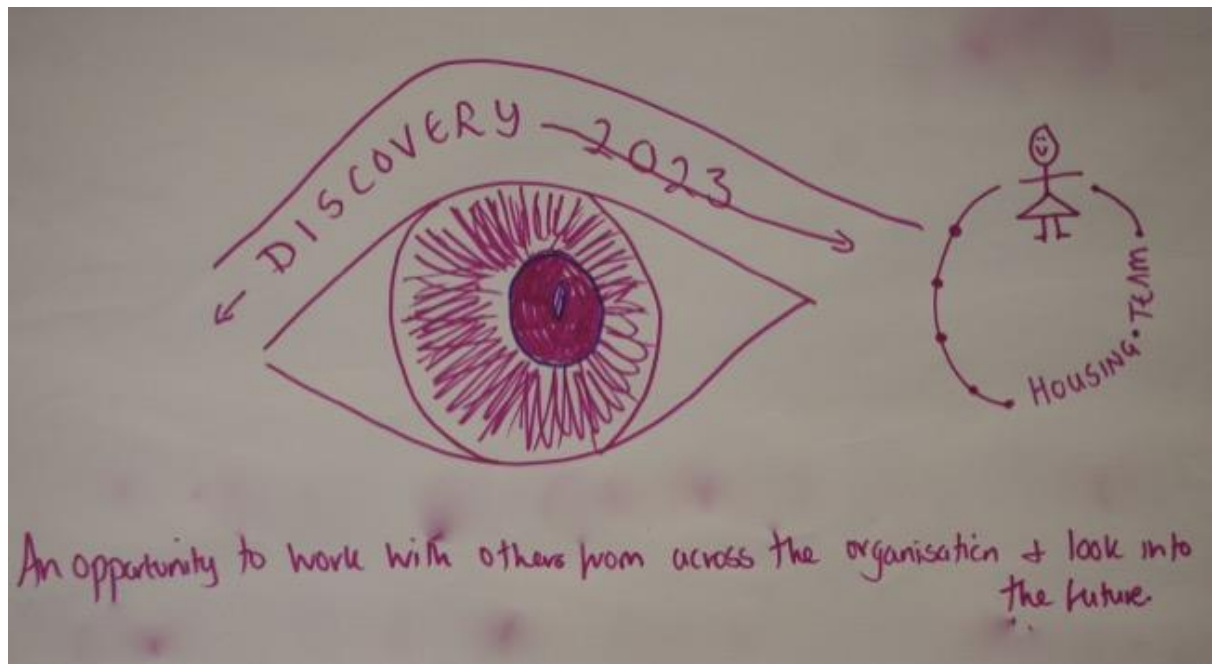
*"Definitely brave being involved and there's something about being exposed to risk*

*(through) being able to open up". (Discoverer: Participant 5a. Support Worker)*



#### 4.5.4 Accessing Participants' lived experience: Desire for connection.

Figure 11 BEING INVOLVED AND CONTRIBUTING TO THE BIGGER PICTURE



Being part of this planning undertaking was also viewed as creating a significant opportunity to connect, network and generally engage more fully with other staff, from across the organisation. This tapped into a real desire for greater connection on the part of those involved.

*"It was a nice opportunity to get to meet people I don't normally get to, so it was a nice motivation to join"* (Discoverer: Participant 5: Group ICT Assistant).

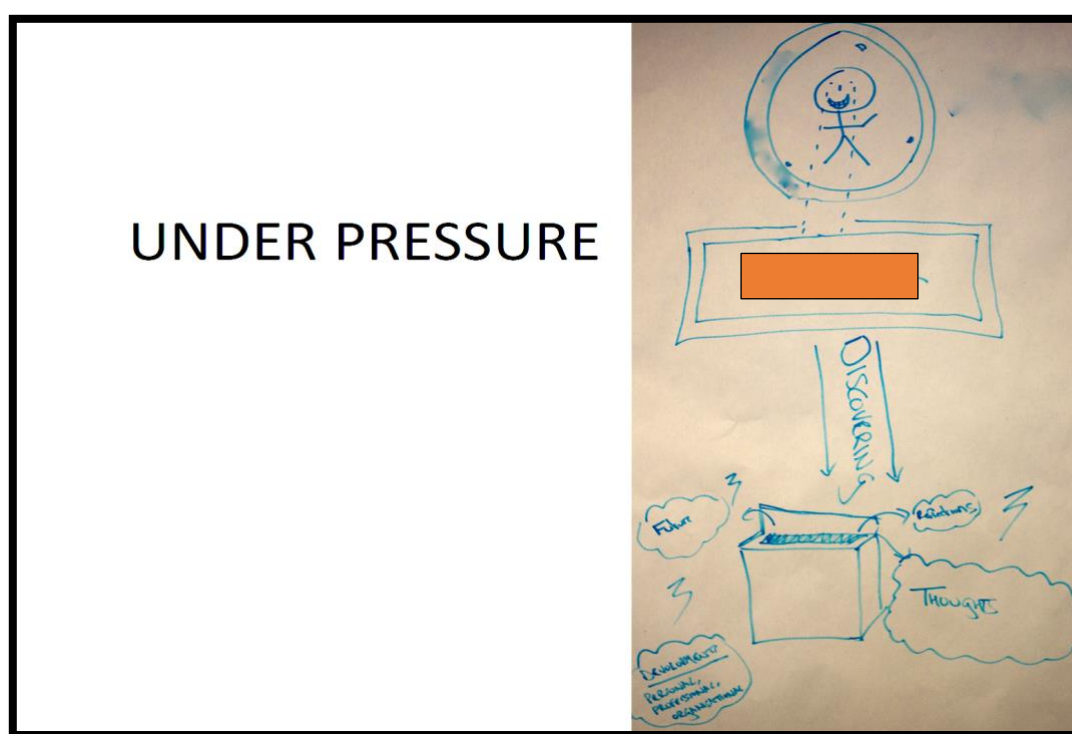
*"I sometimes feel that we can work in isolation, where .. we're not based here we're in satellite offices. So it's been nice to get to know what everyone else does and meet other people from the organization as well"* (Discoverer: Participant 2: Finance Team Manager)

*“One of the reasons I wanted to get involved was I work part time and .....a lot of people don’t even know I work here (Discoverer: Participant 1: People Services Assistant).*

*“I think that’s what I always say about working at (this organization), how everyone is like a big family. It’s just lovely to share” (Visioneer: Participant 10: Customer Services Assistant).*

However, this desire for involvement also reveals a darker side, prompting some less positive reflections concerning people’s response to this additional work.

*Figure 12 Under Pressure*



The pressure and responsibility of this undertaking emerged as a theme, which was experienced by some as quite stressful throughout this endeavour. It raised an issue regarding how to prioritise one’s own work and manage that, in addition to these

additional new demands, created by the strategic planning process. Notably, these feelings associated with the tension of managing ‘business as usual’ and ‘business as unusual’, were never openly shared with senior leaders at the time. Senior leaders would also comment later on, as they were reviewing the Learning History, that they were genuinely surprised by these findings. They had no idea of the extent to which the group members were experiencing this tension of managing workload.

*“It has been quite stressful. It’s been quite stressful in terms of time stress and fitting it in around the day job” (Discoverer: Participant 2: Finance Team Manager)*

*“...it was stressful to try and do it along with what was already going on at work but it was so interesting. You couldn’t help but just be involved and look further” (Discoverer: Participant 4: Property Services Manager).*

A certain degree of self-censorship is revealed by those involved, who for whatever reason did not feel able to fully disclose to their senior managers about the pressures they were experiencing. This may have related to participants’ own perceptions of this leadership role, which meant that they were not willing to openly acknowledge any possibility of failure. This is as opposed to not trusting the senior leadership team, who had instigated this whole planning process. Whatever their reasons for this lack of disclosure, it raised for me yet again, the presence of certain power dynamics, whereby such feelings of stress, or pressure, may not be fully and openly shared, as part of normal working discourse. As mentioned earlier, these, and other findings related to the theme of power, become the focus of further research into the literature, to evaluate

how these relational dynamics may be accounted for within these collaborative relationships.

#### 4.6 Accessing Presentational Knowing. Other group processes.

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##### Key Moments of Truth, (Group Mapping Technique), plus Two-Column Reflection

Another illustration of this visual approach to data collection, involved the application of a story boarding, or group mapping technique with the group, during the first two workshops. “Key Moments of Truth”, otherwise known as “Customer Journey Mapping”, is a visual process mapping technique frequently applied in the NHS and other care settings (See *Dignity Care*). Typically, it is used to map out the service user’s first-hand experience of a service process, with particular attention being paid to the thoughts, feelings, and actions *they* experience along the way. As may be seen here, it therefore provided a useful fit, to describe and explore the key experiences, activities, and events, that contributed to the initial research phase of the strategic planning process for the group. The Discoverers and Visioneers effectively produced road maps that visually depicted, from the viewpoint of their respective roles in this process, their lived experiences, relating to the different starting points and contributory factors, leading to and informing at some level this undertaking.

Figure 13 Discoverer Key Moments of Truth Map

Figure 14 Visioneer Key Moments of Truth Map





Interestingly, this mapping technique applied by both groups, elicited different responses and interpretations of the starting point, for this particular strategic planning journey.

#### 4.6.1 Visioneers and Discoverers' "Key Moments of Truth":

Locating the starting point for this strategy planning journey.

The Visioneer group maintained that the shared, or collaborative leadership undertaking began at **the Open Space** event. Discoverers, in contrast, identified three additional contributory factors informing this collaborative leadership undertaking.

- **Mission Possible (Full staff planning event and pre-cursor to strategic planning project)**
- **Functional Reviews (Service level reviews of performance)**
- **Tools for Change (Relational leadership framework to support collaborative working)**

This was a noticeable contrast between the two groups. Discoverers were pointing to other contextual factors, namely key organisational processes, events, and relational practices, that they felt had influenced this latest strategic planning undertaking. They asserted that previous full staff planning events, coupled with the attainment of certain leadership skills and practices, contributed importantly to the creation of the right organisational climate, to facilitate such shared/devolved leadership responsibility and decision-making. Of equal importance to them, were the regular application of specific organisational review processes, that had been established prior to this strategic planning undertaking. These earlier staff planning events, planning processes and relational skills/practices, Discoverers maintained, directly informed: *“this sort of collaborative working”*.

Such contextual factors were described as a significant

*“forbear” ( Discoverer: Participant 4: Property Services Manager)*

to the strategic planning undertaking itself, that was formally launched at the **Open Space** event. Each of these key influences are now outlined in greater detail.

#### 4.6.2 Mission Possible.

Beginning with Mission Possible, these full staff planning events, hosted some six months earlier, set the tone and expectation, for people to come together from different departments and to therefore:

*“work together on something that isn’t your usual task” and*

*“to see other people’s point of view. What may be important to Finance bit it is not so important to People’s services and so working through that. That was part of collaborative working.....(G)roups of staff from different departments together.. (were) told a few months before we had to go with a project to either:*

*-save money, or-improve service, with no budget and present it”*

*(Discoverer: Participant 6: Asset Manager). (Learning History: Mission Possible)*

The staff experience of earlier full staff planning events such as Mission Possible, was mixed. It had provided the first significant opportunity for wider staff involvement in organisational decision-making, and collaborative working, which some found positive, and others found more challenging. New ideas and opportunities for innovation had actively been encouraged by senior leaders and non-executive board members. Even though these may have resulted in plentiful numbers of ideas and proposals at the time, the overall ‘experience’ was one of subsequent frustration, due to poor opportunities for follow up implementation that resulted.

Notably Group Senior Management Team had reviewed and learned from the impact of such previous group planning events. Accordingly, this had informed the overall design and structure of the Open Space event and the entire shared strategic planning process. Therefore, the call for volunteers to participate as Discoverers and Visioneers was the first, enabling step for participants to be able not just to collaboratively develop, but also to ‘action’ through this undertaking, the relevant ideas and proposals proposed by them and colleagues, that had first been put forward at the Open Space event itself.



#### 4.6.3 Functional Reviews.

This was described by Discoverers as a key 'practice' regularly undertaken within each service area at the Housing Association, to improve service delivery on an on-going basis. Again, this was experienced as an inclusive, collaborative decision-making process:

*"Everyone gets their say there" (Discoverer: Participant 6. Asset Manager)*

While not everyone always welcomed, or fully trusted, the speed and the nature of the changes, as well as feeling at times somewhat overwhelmed by this responsibility, this process of regularly reviewing the services represented a distinct shift towards more devolved decision-making and provided an additional opportunity to regularly influence overall decision-making, e.g., investment decisions as well as cost savings, which were deemed important by staff.

#### 4.6.4 Tools for Change: Featuring 7 Cs Relational Leadership Framework (7 Stages of Effective Relationship).

Finally, and with reference to the development and application of certain leadership skills/practices, as identified in staff development programmes such as "Tools for Change", Discoverers maintained that this had also significantly influenced and informed how they would approach dialogue and discussions throughout this subsequent, strategic planning process. This was due to the adoption of a key relational

leadership framework, “7 Stages of Effective Relationship”, which they considered to be a significant organisational practice, readily and frequently applied in their work.

See web link for full description of each stage of this relational leadership framework, plus associated skills, and actions.

#### The 7 stages of Relational Working

Staff had previously learned how to utilise this relational practice at their workplace. It was described as a key leadership practice, frequently applied by staff at all levels of the organisation.

Its function? To provide a structured method enabling staff to navigate, rigorously explore and influence decisions, regardless of their position within the organisational hierarchy. This leadership practice informing effective dialogue, enables ideas and proposals etc. to be effectively bottomed out, through critical challenge, while maintaining open, honest, and supportive discussions, as opposed to more combative ones. Discoverers argued, its application was to directly aid those involved in this strategic planning to shape strategy and policy. Their experience however of applying this leadership practice, both in this context and elsewhere was described, as somewhat challenging. It was considered in certain instances to be both time consuming and demanding and required confidence to work in this way; whereby those who practice this approach, regardless of role, hierarchical position, function, or expertise, could openly question and challenge ideas, as part of honest, open discussions.

(Reference Learning History: Joint Reflections on Tools for Change).

#### 4.6.5 How this visual road map/high-level review revealed other organisational factors affecting this planning process.

The Moments of Truth visual display itself, also set out in chronological order, the key events and high-level processes affecting this undertaking. By utilising this visual approach, it also served to highlight other, competing organisational factors affecting this process and the impact they were having on participants. For instance, some of the members of this team, were simultaneously involved in, or affected by other major organisational processes, i.e., Investors in People Accreditation, plus staff turnover in key roles. Some of those affected commented on the significant pressure and responsibility there were feeling, coping with what they considered to be equally important, yet competing processes for their time.

*“Prioritisation in this context is really hard- so it is stressful on staff. This, combined with IIP, and people leaving, makes this undertaking difficult” (Discoverer: Participant 4, Property Services Manager).*

Such competing factors were subsequently drawn out further and fed directly into the two-column reflection process for this group, to validate and to reflect further on, in relation to these experiences.

#### 4.6.6 Deepening the dialogue between co-researchers.

##### **Key moments of Truth and Two-Column Reflection.**

By this point this ‘visual’ experience mapping technique, combined with participants’ in-depth discussions about each step, subsequently enabled another action research ‘visual’ technique to be integrated into the research process.

Two column-reflection was applied, to facilitate further, deeper exploration around this journey. This visual technique again links directly to participants experience, this time by facilitating the juxtaposition of participants' "outer experiences" alongside their, and in due course, my "inner responses and reflections" (Gearty, 2017). See example.

*Figure 15 Example of completed two-column reflection shared as a PowerPoint presentation visual in workshop 2.*

## ACTIVITY 1

- By comparing the two views of this topic, we can explore more deeply our reactions or responses to that.

INNER ARC/ IMPRESSIONS/REFLECTIONS	OUTER ARC
This image stuck with me because the idea of travelling into space is really powerful. It literally is travelling into the unknown and being prepared, i.e. brave and not just organized, or resourced to do that.	That's me in the rocket. The reason I drew that is because this whole process is kind of the unknown and none of us know what the outcome's going to be...

3

By visually laying out and comparing the data, side by side, with the subsequent reflections and observations, we were able to "slow down long enough to (critically) explore (and make sense of) "our internal responses, or reactions to that (Gearty, 2017). Notably, the application of this particular research, 'dialoguing' method was also closely aligned to the relational leadership practice supporting effective dialogue and collaboration (7, C), that was already being widely practiced at this Housing Association (reference Tools for Change). Therefore, it was considered by me to be somewhat less

of a risk, experimenting with such a method with this particular group. This is in comparison to its utilisation in other organisational settings, who could have felt less comfortable, even more exposed engaging in such open dialogue.

#### 4.6.6.1 Applying Two-Column reflection: Process and Impact.

Participants outlined their key steps and provided feedback relating to their experience of the overall strategic planning work to date, i.e., those steps in the planning process undertaken prior to the presentations given to the Group Senior Management Executive Team and subsequently to the non-executive board. Each step on this journey was subsequently transcribed and summarised between workshops.

I also transcribed my observations and reflections, made both at the workshop and 'off-line' in response. The aim here is in part to confirm participants' findings about their experience of this work but also to hold up a mirror of sorts, to provoke fresh insights into their own thinking and stimulate further dialogue and therefore learning concerning these experiences.

An analogy may be made to the Johari Window, a communications framework developed by two American psychologists in the 1950s (Luft and Ingham, 1955). It is used in coaching and supervision settings for example, to expand awareness of certain blind spots in an individual's thoughts, attitudes, skills, and actions and therefore facilitate awareness and learning through this type of mirroring dialogue. Hence, my responses were to some extent a form of feedback that mirrored their experience. The intention here was, to increase their awareness about their approach to this leadership task and more specifically, how that might influence their leadership approach and practice moving forward.

For example, using the Two-Column reflection format, the Visioneers responded strongly to my various observations and reflections about the sense of mutual support, coupled with a distinct self-imposed sense of pressure they were feeling, as they took over from their Discoverer colleagues. This was to build on the initial strategic research their colleagues, (Discoverers), had produced. It therefore cemented the two group's relationship by creating a sense of joint ownership (Two-column review workshop 2. See diagram 4.7.6.1 Participants reflections circled in grey, followed by my reflections, circled in yellow).

Figure 16 Two-Column Reflection in Action

**DISCOVERY PRESENTATIONS TO VISIONEERS... ITSELF A CRITICAL INCIDENT**

Q. "they did beautiful presentations for us". (**Visioneer speaking about Discovery presentations**)... we didn't know that they were going to do presentations for us, so that was really good. How it worked is their enthusiasm flowed off and then we (Visioneers) weren't scared any more. It was like the unknown, it was still overwhelming.

And we wanted it to work, not to let them down but there was pride as well. Really proud of what they had done.

**(DISCOVERER PERSPECTIVE)** "It was nice being on the other side of it and seeing how keen they were.. You could feel it. You could feel that everyone in that room, they wanted us to do well and they wanted to hear what we had to say. It was a nice thing to have because we were not all nervous but everyone had there own presentation to give..

That was the more overwhelming thing was that afterwards, we'd seen the presentations and heard the hard work they'd put in, we really didn't want to let them down. And obviously that's still going with us because we're still at the beginning of the journey". (**Visioneer speaking about Discovery presentations**).

26

**ON DISCOVERERS' PRESENTATIONS TO VISIONEERS: MY REFLECTIONS**

There is a real sense of mutual support and generous enthusiasm and feedback for the work of those involved in the process.

That brings with it also a sense of peer pressure, i.e. not to let your colleagues down.

It still feels quite overwhelming as an undertaking for some who are starting this undertaking.

27

Visioneers reported on how creative and liberating the process itself was.

*“ the process of writing the vision, not knowing what was coming next encouraged creativity and ....brings apprehension”.*

(Two-column review workshop 2. Visioneer: Participant 8: Group Co-ordinator ICT).

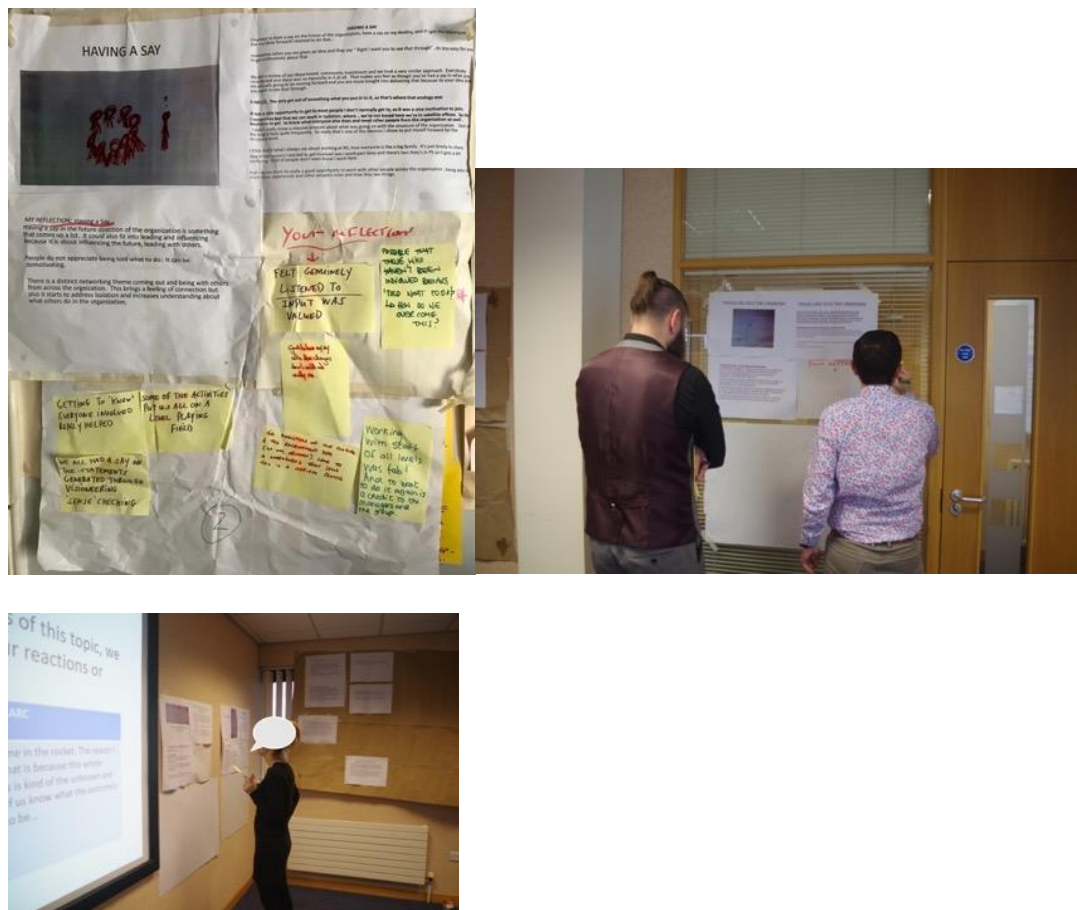
In terms of the experience of sharing leadership at that point, this sense of feeling responsible for building on the high-quality research work that had been undertaken by their colleagues, revealed a certain weight of responsibility being experienced by the Visioneers, which was described as “holding the baby”. However, this sense of shared, or group responsibility was simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically experienced as being quite liberating, as no one person in this Visioneer group would have overall responsibility for crafting the strategic vision.

#### 4.6.7 Further reflections on the customised application of Two-Column Reflection.

*Figure 17 A,B,C,D Further observations on the or customised application of two-column reflection method*







A specific variation was also included in the application of this Two-Column Reflection/dialoguing method. In the second workshop this involved visually headlining, or supplementing participants' responses, relating to their motivation to join this strategic undertaking, and juxtaposed against my written observations and reflections. I observed that participants were quickly moved to populate the more visual displays more rapidly, in comparison to the narrative only Two Column reflections. This enhanced visual version of Two Column Reflection also proved very fruitful, in terms of prompting longer discussions and reflections around participants' thoughts and feelings, relating to their leadership role. In leadership terms, these responses also reveal a shift in terms of these participants recognising that they were exerting a greater influence

over the direction of the organisation in future. Such influence was expressed in different ways:

- Influence, in terms of being able to directly contribute their knowledge and expertise and to therefore inform the strategic plan.
- Influence, in terms of being “*seen*”, or recognised as something “*other than my ordinary role*” (Vioneer: Participant 10: Customer Services Assistant)
- Influence in terms of feeling “*genuinely listened to, with (my) input being valued*” (Discoverer: Participant 3: Welfare Benefits Officer)
- Having such influence also engendered greater “*confidence*”.. “*to have my say and my point of view.. with managers*” ... (working together) “*on a level playing field*”, and even commitment to the on-going “*development of our organisation*” (Vioneer: Participant 10: Customer Services Assistant)

#### 4.6.8 Evaluating Two-Column Reflection as action research method.

The impact of utilising this visual method of Two-Column reflection, where narrative and researcher observations and reflections are juxtaposed, is interesting in research terms. This approach facilitated the follower ‘voice’ to therefore be effectively heard and validated, through the visual display of these experiences, and the subsequent augmentation, or juxtaposition of the co-researcher voice, to provide opportunities for additional commentary, insights, or even challenge to emerge. Throughout the process of dialoguing that followed, related thoughts, perceptions and feelings were more easily

shared. Once again, I observed that this rich quality of feedback may not necessarily have been so transparent or forthcoming, if other methods had been uniquely applied, e.g., qualitative questionnaires, or even focus groups where the 'visual aids' are missing, and the nature and pace of discussion may well be narrower and more rapid, due one person's comments being a main trigger for more immediate and specific responses from others.

Regarding the overall application of Two-Column Reflection itself, Torbert argues in favour of such approaches, in his writing on second person research/practice, a form of "speaking-and-listening-with -others" (Torbert, 2001, p. 253).

These research practices are distinctly relational in nature and also emphasise the value-laden nature of such Participatory Action Research undertakings, where awareness of perceptions, assumptions etc. become an explicit part of the dialogue itself. The intention of achieving "critical subjectivity", with others, is perfectly reflected in this Two-Column Reflection (ibid). For instance, key points on this planning journey were "framed to capture a possible shared sense of intent" (Torbert, 2001, p. 254). The group members would "advocate", in other words, make an assertion relative to their experience of that given moment in time or step on their journey to co-create strategy. That experience would be further augmented, in this case through my 'story', i.e., observations, reflections etc.

Finally, "inquiring" involved taking these reflections and observations and respectfully "inviting" (further) contribution, or feedback from others about their response to one's "speaking" (See also: Fisher, Rooke and Torbert, 2001).

This process isn't easy as both Torbert asserts and as I similarly found during this experience of dialoguing.

“Listening for and testing interpretations publicly..... is no simple all-or-nothing process.”

Rather it is intuitive, and requires “all our powers of judgement, intuition and care” (Torbert, 2001, p. 256).

#### 4.6.9 The pursuit of critical subjectivity.

Balancing my role as co-researcher, or co-subject here as elsewhere was not always comfortable, but neither should it have been, when considering for example similar dialoguing processes occurring within a coaching context. The aim there, as here, is to tease out and test out ideas with others and it takes time to truly listen and attempt to understand more deeply others’ stories, if the matter of ‘taking over’ the story is therefore to be avoided. This process of dialoguing is balanced against maintaining curiosity and ultimately inspiring learning on both sides. According to Torbert (2001), taken too quickly, without fully testing assumptions and one’s own beliefs, a power imbalance emerges, shutting down debate, or even manipulating, or curtailing the expression of critical experiences of others, which I was at pains to avoid, through these reflective action research methods and processes.

Torbert also contends that such inquiry into action is based on the notion that:

“all our actions, including those we are not certain about and... must be committed to, are in fact also inquiries” (2001, p. 250) As mentioned earlier, he is embracing the subjective, value laden nature of such participatory action research undertakings and appears to disregard the approach of some researchers to “ painstakingly construct

(inquiries) where we seek to “detach ourselves as researchers in so far as possible from biasing interests”. (Torbert, 2001, p.250)

This is where the goal of achieving critical subjectivity is recognised as pivotal to my role as the co-researcher. In practical terms, this involved continually testing out my assumptions with others concerning what sharing leadership means as a lived experience, on the part of those who are actually practicing it, in this particular organisational context. Further steps leading to the achievement of critical subjectivity may also therefore start to be discerned, as further thematic patterns, or trends, relating to this lived experience of shared leadership were observed, during the on-going analysis of data that in turn, made constituted the Learning History itself, that was ultimately validated by other stakeholders. The research methods outlined in this section and earlier mark the first steps being taken towards informing theoretical, or propositional knowing in due course, which will be covered from Chapter 5 onwards.

#### 4.7 Accessing Presentational Knowing: A deeper dive.

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Gillian Rose (2016), points to the “increasing use of research methods in the social sciences that use visual materials of some kind to.. (explore) an aspect of social life” (Rose, 2016, p.15). She cites its application in studies, such as those related to the exploration of attitudes to illness for instance, for instance citing Frith and Hanairt’s 2007 study, and Lombert’s 2013 study related to “feelings about living in an informal settlement (Rose, 2016, p.15).

Social scientists according to her, have a long tradition regarding the use of images in their research, referencing the field of anthropology, where diagrams, maps, photos, and even human geography have informed research. Currently digital methods are being enthusiastically utilised and developed to represent and interpret data. This is particularly relevant when considering the visual construction of this Learning History; a point to which I will return in due course.

The act of constructing imagery as an integral part of the action research process was important and revealing in a number of ways. Rose (2016) again echoes my earlier discussion in section 4.6, concerning the power and impact of images, to elicit deeper responses to events, activities etc., as opposed to exclusively exploring meaning through narrative.

“..images are more often evocative of the sensory aspects, richer in information than interview talk, or written text can be, and that research participants’ talk about images can be particularly revealing about the affective aspects of their experiences” (Rose, 2016, p.330,331).

Additionally, as these co-researchers in this study had directly created these primary, visual research sources, the intention was always to incorporate these into this learning history, in the hope of making it both visually appealing and accessible first and foremost to the audiences, for whom it was originally and principally intended, this group of staff and their peers, plus the senior leadership team and board.

“Research conveyed in the form of images can reach more audiences, and different kinds of audiences than the usual academic research output of a paper in a scholarly journal”, (Power and Sharma, 2012, cited in Rose, 2016, p.331).

They can also be “more affectively powerful than academic writing” (ibid).

The inclusion of images in the final story of this shared leadership experience and journey was therefore intended to evoke the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of those who had participated in it. Also, by not shying away from this more aesthetic aspect, the mythic dimension of organisational life, this could also be attended to in some small way; in this instance using visual symbols/metaphors within the narrative, to prompt learning and reflection and ultimately leadership action, on the part of those reading this story (Roth and Kleiner, 1998).

#### 4.7.1 Capturing the affective elements of the shared leadership experience through visuality. The experience at the third workshop.

Once again, this builds on the earlier discussion concerning the customised application of the Two-Column method and the anticipated effects of juxtaposing images with text, (see section 4.6.6.2). During the process of creatively drawing out participants' responses relating to their key experiences, I observed that, the narrative and visual research methods I adopted for that purpose each respectively, elicited very different responses in both cases.

In the case of using the narrative method in workshop 3, participants first reviewed a narrative map, detailing the key stages, or milestones on this journey, and featuring related quotes and observations etc. This was a consolidation of the Two-Column reflections that had been reviewed in the previous workshop, with the additional inclusions of some direct 'freefall writing' quotes, from the participants themselves, who the day before had presented the strategy to the board. As a reminder, freefall writing is a method used in action research to bypass the conscious mind and access the deeper feelings, thoughts and experiences associated with a particular event, or issue (Gearty,

2017)(Gearty,2017). The aim was to ensure that each step had been accurately described and to therefore validate findings, i.e., participants' experiences, as we went along, in the spirit of the Learning History process framework advocated by Roth and Kleiner (1998).

*Figure 18 narrative map detailing the key steps in the journey of co-creating strategy, including direct freefall writing reflections/quotes from participants.*





### Other Steps ?

- Meeting with Claire and Carole to develop strategy
- Meeting with Angela to finesse/refine strategic topics

### Board Residential

- Experience : A unique experience between staff members and Board, where Board hear staff's engaged views on the direction of travel for the business over the next 5 years.
- A collaboration of people who's first priority is the customer, and their experience, rather than surplus, profit or the business function

### Board Residential

- Emotions :
  - At the start of the session I felt pretty anxious..The anxiety increased as each group was interviewed and I couldn't help but feel I might let the side down. When x, y and I sat down, the anxiety seemed to dissipate significantly.
  - Carole's approach helped us to relax and it really teased out more...

FREEFALL WRITING QUOTES

### Board Residential

- Experience : I was amazed and really touched by what Jed said-it all felt like a work task/project to be done, throughout but his genuine surprise and praise elevated it.
- I sensed no scepticism. Surely the organisation has made aspirational promises and statements before and failed to achieve.

The group reviewed each milestone on the journey quietly and thoughtfully. They addressed some gaps in the key activities, including further discussions with the senior leadership team to sense check key aspects of the strategic vision, prior to presenting the same to the board. Notably, this review of predominantly narrative findings to date, produced no further reflection, or clarification in any meaningful sense, which was fine. I observed, on reviewing the audio recording for this workshop that, during this initial exploration of the steps set out in narrative form, participants were not particularly forthcoming, and I found myself rather reluctantly at times, filling the silence and providing further explanations at certain sections of the journey, from a more academic perspective, e.g., justifying inclusion of certain aspects of the journey from a shared leadership or action research perspective.

#### 4.7.2 Eliciting powerful affective responses through visuality.

This was in sharp contrast to the next activity, which involved the group creating a mock-up of the front cover of a professional magazine of their choosing. This would feature both text and image, to represent their journey and the achievement of completing this five-year strategic vision to the point of handing it over to the board. Two groups were tasked with creating a mock-up each, that would illustrate any leadership shift that had occurred, along with the impact and influence on the strategic direction of this work on this organisation's future. This method has similarities to the creation of photo-essays which are defined as follows:

“ A photo essay is a combination of writing with photographs” (Newbury, 211, cited in Rose, 2016, p. 340).

“ .. the photographs must be at least as important as the text to the photo-essay’s impact’

In this case images were drawn instead of taking or using photographs. The group simply loved this undertaking, if the degree of laughter, conversation, and creative engagement, both during the making of their magazine mock-up and in the discussion that followed, is anything to go by.

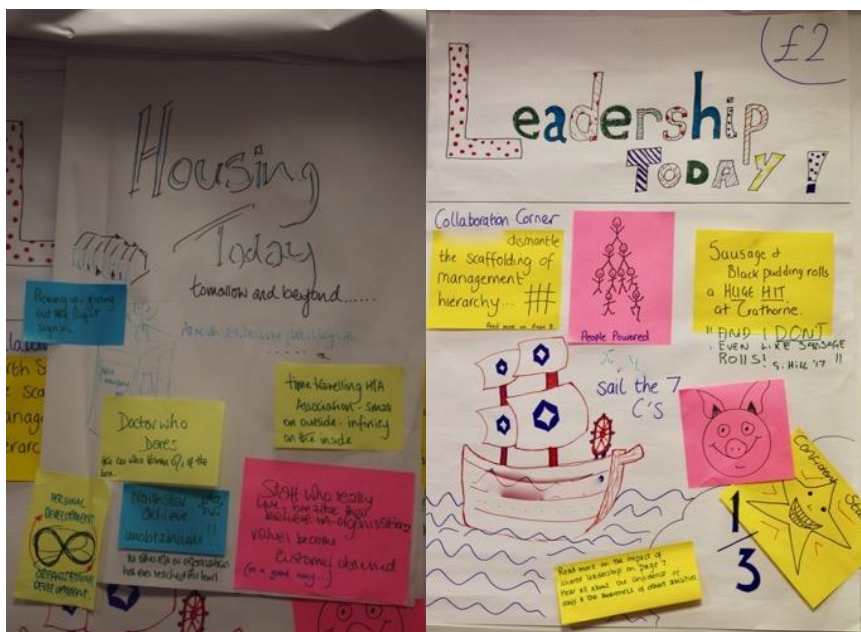
*Figure 19 Group Image and Close-Up: Creating the Mock-up of the Front Cover*





#### 4.7.3 Evoking affective viewer responses.

Figure 20 Front covers Magazine Mockups

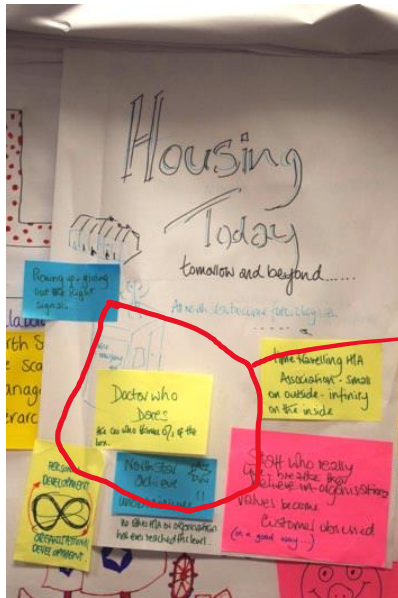


**Two examples illustrate this point.**

One group created a mock-up of a fictional publication entitled: “Housing Today”, which featured a Dr Who style Tardis on the cover, and contained the following headline:

“Time travelling Housing Association-small on the outside-infinity on the inside.”

*Figure 21 Close Up visual of a Tardis*



Visual of a “Tardis” with the supporting By-line: Doctor who Dares. The CEO who thinks out of the box.

This elicited a great deal of discussion using this sci-fi metaphor about the following:

The signals that emanate from the Tardis are symbolic of the deeper connections and relationships that have developed with these staff and with their customers and partnerships, as well as managing expectations more effectively with customers. This, they argued continues to be a direct result of this strategic work.

Another by-line relates to the ambitious and forward-thinking culture in evidence according to the group in this organisation, i.e., through their achievement of Investors in People accreditation beyond the highest award, which is Platinum, thereby achieving “Unobtanium”. The group built on their visual metaphor of the Tardis as reflecting the ambition of an organisation, heading into outer space and therefore undertaking truly,

“pioneering”, innovative activities and ways of working, that are unparalleled in the housing sector.

#### 4.8 Exploring the power of visuality in the development of the strategic vision.

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Visuality, as opposed to the notion of the physiological capacity to see:

“refers to how vision is constructed in various ways: ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein” (Foster 1988: cited in Rose, 2016, p.213)

This quote powerfully begins to describe an acute contrast that became evident, in terms of the visual construction and dissemination of the strategic vision to two, distinct audiences at this housing association; firstly, the Non-Executive Board, with other members of the GSMT, and latterly to the wider staff audience.

Regarding the presentation of the strategic vision to Board, clearly a great deal of thought and preparation had gone into the communication of the strategy on the part of the Discoverers and the Visioneers, working with the Director of People.

The Organisational Development Consultant who supported this overall process of strategy co-creation, introduces the plan to the board as ‘bold’ and ambitious and informed by “**peer principles**”, featuring equitable decision making on the part of all involved, whereby no one individual regardless of whether they were a senior leader, or not, had more authority, or influence over others.

The group themselves referred to their experience of presenting the strategy to board, an event lasting nearly two-hours, with a sense of pride, due to the positive reception and encouragement of the Board. One participant commented on the fact that:

*“We had been allowed to spread our wings”.*

(Participant 10: Visioneer, Customer Services Assistant).

She went on to add with reference to the groups’ knowledge and skills in this undertaking: *“Why would you keep something in a box (i.e., hidden)?”*

They referred also to the fact that they didn’t need to do a formal, scripted presentation because their senior leaders were confident that *they* knew enough to present effectively to the board. The presentation format was an interview Q and A with the Director of People leading the discussion in the style of “a chat show”, as one participant put it, in front of a ‘live audience’, namely the Non-Executive Board etc. Her role was pivotal, according to those who were being interviewed.

*“She would prod you and ... probed you (but) she was not going to let you drop.. She would have done something to pull you back up”.* (Visioneer, Participant 11, Group Lead PR, and Comms).

This enabled a very detailed exposition of strategic vision to be presented, followed by further, more detailed discussion on key aspects of the strategy with the board.

Another presenter referred to the reception they received from the Board, who were pleasantly surprised, recognising and acknowledging the staff talent in the room, to produce this standard of work. The Chairman even went on to remark to the assembled audience, that they as a board could not have produced a better strategic vision.

*“I loved talking to the board, loved working with the vision group and feel my personality strengths and capabilities have come out”. (Discoverer, Participant 4, Property Services Manager).*

Afterwards, over drinks and food the Board mingled with the participants and had the opportunity to discuss further in a relaxed atmosphere the findings.

***“ ..connecting with some board members afterwards allowed the process to deepen, felt more natural and any points missed were communicated and/or clarified” .***

(Visioneer, Participant 7, Group Co-Ordinator ICT).

#### 4.8.1 Comparing and contrasting these two presentations.

Compare this initial delivery of the strategy to the Board, set against its subsequent presentation to a full staff cohort, four months later, approximately one year after the initial Open Space event to recruit that particular cohort of staff.

As outlined in the Learning History itself,

Members of the group in the morning provided short, 4 -minute presentations relating to each key strategic theme to the wider staff group, while also relaying their experience of leadership development during this process. They were limited to the adoption of a Petch Kutcha style delivery of a maximum of 20 presentation slides each. The group reflected with me, during our penultimate workshop about their shared leadership experience, their distinct frustrations with this format; a presentation format which, some of whom maintained, had been foisted upon them at the last minute.



*“you were condensing 4 months of work in 20 images across four minutes, plus (describing) how that had affected you personally and how you had developed and grown ( as a leader). (Visioneer, Participant 10. Customer Services Assistant).*

*“I really enjoyed it but then the people on the other side were only getting that tiny snapshot”. There was no way to explain to everyone the amount of work that had been done up to this point.” (Discoverer, Participant 4. Property Services Manager) (Learning History: Presenting the Strategic Vision at the Full Staff Conference).*

This led to a rather more lukewarm reception for those who had led on the strategic vision when they explored the strategy in further depth in the afternoon open space sessions with colleagues.

*“There was a lot for staff to take in. Because at times people couldn’t hear properly, they “homed in on a particular subject”. Therefore, the afternoon discussions, at times became a bit challenging and yet people were getting ‘passionate’ about it” (the vision). (Discoverer, Participant 3, Welfare Benefits Officer).*

(Learning History: Presenting the Strategic Vision at the Full Staff Conference).

#### 4.8.2 Visual analysis of both presentation events.

Arguably, this presentation format to all staff was designed for a much larger audience, with different logistical requirements required in terms of facilitating subsequent further discussions with up to 100 staff. However, given the fact that this broader staff audience were being invited to 'sign up' for this strategic vision and direction that day, to take forward and to implement in their work, arguably they could have been offered the time to digest the strategy more fully; an experience commensurate with that previously enjoyed by the board.

Such visual construction of events, or *visuality*, when considered as a “cultural process”, or “ set of practices... concerned with the production and exchange of meanings” become arguably symbolic ,“ representations, (in turn) structur(ing) the way people behave.” ((Rose, 2016, p. 2).

To refer again to the earlier quote at the start of this section, *visuality*

“refers to how vision is constructed in various ways: ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein” (Foster 1988: cited in (Foster 1988: cited in Rose, 2016, p. 213).

Therefore, a visual reading of these two representations of the strategic vision, indicates that that there was somewhat less investment, in terms of the time given to the wider staff group, to fully consider the strategic vision. This latter event in turn seems to represent something of a *fait accompli* in strategic decision-making terms. Interestingly, it also starts to illustrate the limitations, or boundaries of what was characterised as a shared leadership process and experience. How this wider staff group was enabled, to “see” , to fully apprehend the strategic vision, also points to a different order of relational dynamics at play; a point which is raised in the learning history itself. This

more transactional approach with the wider staff group has certain parallels with those qualities of non-relational practice described by (Fletcher, 2012, p. 97). This is where in relational terms communication for instance is one-way, as opposed to seeking meaningful input from others, which was the case here.

#### 4.8.3 Accessing Presentational Knowing: Disseminating research findings digitally through the construction of a web site to be accessed by all involved.

Moving on beyond the discussion concerning the impact of visual imagery as a research opportunity to explore meaning, afforded by the visual construction/ consideration of events and activities, I would like to now turn to another important visually informed method that underpinned our collective research process. This concerns the building of a multi-media web site, which would later directly underpin and link to the Learning History 'artefact' itself, through the inclusion of links to key quotes, reflections, visual imagery etc. relating to the key leadership experiences of the participants involved, plus other supporting contextual information, corporate reports, the finalised strategic vision itself etc.

Given my position as a co-researcher during this undertaking, as opposed to being an expert adviser, directly informing this strategy building, it was even more critical that the research process was kept as open and transparent as possible for all interested parties. Therefore, the web site was constructed to function principally as a repository for the research data as it evolved throughout the research process. It therefore acted as a container for those research processes already described, e.g., the use of two-column reflection, thematic distillation of findings, visual depictions of individuals' perspectives on aspects of this undertaking etc., . Setting out findings in this way as they

were emerging was a novel approach, and one which, as mentioned previously, attempted to model to some extent Roth and Kleiner's fourth stage of their Learning History framework, where the 'narrative' or story is being captured alongside the analysis of key themes related to the experience of shared leadership. Initially, it was my intention to build further on this web site and reconfigure it in due course as the Learning History itself, which would eventually be hosted on-line, with invited user access. The original intention was that this web based, multi-media learning history artefact would potentially reach and be more accessible to a wider audience and reach beyond the more typical academic reader. However, given the limitations of my web site design skills, plus the inherent limitation of the web site format that favours visuals over narrative, with much shorter textual summaries, I decided against it.

#### 4.8.4 Identifying issues of accessibility within this learning history.

The intention has always been that this Learning History would eventually be presented in a photo-essay format, characterised as containing images/photographs that are "at least as important as the text", which worked for our purposes (Mitchell, 1994, cited in Rose, 2016, p. 20). On the matter of widening accessibility, in addition to the more visually appealing format, even the language and the propositions put forward would be more accessible, by actively avoiding using academic language. Rather the voice of those involved would be paramount and academic ideas and concepts would be used to underpin and implicitly frame, or give shape to the story, as opposed to dominate it.

This is very much in keeping with the spirit or ethos of action research, whereby research is conducted as a collaborative process of equals and concerned with addressing

practical challenges in an inquiring and reflective way, namely the shared leadership challenge of co-creating an organisational high-level strategy. However, silencing, or muting my academic voice proved somewhat challenging during this whole process, particularly as I sought to build up the various drafts of the Learning History and shared that with leaders at this organisation. Potentially, the conflict lay with the worthwhile purposes of this research, which for my (sole) academic purposes was to explore the nature or phenomenon of shared leadership. For those co-researchers' involved, it was to enable them to reflect on and learn from this unique experience, and to develop their leadership practice accordingly. In this way the presentation of language and images had to be accessible first and foremost for its primary audience and for those connected to this undertaking, either directly, or indirectly. My job as co-researcher/academic researcher has been to extrapolate on this research undertaking accordingly and to inquire further from an academic perspective, to therefore contribute, in due course, to propositional, or theoretical knowing. This hopefully helps explain the tension of moving between these different modes of expression.

#### 4.8.5 Encouraging collaboration in the interpretation of presentational findings.

“ These (digital web sites) environments promote re-interpretation, contextualised by agency, explanation, path-making and choice-making”, on the part of their viewers/visitors (Coover, 2011, cited in: Rose, 2016, p. 636).

It is in this spirit that those involved at all stages, including the Group Senior Leadership Team were able to review our research findings freely and continually in this particular presentational format, in order to validate and learn from these findings as we went

along. At certain times when exploring particular aspects of shared leadership experience or practice for instance, I would provide specific guidance for co-researchers to access key areas on this web site platform, to provoke further thinking/ elicit further insights from the group on certain topics. This proved useful in validation terms too, whereby the evocation of certain activities during this undertaking, such as the organisation of the strategy presentation to the full staff group would be challenged by members of the GSMT, who provided a counterview of how this process was designed and the degree of involvement of Discoverers and Visioneers in that design.

#### 4.8.6 Final observations on the role of visuality in the construction of this learning history.

Having decided upon the photo-essay format for the learning history, key elements of the web site, would therefore underpin key parts of the story. This format for the learning history proved equally appealing in terms of accessibility, i.e., this digital format is downloadable in PDF form. Other important considerations of this format are how, through this engagement with images, a great deal of information about “how culture and social life looks... ( or may be portrayed in ways) that’s difficult to represent in text alone” (Wagner, 2007, cited in Rose, 2016, p. 7). This relates to the accessible way in which we were trying to give voice, or expression to the experiences of those directly involved.

It was also significant for my co-researchers who created various images themselves throughout, as their images which would feature in the final Learning History artefact would be evocative or serve to reinforce the narrative.

“ A photo-essay can have two effects then: the analytical and the evocative” (Rose, 2016;p.342). In the case of this Learning History the use of text with the supporting images that may have stimulated the ‘narrative’ are in many cases “ making the same argument, evoking the same feeling” (ibid).

#### 4.9 Conclusion.

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In this chapter I have set out the rationale and ambition for experimenting with the Learning History, both as methodology and as a method for data collection. To that end it serves two purposes: Firstly, it has been utilised create an accessible tool supporting learning within an organisation. This in turn has fed into its second purpose, as a method for rich data collection. I have observed through this process that, the recognition of extended epistemologies, these other ways of knowing, affords new opportunities to examine and work beyond those conscious experiences of shared leadership. This facilitates the research goal to therefore consider the emotional dimensions of such experiences, as well as consideration of other temporal factors, such as a cultural/historical understanding of the same, for example. Specifically, the opportunity for visual reading has also afforded a fuller consideration of certain spatial/temporal factors, which in turn has surfaced a different order of relational /power dynamics.

In due course, I will explore this use of extended epistemologies again to support my findings in this thesis. There now begins the culmination of this extended epistemological inquiry in chapter 5. In this chapter, the rich data that has been investigated here, will start to inform a greater propositional understanding of the

shared leadership experience. This involves first an in-depth review of relational leadership theory and a positioning of key leadership relational framework, Relational Cultural Theory, as a suitable relational leadership framework to support these findings (Fletcher, 2012; Fletcher, 1998; Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002) Analysis of these findings will subsequently be developed in some depth in chapter 6. Subsequently, in this chapter and in line with this study's objectives, this has created the opportunity to explicate more fully the key conditions, attributes, skills, and behaviours, plus consideration of additional contextual factors that have informed this shared leadership experience.



I will now position the key leadership relational framework that supports this exploration, Relational Cultural Theory (Fletcher, 2012; West, 2005). This is in accordance with the action research principles and practices being applied within this study, whereby the extent to which relational working was informing this strategic planning undertaking became increasingly apparent. This was evidenced through my reflections leading to initial, analytical distillation of emergent themes informing this work. Hence, I became drawn to explore in some depth those key tenets and dimensions of RCT, which were being reflected in this groups' outlook and activities.

In this short chapter, it is first necessary to outline the merits, or otherwise, of other relational theories, to further distinguish RCT and to subsequently justify its inclusion in this thesis.

Next, RCT will be positioned as the most appropriate theoretical lens through which to view this shared leadership undertaking. The historical background, or lineage of RCT will be set out and there follows in chapter 6 a comprehensive and systematic examination of the learning history data, set against key aspects of this framework. This serves to explicate shared leadership-in-action, with consideration of the social context in which such leadership is occurring, as well as drawing out those distinctive features associated with these shared leadership relationships accordingly.

## 5.1 Distinguishing RCT from other relational leadership theories.

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Building on those key ontological and epistemological debates examined in Chapter 2, section 2.3.4, relating to the field of shared leadership, within the field of relational leadership, Uhl-Bien (2006), helpfully positioned two key relational perspectives, that inform the leader follower relationship. Firstly, she sets out an entity perspective, whereby the “ focus is on identifying attributes of individuals as they engage in interpersonal relationships” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 654). Secondly, a processual view of relational leadership is described as “a social construction through which certain understanding of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology (ibid). Relational leadership theory is a culmination of those perspectives and is presented as an overarching leadership framework. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, drawing on those entity-based leadership theories whereby discrete leadership variables, skills qualities etc. may be observed exclusively, was insufficient to meet these study’s objectives. Consequently, well established relational theories of this kind such as LMX theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), or charismatic theory (Kark and Shamir, 2002) etc. were rejected, in favour of this more processual, relational perspective.

One final, important point to consider concerns the usefulness and flexibility of this RCT framework in examining relational mentoring style episodes, interactions, or moments, which characterised this group leadership setting. This is as opposed to being only relevant, when exclusively applied within a dyadic, formalised, mentoring relationship arrangement. In this way, a more nuanced, detailed and varied capturing of relational mentoring in this group setting, is therefore possible to observe.

### 5.1.2 Linking RCT to followership theory.

The expanded relational view presented in RCT, also fits with the ontological requirements of the study of followership, as set out by Uhl-Bien(2014), and demonstrated by the ontological shift beyond the exclusive focus on observing an individual's behaviours, attitudes, skills etc. (See also, chapter 2, section 2.7). RCT as a relational framework is therefore fit for purpose and designed to enable leadership and followership to be observed "live", as it is dynamically occurring through key interactions, activities, and processes. Significantly, RCT also embraces a feminist position, whereby a more egalitarian outlook is emphasised, where interdependence, connection and collaboration is recognised as fundamental to growth and development. This is rather stark contrast to more conventional, notions of 'heroic', individual models of leadership that still dominate. Finally, as a woman myself and former leader within public sector, social sector organisation, this appreciation of interdependence, connection and collaboration set out by RCT speaks more directly to my leadership 'reality' more readily.

## 5.2 Accessing propositional knowing through RCT.

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The dynamic nature of action research invites on-going review and analysis of data in both a reflective and reflexive way. The Phase 1 data collection in this study was preceded by an initial literature review that considered these more pluralistic approaches to leadership, from the followers' perspective, plus other related topics. As demonstrated within the earlier discussion concerning the application of extended epistemologies, accessing these richer/enriched veins of data facilitated the identification of a range of leadership themes that were emerging: variously observed through:

- participants' experiential accounts of their shared leadership journey, coupled with my reflective accounts
- their presentational accounts of the same, both written and visual
- the visual reading/ interpretation of key events and group activities.

During my own reflective process, principally journaling, undertaken both during and after workshops and other key events, I had become increasingly aware of the strong sense of community, operating within this group; their sense of connection and commitment to their 'cause', i.e., to their work and to each other, coupled with a high degree of collaboration. Throughout all our research workshop sessions and during the strategy co-creation process that ran in parallel, a palpable sense of mutual trust and support was also being demonstrated. For instance, this was being expressed through the high quality of active listening between group members and the mutual support being provided to each other, to complete key tasks, informing the creation of the strategic vision itself. Such purposeful connection, trust and collaboration within the

group was reinforced also by at times almost therapeutic levels of expression, demonstrated by members of this group and others to the senior leadership team and board. This was being demonstrated for instance during the full staff events that informed the construction and eventual sign-off of this strategic vision. (Please refer to the Learning History, critical incident section, within the first Open Space event for instance). This is just one of the many expressions of honest challenge, vulnerability and feedback from participants being observed throughout this process.

It is due to the observation of these particular qualities, or characteristics, being frequently exhibited by the group, coupled with their infectious enthusiasm, and their espoused motivation, being effectively harnessed through this undertaking, that drew me to explore further the following: those key tenets and principles of Relational Cultural Theory; many aspects of which appeared to be reflected in this group's attitude and actions(West, 2005).

### 5.2.1 Establishing this study's fit with RCT's tenets and principles.

Before setting out the key dimensions of RCT and exploring their relevance to this study, it is important to first contextualise this framework within the scope of this study's objectives and accordingly within the wider literature, supporting the study of collective leadership and finally from a relational leadership perspective.

As a reminder the three key objectives for this study are summarized here.

**Objective 1:** Understanding more fully the nature of the relationality followers experience, in the context of sharing leadership with their leaders and working with other staff.

**Objective 2:** Understanding more fully the processual nature of shared leadership itself: how such leadership is actually operationalised, or practiced by those involved.

**Objective 3: Understanding the power dynamics informing these shared leadership**

Due to the longitudinal nature of this study, this research site has uniquely offered the potential to examine a shift, or gear change in terms of how followers and their leaders have uniquely experienced that particular 'gear shift', changing the leadership paradigm, from what might be termed an 'agentic' approach, to a more pluralistic one. Assuming that such influence, or authority has shifted in followers' favour over time, how have those staff involved in the co-creation of strategy actually experienced this shift in the context of the power relationship and dynamic they were experiencing in relation to their senior leaders? This particular organisation continues to operate what they term as an "authentic hierarchy", where conventional, functional roles and positions are nonetheless maintained.

Therefore, the application of RCT at this juncture is relevant, for a number of reasons: As will be demonstrated in due course, this framework effectively facilitates the exploration of key aspects relevant to this study. This is due to its focus on characterising and exploring relational working and associated practices, plus the conditions supporting the cultivation of effective, supportive, relationships, or otherwise. RCT also recognizes power dynamics at play.

### 5.2.2 Positioning RCT within the research stream of collective leadership.

In addition, RCT complements and supports this study's 'fit', or position, within the field of collective leadership. As explored earlier in Chapter 2, section 2.6, Ospina et al.'s study in 2020 set out an updated representation, or "map of the terrain of collective leadership", that builds on the on the previous major study in this field undertaken in 2012 by Denis et. al.(Ospina *et al.*, 2020, p. 441). For reference once again, this "map of collective approaches to leadership sets out two dimensions; namely the "locus of leadership, which captures how scholars conceptualise *where* to look for manifestations of leadership and the view of collectivity, which plots *how* scholars conceptualise the collective" (Ospina *et al.*, 2020, p. 443). Given the multifarious conceptualisations of collective leadership, this hopefully starts to address some of the challenges of "defining, measuring and documenting CL" (Ospina, 2020, p. 442).

This study occupies the first dimension, where leadership is located in the "interpersonal realm between ... leaders and followers, or co-leaders" (Ospina *et al.*, 2020, p. 445).

The social arena in which leadership emerges as a result of "complex interpersonal relationships taking place" is within a formal unit, e.g., within a "team, an organizational unit, an organization, or a larger social group" (*ibid*). RCT complements the

conceptualisation, where leadership becomes decentred from the individual leader... “shifts to relations but it is still humanly embodied” (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016 cited in: Ospina *et al.*, 2020). Leadership may be identified within those “distinct relationships and patterns of interactions among concrete social actors” (ibid).

Finally, from a relational leadership perspective, this emphasis on relational dynamics can help to shed light on what is actually happening, when followers and their leaders co-produce a strategy (Schlappa, 2021). RCT is very well accommodated within this relational frame, and its adoption of a social constructionist position. Additionally, RCT was originally developed within therapeutic settings, that actively embrace individuals’ multiple, local-historical realities and context accordingly, and out of which those conditions, skills and behaviours that support growth fostering relationships, may subsequently be fostered.

Other relational leadership theories within this collective leadership conceptualisation are similar to RCT; considering also the effects of power dynamics and positions, recognising these as both enabling, or liberating and simultaneously limiting. (See also Hosking, 2007, Van Der Haar and Hosking, 2004, cited in: Ospina *et al.*, 2020). Within relational leadership terms, collaboration as it emerges is negotiated and the motivations of actors who exercise power and influence is “moderated by the context in which these relations occur” (Ospina *et al.*, 2020 p.476)

### 5.2.3 About Relational Cultural Theory

This model of human growth and development was developed by feminist psychologists and psychiatrists (Fletcher, 2003, 2012). RCT is essentially a psychological theory of growth and development that has originated within community, therapeutic settings. It



has been adopted by Fletcher and other leadership writers, informing writing on the topic of practice-based approaches to leadership for instance.

RCT originated however in Jean Baker Miller's key/foundational text *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Miller, 1976). It has also now expanded in its application over recent decades, across a range of disciplines, including that of mentoring and counselling. Such RCT characteristics supporting the creation of a mentoring style environment, are relevant for this study. This is in view of the fact that not only was this entire shared leadership undertaking facilitated by the Director of People and Culture, other members of GSMT, specifically the Finance Director and the Direction of Partnerships also became active participants within this strategic planning undertaking.

#### 5.2.4 Aligning RCT with feminist principles and alternative theories of human development

Fletcher and Ragins (2007) position RCT within feminist theory, because of its examination of gender within personal relationships, as well as within broader society. Elements of RCT are also rooted in feminist approaches to counselling, with attention being paid to power differentials and structures; plus, a pursuit of collaboration and integration in relationships that are strengths-based and egalitarian, in their composition and outlook. Consequently, writers on RCT acknowledge that this expanded framework serves to "emphasize meaningful and deepened connections for strengthening change, development and transformation" ref.. (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 276). It also challenges conventional models of human development and by the same token conventional ideas of leadership growth and success, as being based on/ associated with the achievement of independence and autonomy (Hammer *et al.*,

2021; Fletcher, 2012). In this way it aligns with a post heroic view of leadership, which recognizes the influence and contribution of others in organisational success. The shift away from the exclusive authority and control of a given leader is implicit here.

In essence RCT is a theory of human development, **and** (my emphasis) a therapeutic modality, with the primary assumption that growth in connection occurs within relationships to the mutual benefit of both parties concerned (See also, Jordan and Hartling, 2008; Miller, 2012).

Significantly, the focus of this theory and resulting framework has now expanded “and can be applied to all human relationships, with cultural contexts being a necessary consideration in understanding these relationships” (Hammer *et al.*, 2021, p. 45). This becomes useful for understanding the experiences, motivations and actions of those staff sharing leadership, to support the creation of a strategy within **this** Housing Association, at that time.

#### 5.2.5 Expanding our shared leadership perspective(s) of these working relationships, as assessed against the key tenets of Relational Cultural Theory

(See Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002; Fletcher, 2012; West, 2005)

The aim of applying key elements of this relational framework in a targeted manner, was therefore to facilitate a more detailed and systematic exploration concerning the nature of shared leadership, as it was being experienced within this group’s working relationships. It’s application in this way offers an expanded view of the relational processes, practices and dynamics affecting shared leadership. This is in order to test, or challenge our assumptions concerning the benefits, or positives of this particular leadership approach, its potential and its limitations. This review of the key tenets of

Relational Cultural Theory within this particular organisational context is therefore appropriate for several reasons.

- What is particularly significant about this relational leadership framework, is that it really doesn't consider individual leaders. Instead, it offers a sense of 'self', positioned and operating effectively, *in-relation to* others (my emphasis). While I had been continually collating and reviewing key data supporting this whole process of co-creating strategy, such 'positioning' seemed to be continually being illustrated through the experiences being shared by this leadership group. With reference to some of the key features of this framework, the group appeared throughout to be working with a high degree of *interdependence*, and they had developed very strong, positive working relationships, having worked so intensively together.

#### 5.2.6 Creating a more nuanced understanding of the working relationships occurring within shared leadership settings.

- “ (I)ts carefully nuanced delineation of the processes, outcomes, characteristics and skills associated with relational interactions highlight the microprocesses within social interactions that have been largely ignored in the shared leadership literatures (Ilgen, 1999 cited by: Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002, p. 27).
- As we were seeking to capture the lived, felt experience of shared leadership through action research, the application at this point of RCT to support that exploration became opportune, because it celebrates the expression of key moments of “ connection and relatedness” (West, 2005, p. 101). Giving voice to, or drawing on such expressions, enables us to consider more fully the effect and impact on those directly involved in this relational leadership undertaking. “It is possible to understand what is being described

.. because we have felt it, we can name people and circumstances that offer this connected relationship and we have felt the reverse as well....In some ways this model offers the possibility of a personal mini-lab, where as a relational encounter occurs, there is an immediacy of sensory and emotional and cognitive experience- In a mutually empathic exchange..one feels heard and understood” (West, 2005, p. 105).

#### 5.2.7 Understanding more fully how shared leadership may be practiced.

- With regards to understanding more fully how shared leadership effectively works, R.C.T. provides an opportunity to therefore examine those intra and interpersonal conditions, or factors, that may facilitate, or enable those involved to effectively operate interdependently and thereby create opportunities for mutual growth (West, 2005; Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002; Lewis and Olshansky, 2016). RCT sets out a very different attitude to the cultivation of such conditions that support mutual growth, underpinned by relational leadership attitudes and practices. These are:

*Mutuality, Authenticity, Reciprocity, Empathy and Connectedness (ibid).*

These conditions are designated to be of a very different order, to those more usually associated with the ‘heroic’, individualistic schools of leadership thought (See Fletcher, 2012; Meindl, Erlich and Dukerich, 1985). In fact, according to these proponents of RCT, these growth fostering conditions have traditionally been viewed as an expression of weakness in leadership terms and therefore may even be discounted as not really characteristic of ‘good’ leadership, on the part of those exhibiting them (Fletcher, 2012). For one thing the relational attitude and approach, while respecting the need for autonomy and individuation, doesn’t necessarily favour or differentiate any one

individual's efforts over another's (Lewis and Olshansky, 2016). In this relational arena, success is predicated on the individuals' ability to effectively tolerate others and operate interdependently. Whether, how, and the extent to which this may have been achieved, or otherwise, at the research site NOW became worthy of some consideration.

#### 5.2.8 Cultivating dynamic states of growth and development through relationship.

Notably, the trajectory of this particular approach to in this case 'leadership' growth and development of 'leadership' practice, ideally leads to dynamic and energetic states and perspectives, or " five good things" mutually experienced and achieved by those involved (Miller and Stiver, 1997 cited in Fletcher, 2012 p.89). These are summarised here as: ***Zest, Empowered Action, Increased Self-Esteem, New Knowledge, and a Desire for more Connection (ibid).*** These attitudes and states too will be reviewed in due course against the Learning History itself, and other supporting research data. What is particularly interesting about fostering such ideal states and attitudes, cultivated through the growth of a relational approach, is its sheer dynamism. This is as opposed to achieving fixed, stable, or static outcomes, which are conventionally the focus of other, shared leadership studies. The implications of understanding this more fully may therefore point to where other opportunities could exist, extending the cultivation of such growth fostering states beyond this strategic planning undertaking, with others. Such desire to foster connection and relationship was certainly being reflected by those who took part in this shared undertaking.

Three illustrative examples of this kind come to mind:

- This was expressed for instance in these participants' desire and concern throughout the process to ensure that their fellow colleagues were not excluded from this process as it was occurring.
- Notably, concerning the two groups making up this particular strategic planning task force, it was evident that the 'Discoverers', who had undertaken initial research into key strategic themes had no desire whatsoever to stop providing support to the Visioneers, who had formally taken over from them at about the halfway point, to develop their work into strategic priorities with supporting priorities.
- Finally, at the end of this undertaking, all the group expressed the desire to continue to work with the Board, as part of overseeing strategy implementation in due course.

Concerning this group of Discoverers and Visioneers, who were sharing leadership responsibility to co-create strategy, the task is firstly to identify the extent to which such dynamic states were being realised/experienced by those directly involved, as well as examining the kind of influence these experiences were having on others in the organisation, in this case colleagues, senior leaders, and board.

#### 5.2.9 Attending to power dynamics in shared leadership.

"Power is attended to in R.C.T. How we operate in hierarchies of power and interactive relationships coming from these positions " (West, 2005, p. 104) . This topic remains relatively underexplored, when considering more collective, pluralistic approaches to leadership, or simply assumed to be positive in the context of these leadership relationships (Gordon, 2002; Uhl-Bien, 2014; Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020). According to Fletcher (2012), constructionist positions, which recognise leadership as a relational

construct, accordingly, do not seek to abstract leadership from the wider organisational, or societal context in which it is co-created and perceived. She asserts that a distinct challenge within the constructionist 'space' is that individuals often don't readily grasp the particular social processes, or power dynamics affecting their actions, and may even " unwittingly (be) reinforcing the very dynamic we(they) seek to interrupt (Fletcher, 2012, p. 96 See also ; Raelin, 2016).

A related point concerns the very real dangers associated with those organisational leadership cultures that are highly controlling, where a "power over" culture (prevails) and

"is itself an agent of disconnection that, left unchallenged, diminishes the relational capacities and confidence of all its members.... When the purpose of a relationship is to protect the power differential(maintain the gap between those who hold privilege and those who do not), it is unlikely that authentic responsiveness can unfold. Indeed, authentic engagement and openness to mutual influence may be viewed as dangerous practices" Jean Baker Miller Training Institute website (Miller, 2022).

This distinct nurturing, or propagation of a self-in-relation attitude, or outlook, during this undertaking therefore has distinct implications concerning how staff have interacted with, and therefore influenced and affected their senior colleagues and their board, all of whom were collaborating with them at some level, during this process of co-creating strategy. Therefore, it seems also important to also consider the effects, and potentially the limitations of cultivating such a relational approach in this leadership undertaking, from a power perspective; one that was essentially driven by the 'lower' leadership levels. What could this potentially mean for the evolution of shared

leadership practice moving forward within this organisation? This is relevant given the operating context of what remains a conventional organisational hierarchy, where positional power exists, where individual staff are still generally rewarded, and yet where leaders have chosen to widen out and share leadership responsibility. How that is experienced by those leaders is relevant, i.e., those who have had this new opportunity, to directly influence and shape organisational outcomes through strategy co-creation. Again, the implications for the senior leadership and their attitudes and ways of working, is also worthy of consideration beyond this, specific, co-operative strategic planning undertaking. These themes will be examined in greater depth in chapters 6 and 7.

#### 5.2.9.1 Power dynamics within the context of social change.

A related power issue being recognised within this RCT framework concerns the recognition of the socio-cultural context, and the notion of individuals working together to achieve social change. This is important when the common purpose of this group and their senior colleagues, working within this particular social housing association context is considered (Lewis and Olshansky, 2016). The focus shifts to power with, as opposed to power over in relationships, in order to pursue positive social outcomes, while simultaneously acknowledging the unique, individual operating context and conditions affecting proceedings.

The intention therefore of applying this RCT framework is, to expand awareness and understanding of the nature of the shared leadership relationship, as it was occurring within this organisational context, and as assessed against the framework criteria. This also creates the opportunity to explore these other related issues of power and key



leadership practices and how these were being specifically applied here. Finally, it provides an opportunity to describe what else may, or may not have been occurring, in relation to the sharing of leadership within this given, organisational setting.

### 5.3 Applying RCT within this organisational context.

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I will now start to explore how key tenets of Relational Cultural Theory, were being applied within this collaborative leadership undertaking. RCT has been applied to mentoring settings, to develop our understanding of the nature of such relationships. Importantly, attention will therefore be paid to certain RCT aspects that inform a relational mentoring dynamic, or approach, as it applies here. Firstly, this is because both formal and informal aspects of a mentoring approach were already in evidence at this research site, informing this strategy undertaking. This is with reference to the fact that this collaborative undertaking was organised, coordinated, and supported throughout, by members of the Group Senior Management Team, as well as incorporating at key points the formal contribution of the non-executive board, in relation to reviewing the formal outputs of this process. In this way the involvement at some level of such senior personnel would be akin to a traditional mentoring perspective, whereby the more experienced, more knowledgeable leader typically supports the less experienced protégé(s) in their career development (Ragins, 2005). Notably a mentoring dynamic and approach was also visible in the working relationship of the participating “Vioneers” and “Discoverers”, at the time, given for instance how particular organisational knowledge and expertise, associated with each participants’ role, was being mutually shared within the group to inform the strategy itself.

### 5.3.1 What makes this relational mentoring approach different?

What differentiates this from a traditional mentoring approach is precisely its co-directional, or two-way relational approach that, disturbs the dynamic of the conventional mentoring relationship considerably. Relational mentoring is defined as “an interdependent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning and development within the career context”(Ragins, 2005, p. 10). This was being demonstrated in terms of how such mutual growth was being experienced and expressed by those individuals involved at the time; by their deep learning with and from each other about the strategic topics under consideration throughout the process, and how they learned, both from each other’s expertise, and more broadly in a relational way. Additionally, this interdependent relationship contributed, they maintained, to their overall growth as leaders, enabling them to operate increasingly in “complex states of interdependence and connection with others” , during and beyond this undertaking (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 375).

*Work practices have evolved. Where you work on the whole in isolation, now it is about group/team working, sharing your practice within your team, joint problem solving"*  
(Discoverer 4: Property Services Manager)

*" A big part of (continuing to work in this way) has been giving and receiving feedback"(Discoverer 3: Welfare Benefits Officer)*

*' I continue to ask for input from everyone and reinforce this with positive feedback"*

*(Visioneer 12: Community Investment Officer)*

*"I challenge externally all the time to influence a change" Discoverer 6: Asset Manager)*

*" I am able to think outside the box... and have been given some freedom to make decisions, which can ..filter into changing work practices" (Visioneer 10: Customer Services Assistant)*

*"Team meetings are held differently. Instead of being talked to and told what was going to happen etc., information is shared, and questions/opinions are asked, the quest to find an outcome... both understood by all but that works" (Discoverer 4: Property Services Manager.)*

### 5.3.2 Shifting power dynamics in RCT relational mentoring.

Reflecting once more on the issue of power in such relational interactions, as opposed to more, conventional, hierarchical relationships, where a given mentor, or leader would be perceived typically, as being the dominant source of expertise, or influence; and where traditionally the “protégé”, would be regarded as somewhat lacking in such skills, or capacity (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007). This shifts within the relational arena to that of mutual influence, i.e., a “power with” stance, as opposed to “power over” (Follett, 1924; Miller, 1976). This is illustrated by this group’s existing knowledge base of their given service area and operating context, coupled with their extensive research activities into

the same, which all served to provide a significant contribution to the final five-year strategy. I noted in my reflections that this point was even specifically commented upon by the Chairman during the presentation of the strategic vision to the Non-Executive Board; where he not only praised the high quality of the work being presented, but also on the limitations of the non-executive board to have been able to produce a strategy that was commensurate in its quality.

*“The praise back from the board and the questions showing that they were both engaged and interested in the process was great and it gave validation to us all”*

(Visioneer 11: Group Lead PR and Comms)

#### 5.4 RCT relational mentoring framework applied to this organisational context.

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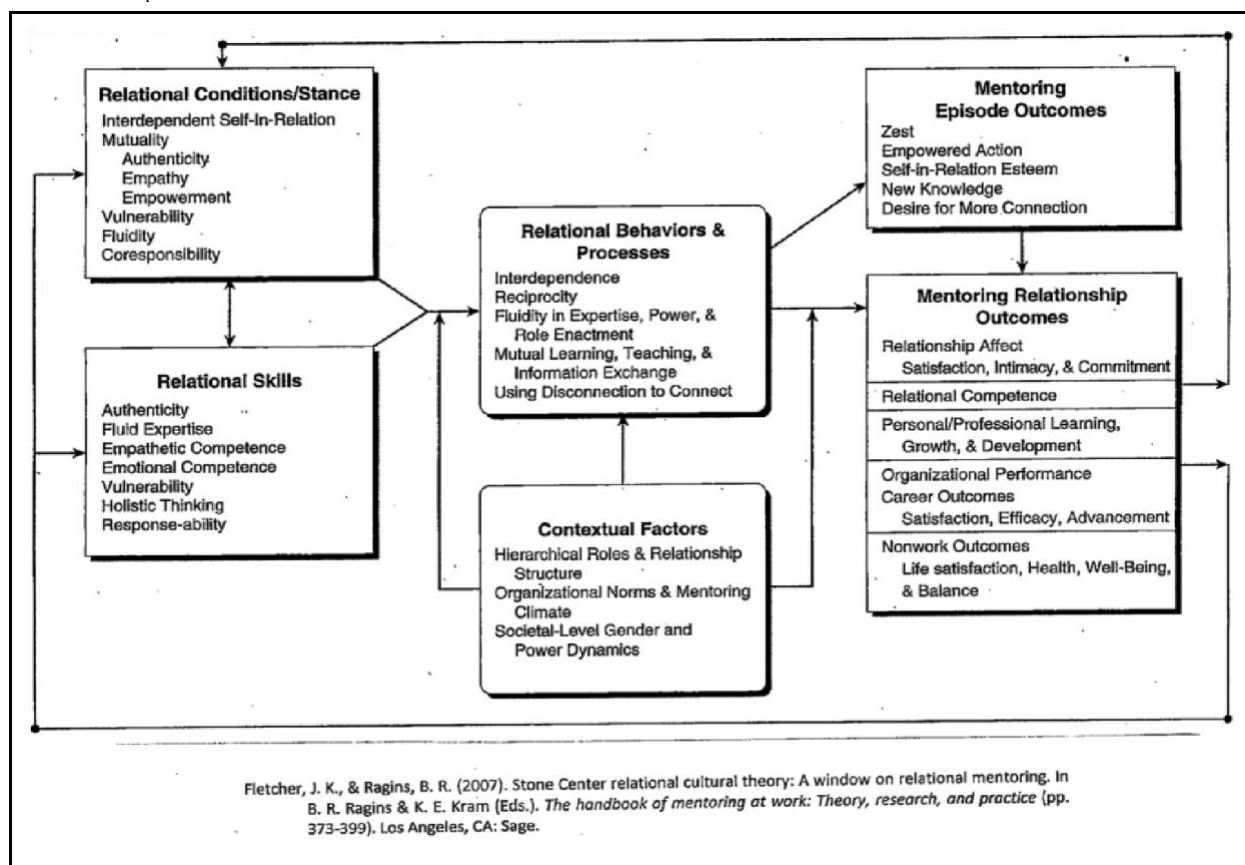
RCT as a framework seeks, through the acknowledgement of key criteria, namely conditions, skills and resulting states, to differentiate accordingly between such high quality and therefore ***mutually growth fostering relational interactions*** (my emphasis) and those which are not. These key criteria may be noted within the following table 5.4.

I will now explore these and other facets of this framework in greater depth, as they apply to this research site, in line with this study’s key objectives.

With reference to the RCT relational mentoring framework as originally set out by Fletcher and Ragins (2007), it is notable that this framework is rather dynamic and

reciprocal in nature; whereby key elements feed into each other and are in turn influenced and developed accordingly. Therefore, by examining key facets of this framework in some detail, further light may be shed on the specific ways in which leadership was being shared, or otherwise, through consideration of the role, or influence of such relational factors. In other words, the ‘what’ of shared leadership will start to be demonstrated, through this relational lens and illustrated through specific illustrations of its occurrence. This is coupled with the ‘how’, i.e., namely the way such instances or shared leadership “episodes” are occurring.

*Table 4 Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory*



#### 5.4.1 Setting out the conditions of RCT supporting interdependence and a self-in-relation outlook.

RCT fundamentally challenges those traditional views and goals of Western models of growth and development, which are also applicable to certain schools of leadership thinking; namely where growth and success is predicated entirely on individuation and separation, the myth of self-reliance, or independence from others, which are applicable within charismatic schools of leadership thinking for example (Miller, 1976; Miller, 1984; Miller and Stiver, 1997; Surrey, Services and Studies, 1985). This really doesn't do justice to the "fluid, two-directional flow of mutual influence that characterises interactions" (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 380).

It is also argued by other writers who offer a psychological perspective on relational identity, that the "extent to which one accepts and enacts one's self-in-relation.... (directly affects a person's) "motivation to engage in such relational interactions" (ibid). Related to this point, some of contextual factors will be set out now, specifically, the influence of the prevailing organisational culture, in facilitating the acceptance, or otherwise, of staff engagement, relationally speaking, at this organisation and how that influenced people's motivation, or desire, to join this strategic planning work. In particular, it is the prevailing cultural approach to the adoption of shared leadership responsibility that informs such a self-in-relation "stance", or attitude and all that it entails, as recorded within the learning history. This also accords with conventional shared leadership studies, where the focus is on examining key antecedents that inform shared leadership occurrences (see Pearce and Sims, 2000b; Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012; Pearce and Manz, 2005)

#### 5.4.2 Facilitating a more holistic view of the shared leadership experience.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this relational mentoring framework, while providing the opportunity to consider prevailing organisational factors, influencing leadership relationships; including structure, organisational climate etc., goes even further. Uniquely, it also provides the opportunity to increase understanding of what, how, when, and where shared leadership may be occurring. This is made possible through the observation of the relational attitudes, behaviours and processes that are being dynamically played out by those involved. Additionally, in contrast to other, conventional shared leadership studies, RCT pays considerable attention to power dynamics, which is significant, when considering how such dynamics have been played out, between Discoverers and Visioneers and between them and their 'superiors' during this strategy creation.

#### 5.5 Conclusion.

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Having justified the proposed use of this rich, relational leadership framework in this chapter, we turn next to the examination of key RCT dimensions, and their application to the key shared leadership experiences informing this collaborative, strategic undertaking, beginning with an examination of relational conditions, or states, and their impact on these working relationships.

## CHAPTER 6 EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONAL CONDITIONS SUPPORTING SHARED LEADERSHIP.

### Introduction

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This chapter predominantly focuses on a more in-depth exploration of shared leadership-in-action, with particular emphasis on the relational perspectives and dynamics at play. This represents a culmination of the earlier phases of action research inquiry set out in Chapter 4, specifically the identification and analysis of those key experiences, plus the presentational consideration of the same, that now feed into this examination.

In summary this chapter will embrace the following dimensions of Relational Cultural Theory, in order to offer a more nuanced, dynamic reading of these shared leadership experiences, which in due course will inform the findings of this thesis. These dimensions are as follows:

- Relational conditions/states, with a particular emphasis on the cultivation of the state of Interdependent Self-In-Relation, informed by mutuality and with consideration of the state of vulnerability, as it informs these leadership relationships.
- Consideration of key relational skills and competencies, as these relate to and mutually reinforce those relational conditions, or states. In particular, the relational skills emotional competence and vulnerability will be reviewed. The benefits and the drawbacks of applying these skills in practice will therefore be reviewed.
- Other relational skills of response-ability and fluidity of expertise will also be examined, to illustrate key relational episodes, where leadership influence was being shared and the impact of that, in terms of informing power dynamics occurring between different



leadership groups. Also, in practical terms, fluidity of expertise played an important role in support of organisational learning, which will be considered here.

- Reciprocity and in turn mutuality will also be positioned as significant relational behaviours, that inform key relational practices and processes during this strategic planning and at the organisational level.
- Thereafter, the influence of power dynamics more widely will be considered in relation to this shared leadership undertaking. In particular, the limits, or boundaries affecting how leadership may be shared more widely beyond this group will be examined.

#### 6.1 Operating from a self-in-relation position.

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RCT “posits” that when “individuals *are operating from a self-in-relation stance*”, this facilitates a process, or a progression whereby “mutual authenticity” may start to be experienced (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007;p.383). One’s authentic self may therefore be brought to the relationship, where all involved trust, to express themselves openly and honestly, expressing their true feelings. Such “growth-in-connection episodes, or moments, thereby cultivate a sense of “mutual empathy”; the sense of appropriating, if not fully knowing what the other person is experiencing and communicating that with them. “Mutual empowerment” ensues, as “each person is ..influenced or affected by the other, for the purpose of creating something new” (ibid) (See also Jordon, 1986; Jordan, 1991).

A sense of vulnerability also informs such relational episodes and those involved within the relationship “*approach the interaction expecting to grow from it and feel a*

***responsibility to contribute to the growth of the other***". This process of growth-in-connection is therefore "***characterised by fluidity and co-responsibility***" (ibid).

What does this self-in-relation positioning and perspective mean for those followers who actively participated in this collaborative undertaking? To appreciate more fully the extent to which these key RCT tenets and principles may shed light on the nature of this group's relational experiences, processes and activities and practices, it is worthwhile revisiting some of their earliest reflections, relating to their initial motivation for this work.

When this group put themselves forward, they viewed it as a unique opportunity to be heard, to be listened to, for their views and their expertise; in effect to have *a voice*. In RCT terms, by virtue of their intention to ***express themselves openly and honestly with others on this agenda***, (my emphasis), in other words to be authentic, their intention was therefore that of adopting a state of mutual authenticity.

*"I feel it's like we've been given the opportunity to lead the way and to give some ideas and input." (Participant 3, Discoverer, Welfare Benefits Officer)*

*"I wanted to have a say in the future of the organisation, have a say in my destiny and if I got the opportunity to put my ideas forward I wanted to do that". (Participant 4, Discoverer, Property Services Manager)*

*“None of us knew what these roles meant, but we were still willing to give it a go regardless... that goes back to the fact that we have trust in what we do”. (Participant 12, Visioneer, Community Investment Officer)*

*“And I always think it’s a really good opportunity to work with people across the organisation; being able to share those experiences and other people’s roles and how they see things”. (Participant 10, Visioneer, Community Services Assistant).*

## 6.2 Seeking out the opportunities for growth fostering interactions.

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This last quote too also starts to point to a desire for **mutual empathy**, as experienced by the group, whereby those involved would actively seek out others’ perspectives and experiences. I referred to this, during my written reflections back to the group at the time, informing the “Two Column Reflection process, as a *“feeling of connection (that) starts to address feelings of isolation and to increase understanding about what others do in the organisation”* (Workshop 2 reflections). Notably, this experience of working in a mutually authentic and empathic manner, characterised by trust and openness with peers was not wholly unfamiliar to the group. They had previous, albeit more limited experiences, of this way of working.

*“.. the year before last (2015) was our first experience of this sort of collaborative working. They brought staff together from different departments together... we had to go with a project to either save money, improve service, with no budget and present it*

*at the staff awards from our team. A bit like this Discovery work.. the forbearer of it, encouraging people to work together on something that isn't your usual daily task".*

*(Participant 12, Visioneer, Community Investment Officer)*

*"So, it's sort of getting people to see other people's point of view. Well, this may be important to Finance but it's not so important to People's services and so working through that. That was part of the collaborative working... We thought it was a fresh approach, way of doing things and it would influence how change would work since... It was about the dynamics of the groups, simple as that really". (Participant 2, Discoverer, Finance Team Manager)*

#### 6.2.1 Seeking greater connection with colleagues.

This motivation to actively seek out opportunities for connection with others, in order to understand more about their work, and how it contributed to the organisation overall, should not be underestimated. As I had previously observed with the group, it represents a way of overcoming a sense of isolation, or detachment, that some people were experiencing keenly in their role.

*"I sometimes feel that we can work in isolation, where .. we're not based here, we're in satellite offices. So, it's been nice to know what everyone else does and meet other people from the organisation as well." (Participant 1, Discoverer, People Services Assistant)*

*I didn't really know a massive amount about what was going on with the structure of the organization. Out of the loop it feels quite frequently. .. that's one of the reasons I chose to put myself forward for the Discovery work. (Participant 3, Welfare Benefits Officer)*

*"One of the reasons I wanted to get involved was I work part-time. A lot of people know even know I work here". (Participant 1, Discoverer, People Services Assistant)*

Interestingly, this motivation to seek connection is not emphasised in the writing on RCT, or within its application in a relational mentoring context. However, it provides a logical justification on the part of those, who were seeking to engage in such growth-in-connection opportunities of this kind.

#### 6.2.2 Embracing the opportunity for mutual empowerment.

When the notion of mutual empowerment, "influencing and being influenced for the purpose of creating something new" is subsequently considered within the trajectory of the RCT process, this is being clearly being embraced by the group, from the inception of this collaborative undertaking (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 383).

(On the topic of being involved in this work) Workshop 2.

*"I honestly think that if you have lots of people involved you get more buy-in, everybody feels like they are pulling in the same direction" (Participant 11, Visioneer, Group Lead PR and Comms).*

*"It was nice to be involved and to have a say in what those outcomes (strategic themes) will be". (Participant 3, Discoverer, Welfare Benefits Officer)*

An analogy is made to the democratic process, which also raises an important and related leadership dimension inherent in RCT; of being able to exert influence, which in this case meant pro-actively influence organisational direction and activities with others.

*"I'd rather be on the inside looking out than the outside looking in, so as far as I'm concerned if you don't get involved, if you don't put yourself forward, .... If you don't vote, how can you complain when your taxes go up. That's really important, I think you have to be really proactive". (Participant 6, Discoverer, Asset Manager)*

*"My motivation to become a Visioneer is to understand the organization more, to be involved in the direction its heading". (Participant 8, Visioneer, Group Co-ordinator ICT).*

### 6.2.3 Acknowledgement of the condition of vulnerability with RCT, its potential merits and drawbacks.

The state of vulnerability that characterises RCT and relational mentoring episodes, also informs some participant's experiences of these collaborative events and activities.

*"It still feels very new to me. I'm in the unknown bit really, still finding my feet with it.."*

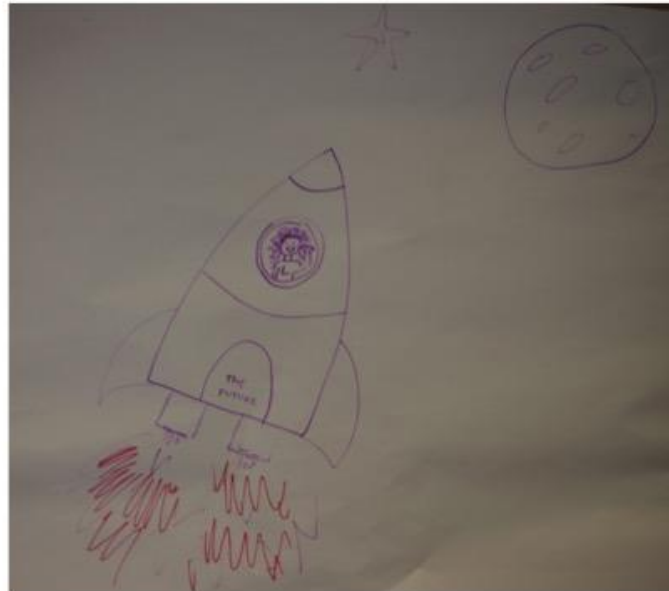
*(Participant 3, Discoverer, Welfare Benefits Officer)*

*"Confusion (is how I feel) overwhelmed still". (Participant 10, Visioneer, Community Services Assistant)*

Some members of this planning group depict their lack of certainty about the outcome of this whole process, variously through a visual metaphor of a rocket travelling into space, and through the visual representation/metaphor of walking down an unknown path, ***"into the valley of the unknown"***.

Figure 7 Travelling into the Unknown

## TRAVELLING INTO THE UNKNOWN



3

Such metaphors served to give a sense of the unknown nature of the journey they were embarking on.

*"None of us really know what the outcome's going to be, what we are actually going to be doing as a Visioneer, or as Discoverer. ... We don't know where we are going but we know that there will be a result at the end of it". (Participant2, Discoverer, Finance Team Manager)*

Therefore, here, and in other relational episodes, a certain degree of acceptance is required, concerning the lack of predictability, or certainty, associated with this type of work. Additionally, this necessitates a degree of trust in such relational encounters and



processes, which is inherent in RCT. Notably, this lack of clarity and sense of confusion around the process also was experienced as quite liberating and even creative at times, enabling those involved to exert their influence on the strategy. With reference to the initial strategic planning “Open Space” event:

*“The (SLT) were very specific about the fact that (they) didn’t want to tell people what it was”*

*The positive side of that eventually was that we got to set the agenda for the day... and here you could be really specific”. (Learning History: Open Space Event) (Participant 12, Visioneer, Community Investment Officer).*

This last quote highlights the potential value of experiencing such vulnerability, within these relational encounters, insofar as it facilitates a degree of openness to new ideas, or perspectives, as well as honesty and potential creativity, through experimentation, with others. In RCT terms, the experience of vulnerability becomes an accepted part of growth, learning and development. It is also assumed that such vulnerability is part of the human condition and that those involved in these relational encounters will not only grow themselves but endeavour to support the growth of others (Fletcher, 2012)

#### 6.2.4 Observing the potential drawbacks of the experience of vulnerability.

This is also not to assert that, as this group experienced vulnerability, the experience was always a welcome, or pleasant one. With reference to the first, Open Space event, where the full staff group started to devise and explore the main high-level strategic topics, a palpable sense of confusion and discomfort was felt.

At the outset:

*“we went over to fill up the blank sheets of paper and we thought: “What’s going on??”  
That was scary.”*

*(Participant 4, Discoverer, Property Services Manager)*

*“(We experienced) confusion because no-one knew what was happening beforehand and even on the day... and sometimes in the middle of the day”.*

*(Participant 3, Discoverer, Welfare Benefits Officer)*

The experience of vulnerability will be expanded on later on in this chapter. This is with particular reference to the relational skill and practice of fluidity of expertise, and how that was informing the senior leadership experience at key points during this collective undertaking.

### 6.3 Exploring relevant relational skills and competencies that informed this work.

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*Table 4 Relational Skills and Competencies*

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Competency Definition</b>
<b>Authenticity:</b>	Ability to access and express one's own thoughts and feelings
<b>Fluid Expertise:</b>	Ability to move easily from expert to nonexpert role
<b>Empathic Competence:</b>	Ability to understand other's experience and perspectives
<b>Vulnerability:</b>	Ability to admit "not knowing," to seek help and expertise with no loss of self-esteem
<b>Holistic Thinking:</b>	A synthesis of thinking, feeling, and acting
<b>Response-ability:</b>	Ability to hold onto one's own perspective while at the same time fully engaging with another's to allow mutual influence.

(Fletcher, 1998)

## Relational Skills and Competencies

Moving on now to examine those relational skills, considered to be pivotal to the cultivation of those self-in-relation conditions, or perspectives, and vice versa, through mutual reinforcement. These are positioned as competencies that may evolve through relational practice. With reference initially to the idea of emotional competence, it seems that such an “ability to understand, interpret and use emotional data” becomes very useful within this working environment, which may be characterised at times as having been rather unpredictable and emotionally charged, on the part of those involved (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 384). Being able to ‘hold one’s own’, emotionally speaking, through self-awareness of one’s own emotions and feelings, while seeking to consider and understand others’ experiences and perspectives is therefore not an easy ‘ask’.

As explored earlier in chapter 4, this is particularly true of those critical instances, during the strategy building process, where individuals were being exposed to others’, at times quite negative and emotionally charged accounts of key organisational issues. Such an emotional skill, or capability, also complements another important, relational skill being demonstrated by participants; namely that of vulnerability.

### 6.3.1 Cultivating the skill of vulnerability at this housing association.

Notably, such an ability to admit to “not knowing, to seek help and expertise with no loss of self-esteem”, does not regularly feature in many job descriptions for leaders, or on leadership competency frameworks, relational, shared or otherwise (Fletcher, 1998:

cited in: Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 384). Yet from an RCT perspective, when applied to this organisational arena, the cultivation of such a skill proved to be quite powerful. During this collaborative strategic planning process, it enabled staff to openly share the key issues they felt critically needed to be addressed within the strategy, e.g. managing tenant's complaints etc.

*" .. there was board members there...senior members... there was the CEO... they had enough trust and faith in (us) that they could say whatever they wanted to say in that room and it wouldn't potentially have a negative impact on your role, or whatever in the company"*

(On the experience of sharing key issues and challenges during the Open Space Event, Participant 12, Visioneer Community Investment Officer).

Significantly, the supporting culture that facilitated such open, honest expression had been evolving over a period of at least 5 years, according to the CEX.

*"We have a culture of adult-to-adult discussions and relationships whereby each individual can say things that they need to say, in a very safe place without fear of any comeback".*

Interview with CEX November 2016: pilot study.

The adoption of vulnerability in this context notably also facilitates the ability to be open to the knowledge, perspectives, and expertise of others, regardless of their role.

*“And I always think it’s a really good opportunity to work with people across the organization; being able to share those experiences and other people’s roles and how they see things”* (Participant 10, Visioneer, Customer Services Assistant).

Interestingly, the cultivation of the skill of vulnerability was also advocated by the Chief Executive herself. During a separate interview during this strategic planning process, she acknowledged the fact that participants had been directly experiencing confusion, and uncertainty, as part of this strategic planning process, referring to it as a more authentic reflection of the ‘reality’ of being involved in such a leadership undertaking, where there is no existing blueprint for strategy. Another potential value of demonstrating such vulnerability within this planning process, relates to individuals’ ability to fully express what they deemed to be the potential, “negative effects of (particular) issues and the impact they felt such issues were having for them in their role, for the organisation and for customers and partners”. (Researcher observation, Learning History: On the Call to Contribute to Strategy).

A key benefit of this was that such issues were not only being identified and openly shared, but also explored collectively with senior leaders and the board.

### 6.3.2 Exploring the RCT skill of (co)-response-ability within this planning process.

The (7 Stages of Effective Relationship), or 7 Cs, relational leadership process, utilised to support decision-making at this organisation and within this planning process, itself facilitates this important relational skill to be enacted. The skill of response-ability is characterised as one that requires “ the ability to hold one’s own perspective while at the same time fully engaging with another’s, in order to allow mutual influence” (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 384). Deployment of such a skill has distinct parallels in the coaching and mentoring arenas, whereby overt influencing, or directing the conversation is curtailed, to enable a fuller, mutual, expression of key issues, and therefore facilitate progress. In addition to being able to fully and “authentically” express different viewpoints, without fear of curtailment, which itself enables a broader, or fuller range of views to be shared, for those involved, this also contributes to focused intent, to support decision-making. This accords with the experiences of those involved in this shared leadership undertaking. The application of this skill generated feelings of confidence, for some, within this new leadership role.

*“Addressing things with people ...talk(ing) in an open and honest manner, because that’s what’s expected of you in a peer-based system. So for me it helped to break down some of those mental walls you put up yourself”. (Vioneer, Participant 10 Customer Services Assistant).*

*“I’m ok being challenged... it’s not as scary as you might think. It’s always done in a very positive way to focus your thinking, focus where you need to be”* (Participant 4, Discoverer, Property Services Manager).

#### 6.3.3 Exploring the skill of fluid expertise, informing shared leadership influence and the impact of that on shifting power dynamics.

The relational skill of fluid expertise is recognised within RCT as “ the ability to move easily from an expert to non-expert role, being able to acknowledge help and give credit to others (without losing) one’s own self-esteem” (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 384)

Throughout the strategy building process and even arguably prior to it, through earlier collective planning events such as Mission Possible (ref. Learning History), this relational skill of fluid expertise was being manifested in very interesting ways. For example, such fluidity of expertise was actively being demonstrated at the research site, in the form of a reversal of roles, which in turn affected conventional power, or authority positions, from the outset. The impact of this power shift, at an organisational level, will be explored more fully later on in this chapter, where the limits of this shared leadership influence will be delineated.

#### 6.3.4 Observing the impact of fluidity of expertise on these followers in relation to their leaders.

A distinct “power with” as opposed to “power over” attitude and approach was also informing these full staff events, as well as at other key points on the planning journey in terms of staff sharing leadership influence, without fear of reprisal, or curtailment (Follett, 1926).



*“Trust was a big thing... even though there was board members there, senior managers there, the was the CEO there, they had enough trust and faith (in staff) that they could say whatever they wanted to say in that room, and it wouldn’t potentially have a negative impact on your role... in the company”. (Participant 7, Group Co-ordinator ICT).*

This facility or ‘fluidity in expertise’ that was being enacted by those who would eventually become the Discoverers and the Visioneers was significant, as depicted through this shift from the role of expert professional to that of strategy lead planners. It presupposes a significant degree of trust in others, i.e., senior leaders and board, who are typically more powerful than yourself; to therefore share your views openly and honestly, without fear of judgement, or criticism. By implication also, those ‘superiors’, engaged in listening to feedback, during these initial, full staff planning sessions, were at some level receiving a degree of judgement or criticism, about certain aspects of organisational activities that staff felt had to be addressed, improved etc. and for which they, senior leaders, and the Board, were ultimately responsible. This cannot have been an altogether palatable experience, to actively support others, who may be criticising the organisation, while maintaining one’s “self-esteem” throughout. In RCT terms, it would require of these senior leaders and board members to call on their relational capacities of empathy and emotional competence, response-ability and even vulnerability, in order to avoid significant “dis-connection”, from these staff during these discussions, in the manner described by Fletcher and Ragins (2007).

Many episodes demonstrate fluidity of expertise whereby “role enactment”, i.e., where a new role, or in this case a role reversal occurred, throughout this planning process.

For instance, key handover points in the strategy's evolution were interesting in this respect. Firstly, this occurred between peer staff groups, i.e., Discoverers conducting a handover to Visioneers and the full Discoverer/Visioneer group handing over the completed strategic vision to the board.

The first key handover occurred when Discoverers presented their in-depth research findings, supporting strategic direction and intent to their peers (Visioneers). They, in turn, would subsequently build on this research and go on to create high-level strategic statements and accompanying actions for the five-year period.

In accordance with RCT principles, there appeared to be no obvious loss of self-esteem, nor any overt seeking to control proceedings in any way, exhibited through this move, from one group's expertise to another's. Instead, there was a distinct and quite powerful expression of mutual connection and support for each other between these two working groups, exhibited through this relational episode.

*"They did beautiful presentations for us". (Visioneer speaking about Discovery presentations) ... we didn't know that they were going to do presentations for us, so that was really good. How it worked is their enthusiasm flowed off and then we (Visioneers) weren't scared any more. And we wanted it to work, not to let them down but there was pride as well. Really proud of what they had done". (Visioneer 10: Customer Services Assistant).*

*(Discoverer perspective) "It was nice being on the other side of it and seeing how keen they were... You could feel it. You could feel that everyone in that room, they wanted us to do well, and they wanted to hear what we had to say. It was a nice thing to have*

*because we were not all nervous and everyone had their own presentation to give.”*  
*(Discover 2: Finance Team Manager).*

#### 6.3.5 Observing the potential for more negative effects of shared influence.

Interestingly, during off-line conversations which I reflected on later, a distinct sense of pressure was also being experienced on the part of the Visioneers, who were taking over. They felt that the high standard of work that was shared with them by their peers, meant that the onus was now on them to maintain that high standard. This points to a potential shadow side of such growth-in-connection experiences; whereby such collaborative endeavours can create, due to their mutually reinforcing nature, a degree of self-generated pressure or stress, within the team, not to let others down, during such proceedings. Barker in his longitudinal study on self-managed teams operating within a hierarchical setting, identifies similar pressures that manifested within teams, who were involved in wholly devolved decision-making, with often toxic results, including punitive impacts for those colleagues, who didn't engage, or collaborate fully with their peers (Barker, 1993). While this certainly does not reflect the situation at this organisation, it is important to also acknowledge these less welcome experiences in this dynamic collaboration, and to consider their impact accordingly.

#### 6.4 Fluidity of expertise informing organisational learning.

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Such behavioural manifestations of “fluidity of expertise”, demonstrated in these key events, also serves another organisation purpose; namely, informing the relational processes “mutual learning, teaching and information exchange”, that was being exhibited throughout this whole endeavour (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007). This relational process was not exclusively restricted to this setting and had hitherto manifested in everyday working relationships, and through such collaborative events the Functional Reviews, that had become a regular feature of service planning within service-level teams.

On the ethos that underpinned this relational process at this organisation.

*“It (is) also about Adult-to-Adult conversations and ... you could challenge across the organization up and down.*

*It’s all about not putting your feet in but thinking about how you are going to speak to that person about a point that you don’t agree on but put it in such a way that they’d understand and why you’re thinking the way you’re thinking and vice versa”.*

**(Visioneer, Participant 6: Asset Manager).**

*“You feel like you’re willing to give things out because you know that people are on the same page. You’re not going to be judged on how you’re asking things...we’ve all been in circles like this with other people and being able to go back and forth... and having that confidence to go back and give your answer in an open and honest forum”.*

**(Discoverer, Participant 4: Property Services Manager)**

Before turning now to examine the initial handover of the strategy to the board, it is worth ‘fast forwarding’ briefly, to outline another episode here, with reference to the relational processes supporting mutual learning, teaching, and information exchange. Specifically, this is where the non-executive board subsequently conducted a thorough review of the strategic plan itself, with the direct input and support of the Visioneers and Discoverers. The unconventional process of these parties jointly reviewing the strategy collaboratively, provided yet another opportunity for further debate on key aspects of the strategy, in other words another opportunity for realising mutual learning, teaching, and information exchange. Notably, members of the group also experienced this as an equitable exchange of views.

*“We were working at the same level, both getting stuck on the same bits. I thought that was very powerful really”. (Participant 12, Visioneer, Community Investment Officer).*

#### 6.4.1 Fluidity of expertise enabling the expression of follower voice within this endeavour.

In the learning history, the detailed process is set out concerning how the strategic vision is initially shared with the Non-Executive Board. What is immediately noticeable about this first launch and the subsequent, strategy review event with the board, is the extent to which the views and perspectives of the Discoverers and Visioneers are embraced, enabling them to fully share and explore each strategic topic in turn, with their non-executive counterparts.

At the strategy launch event to the board, The Director of Culture, who had orchestrated and facilitated the strategic planning process, with the support of an external Organisational Development consultant, took great pains to effectively support the detailed drawing out of key points of strategy, through her listening, reflection, and careful questioning. The board in turn asked follow-up questions, drawing out key points.

*It was a completely different, alien experience to present in the way we did but it had so much more impact because of the way it was delivered... The Director of Culture's approach helped us to relax and it really teased out more (information)" (Visioneer 10: Customer Services Assistant).*

Once again, such episodes support this relational idea of "Fluidity of Expertise", demonstrated in this reversal of roles and expertise and therefore also a shift in power dynamics, in favour of active and full recognition of the Discoverers' and Visioneers' voice and contributions. In many respects this was similar to the previous handover, whereby this relational episode was being experienced by both 'sides' as a "growth fostering interaction", whereby relational skills and relational attitudes and outlook are being expressed, particularly by the Board and the GSMT, to support this work.

*"The support back from the Board and the questions, showed they were both engaged and invested in the process" ( Discoverer, Participant 3, Welfare Benefits Officer).*

The Discoverers and Visioneers were feeling genuinely empowered and energised by this experience, which is captured through their reactions immediately after the strategy was launched to the board and which is usual in such relational encounters (ibid).

Freefall writing feedback.

*“The fact that the board were so happy with what we presented only made me happier that I’d embarked on the process... I am so happy that they picked up on the passion and drive that we all felt during this project”* (Visioneer 12: Community Investment Officer)

*“Board members very engaged and really listened and supported us”*

(Discoverer: Asset Manager).

*“An engagement where a board are genuinely interested in staffs’ views for the future direction of the business”* (Visioneer: Group Co-Ordinator ICT)

Also at that moment, this sense of (co) response-ability and connection was being extended between the Discoverers and the Visioneers and between them and their non-executive board.

*“Connecting with some board members afterward allowed the process to deepen, felt more natural and any points missed were communicated and/or clarified.”*

*(Participant 12, Visioneer, Community Investment Officer)*

*“Interesting to see so many links and common themes... between the groups”*

*(Participant 11, Visioneer, Group Lead PR and Comms)*

*"I wanted the interview to go on longer, as I felt that there was a lot more information I wanted to put across and was very conscious that (my colleague) wasn't here, so I wanted to do her justice too". (Participant 10, Visioneer, Customer Services Assistant).*

## 6.5 The relational leadership practice and process of reciprocity-in-action.

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Turning now to examine relational leadership practices and processes, within this organisational context, significant evidence was being presented to support the presence and consistent application of reciprocity. This relational practice was underpinned by a leadership framework that had been developed and informed working relationships at this Housing Association. As a reminder, this was known as "The 7 Stages of Effective Relationship" (Reference The Learning History: Tools for Change: Featuring the 7 stages of effective relationship). The vast majority of staff at all organisational levels and non-executive board members had been trained to actively manage and reconcile, what may at times be distinctly diverse views, perspectives, and positions. This approach was in evidence throughout the strategy planning process, as it evolved.

### **What makes reciprocity a relational practice?**

This leadership model, developed for this organisation, informs the process of dialogue, discussion and negotiation supporting decision-making. Such an approach to negotiation and reconciliation of diverse views, is more akin to that advocated by Follett, in her paper on constructive conflict (1926). Firstly, the act of disagreeing and



presenting different positions is not value laden. Rather the act of conflict is regarded as neither good, nor bad. This goal of this type of interaction is “integration” (1926, p.31), which is informed by different sides presenting their intentions and positions fully, being creative and inventive in their proposal for resolution, which simultaneously involves on-going re-evaluation of their ‘wants’.

This is particularly relevant within the operating context of what remains a conventional organisational hierarchy, where positional power exists and yet where senior leaders have chosen to widen out and share leadership responsibility. How that was being experienced by this group of Discoverers and Visioneers becomes relevant, specifically in terms of how they sought to directly influence and shape organisational outcomes through strategy development.

#### 6.5.1 Reciprocity demonstrated as both high-level process and practice.

Linked to the 7 Cs relational framework that was informing the relational practice of reciprocity, other instances were in evidence, where these staff and others were operating in a reciprocal manner during this undertaking: Starting with the Open Space event, where intense debates were being held, to establish the initial strategic themes. Groups of staff chose to engage in dialogue and discussion around their preferred area of interest, to initially build on, clarify, or introduce new strategic themes and to set out the relevant issues associated with these, during the morning session. Thereafter, all staff self-selected to join the themed discussion of their choosing, attended by the Group Senior Management Team and the Non-Executive Board, where these topics were being explored in greater depth.

*"I really wanted to talk about this specific thing and you were joined by people who were interested in that. You could talk it through properly, instead of trying to shoehorn it in..."*

(Visioneer 12: Community Investment Officer)

*"And the choice of being able to go from one room, go "Mmmm, that's not right for me" and then go to another one".*

(Reference Learning History)

Another notable example features in this Learning History, supporting this relational practice of reciprocity; whereby people sought to come to a negotiated agreement, or consensus, through a process of dialoguing. In the process, they have shared their perspectives on issues, to improve and deepen their understanding, ultimately to create better decisions supporting organisational outcomes. This occurred when the Visioneers and the Discoverers were collectively reviewing the final written version of the strategic vision with members of the Non-Executive Board, as opposed to handing over their version of the written document to be reviewed and signed off by the board exclusively, which is a standard organisational practice. Again, this process of joint "wordsmithing" that occurred between both parties illustrates the relational practice of reciprocity in action; in other words the "to and fro" involved, to support effective decision-making (Lewis and Olshansky, 2016). This process of negotiation also reflects the empowerment of this group to an elevated status with the board; a point that will

be developed further in this chapter, when the impact of power dynamics is explored more fully.

#### 6.5.2 Reciprocity-in-action during the strategic building process.

This relational practice of reciprocity, as described within the relational, mentoring RCT framework, differed in practice in certain respects, when observed within this particular, organisational setting. Laloux, in his writing on Teal organisations, offers a useful distinction concerning the nature of achieving consensus, or agreement.

He maintains that:

“bringing about consensus among large groups of people is inherently difficult... (and) invariably ends up in gruelling table sessions and eventual stalemate. In response, power games break out behind the scenes to try to get things moving again” (Laloux, 2014, p. 32).

What was happening within this Housing Association, as they openly debated the content for their strategic vision, was arguably more aligned to conditions supporting decision-making within Teal organisations.

“.... (T)he basis for decision-making is not consensus. For a solution to be adopted, it is enough that nobody has a principled objection”(Laloux, 2014, p. 67).

“ A solution will be adopted, with the understanding that it can be revisited at any time, when new information is available”(Laloux, 2014, p. 68).

In contrast, as concerns how the relational practice of reciprocity within R.C.T. is described, such nuance around the achievement of consensus is lacking, or at least may assumed to be positive, given the relational conditions that inform it for example. Given

the range of voices and perspectives represented at each stage of this strategy building process, reaching decisions that were 'good enough' for now, becomes rather a pragmatic necessity, when applied to collective strategy making.

To that end, the meeting processes in evidence supporting strategy planning, reflected this relational practice of reciprocity. Notably, they too share similar characteristics, being egalitarian in their nature, to those meeting processes detailed by Laloux. Such meetings were ***always*** (my emphasis) facilitated, be it a staff member, an internal, or an external facilitator; a point which is also raised by Laloux.

*" a meeting process elegantly ensures that every voice is heard, that the collective intelligence informs decision-making, and that no-one person can derail the process and hold others hostage trying to impose her personal preferences" (Laloux, 2014, p. 68).*

This was also particularly important when key elements of strategic plan were being developed by the group, and as part of the process, being challenged by other senior leaders.

#### 6.5.3 The expression of mutuality as a relational practice.

The practice of mutuality is closely related to reciprocity and was readily supported during these facilitated meetings. It is described within R.C.T. as a shared experience of a given situation between two or more people, which is expressed by each of them respectively, in order to cultivate a deeper understanding of the other'(s)' experience (Lewis and Olshansky, 2016). In the case of this organisation, very different experiences

were being shared from the outset on any given topic within this forum, from customer services, to technology, to supplier relationships etc.

Expressions of mutuality were manifesting in the quality of attention and listening being paid to one another, as staff shared their particular organisational 'take', or experience of a given topic. As has already been highlighted previously, certain strategic topics were being at times being passionately debated, where problems and challenges experienced by individuals around a given area were openly shared, regardless of who was there- and embraced by the senior leaders and board. See also chapter 4 section 4.4.3.

As described in chapter 4, I observed during these group discussions that, even where senior leaders, board and staff were in attendance, those talking remained forthcoming and forthright with their views, regardless of who was in the room. This is as opposed to self-censoring their comments in any way. I noted this in one particular instance, when the Chief Executive came into the room, where a discussion concerning problems within finance was underway, and where a member of staff was clearly expressing some distress, caused by the workload pressures they were experiencing at that time. This discussion was being facilitated by one staff member. At no point did the Chief Executive intervene in the discussion. She simply stayed and listened, without interruption, as others were doing, enabling the speaker to share their experience in great depth, being actively listened to by others who would then clarify and explore a given issue further and subsequently share their perspective.

*“That’s it because ultimately something’s not right if people are feeling those frustrations, something’s not working and management, they left it open for people to be open and say....”*

*“In organisations if things are left unsaid it breeds contempt. It is really useful if it can be brought out in a constructive manner”.*

(Learning History, Open Space Event. The Call to Contribute to Strategy).

The forthright nature of these discussions underlines the call for honest feedback on the part of followers, to therefore provide constructive feedback to leaders in ways that serve the organisation (Chaleff, 1997). Such perspectives on courageous followers, or followership, are still relatively rare however (Riggio, Chaleff and Lipman-Blumen, 2008) Even where the literature on whistle blowing is concerned, such actions are recognised potentially as ‘career-ending’ and may therefore be viewed as an act of disloyalty on the part of those in senior positions (Baron, Crawley and Paulina, 2003).

Collinson (2006) similarly describes “self-censorship” as a real form of resistance that followers may choose to adopt in the face of the anticipated discipline and sanctions, in the face of any dissent. This serves to underline the contrast in these experiences described by the group during this undertaking. This is not to say that all dialogue between followers in relation to the senior leadership team was otherwise completely open and transparent. There are distinct episodes of self-censorship that will be examined later on with consideration of underlying power dynamics later on in this chapter.

#### 6.5.4 Integrating the ethos of mutuality and reciprocity within this undertaking.

However, the principle and practice of mutuality and reciprocity had in effect infused the whole strategic planning process. During the launch of the strategic vision itself to the board, the OD consultant who had overseen this whole planning process cited “peer principles”; whereby no-one individual regardless of their status could exert more authority, or influence over others. She also characterised the overall collaborative experience as one of “mutual support and relationship”, that required openness, honesty, and transparency. It is in this vein that participants collaborated and where such relational practices were therefore able to be fostered.

#### 6.5.5 Further reflections on these relational leadership states, skills and practices and their impact on all involved.

Clearly, this handover presentation to the board was experienced, in the main, as a highly engaging and fulfilling experience by those involved. Such episodes, viewed through the relational RCT lens, accentuates the success of these key relational behaviours and processes, that have enabled such “growth fostering interactions” to flourish here. Considering these same relational encounters from a followership perspective, the following may also be observed. These relational episodes fundamentally challenge the “leadership-centric vantage point”, that continues to dominate much leadership research (Kelley, 2008, p. 11). RCT, as outlined earlier in this chapter, offers an alternative view of (leadership) growth and development beyond notions of the individual, independent leader, instead emphasising our

interdependence. It is precisely this interdependence that is being dynamically negotiated between this group of staff, operating in relation to their senior leaders, and underpins states and behaviours whereby power relations can and do tilt, or shift dynamically at time, clearly in favour of those staff co-leading this undertaking. It is a long-held view that leadership cannot exist without followership and “without followers there can be no leaders” (Collinson, 2006). Despite this, there is a persistent trend in favour of those leader-focused studies, with a lack of in-depth consideration for followers, or followership, beyond consideration of the cultivation of courageous, or exemplary followers, and their “good followership skills” as the primary solution to successful leadership processes (Gilani *et al.*, 2020).

The relational episodes explored here call for a more radical rethink, beyond simply acknowledging the positive influence followers may have on their superiors for example. As has been demonstrated by these key facets of Relational Cultural Theory, applied to what may be considered a mentoring context, both parties have demonstrably benefitted in terms of growing in their understanding and learning for instance of strategic issues. This builds further upon the benefits of mutuality identified by Lewis and Olshansky (2016) for example, marking a distinct shift beyond the convention whereby the mentor/ leader is principally responsible for “imparting expertise to the protégé” (Lewis and Olshansky, 2016, p. 390)( p.390). In this organisation the protégés have contributed their not inconsiderable expertise to this plan for the benefit of all. This constructionist interrogation of these relational leadership episodes illuminates the dynamic nature of these follower leader encounters, those (creative) tensions and even some contradictions in terms of, what may be characterised as “shifting asymmetrical and interdependent ..dynamics” (Collinson, 2005, p. 1419).



## 6.6 Recognising the wider influence of power dynamics within this undertaking.

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Within the framework of RCT and its relational mentoring application, certain aspects of power dynamics are acknowledged. These will now be further explored within the context of the subsequent joint review of the strategy with the board.

In terms of shifting power dynamics and the practical expression of fluidity of expertise, once more the tables are turned. Now it is the Discoverers' and Visioneers' turn to receive feedback from a board perspective on their work. However, many of them found this to be a genuinely surprising experience, due to the board's overall acceptance of their work and therefore recognition of their expertise, signified by the lack of any serious, or wholesale changes to the plan.

According to Fletcher and Ragins (2007), this particular relational framework supports a different order of mentoring approaches and practices and is itself not occurring in a power vacuum. Rather, it is occurring "within a larger societal context" (that) "makes visible the ways in which relational activity is subject to systemic (power) dynamics outside of the relationship itself (p.390). As an indicator of these wider power dynamics, that would also be recognisable to this group, their surprise at the board's reaction, (plus lack of interference in their work), reflects both respect for those with greater authority, plus a sense of empowerment that this collaborative work was being recognised at that level and taken forward within the organisation.

*"When the board reflected their draft to us, I was taken aback (and thought):*

*“This is the essence of what we produced... I was quite knocked back that they (Board) didn’t need to tweak it... that was quite a pivotal moment. This has been a staff led, shared leadership experience” (Participant 4, Discoverer, Property Services Manager)*

*“I think they’d been really respectful, in terms of the changes that they’d made and it was just word smithing, rather than full scale change” (Participant 3 Discoverer, Welfare Benefits Manager)*

*“Very powerful really. I felt we stood united together (strategists and board) and I was really confident about what we were doing and that it wasn’t going to be turned into ‘newspaper’ for chips!” (Participant 6, Discoverer, Asset Manager).*

During my fourth workshop with the Discoverers and Visioneers, we all jointly reflected on the groups’ genuine surprise at the Board response to their work. Our reflections included a recognition, not just of their achievement in this regard, but also of the inherent power dynamics, affecting this board working relationship. The group had assumed that, given the Board’s authority, key aspects of this work could simply be dismissed, or overruled, without any further justification to the group. The fact that **their** (*my emphasis*) work was going to be recognised, should therefore not be underestimated. This is significant, in contrast to their previous experience of Mission Possible, which had not resulted in this degree of influence, or impact, on the part of staff.

This view was also underpinned by some of the group’s earlier experiences of consultation processes with senior leaders, in other organisations, which they regarded

as not only cursory but also risky (See Learning History: Critical Incident at the Open Space Event). It is maintained that such 'historical' comparisons are rather "unusual in plural(istic) leadership theorising" (Reid and Karambayya, 2015, p. 620). With reference to the methodological strategy adopted for this study, this participatory paradigm of enquiry, embraces these 'realities', constructed locally and also directly informed by social and historical realities, structures, culture etc... These in turn can be seen to affect participants' current perceptions at that moment of leadership power dynamics being played out.

#### 6.6.1 Debunking the myth of individualism.

Recognition of power dynamics at play and how these may inform such relational episodes between members of different organisational strata, are considered in some depth within Relational Cultural Theory. Jean Baker Miller (1976) in this regard, refers to the "myth of individual achievement" as an idea that permeates the human condition, where growth and development is typically considered as a process of separation from others. While the process of individuation is not discounted in any way, it is rather the "interdependent nature of the human condition that is celebrated" (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 389) Within the parameters of RCT, such a conceptualisation of "mythic individualism" fails to acknowledge the support and collaboration of others, who are in turn expected to provide such support "invisibly: , i.e. without any recognition. In light of this proposition, consider once again the genuine surprise of the group regarding the wholesale acceptance of their strategy.

#### 6.6.2 Reclaiming follower voice through the lived experience of interdependence.

Revisiting these particular relational episodes, that occurred between peers and between this group and their board, it is therefore interesting to observe the extent to which such interdependence is openly acknowledged and accepted. Certainly, this is the direct experience of the group, who considered this as:

*“An engagement where a board are genuinely interested in staffing views for the future direction of the business”*

*“A board taster of reality for staff within an organisation, where both the staff and the board are engaged with one another”*

(Visioneer 11: Group Lead PR and Comms)

This interdependence is consolidated to the point where even the Chairman of the board declares the authorship of the strategy as jointly conceived, i.e., a plan “co-created by this housing association” (Reference Learning History). In this way this broader, collaborative, and relational input of expertise of staff and board alike, in certain respects, starts to challenge at some level such accepted myths that can dominate organisational life.

Another of the key propositions of RCT, as applied to a relational mentioning setting, is the assertion that, it is more likely to serve the needs of both women and other, non-dominant groups. If this group of Discovers and Visioneers, for a moment are

considered in a similar vein, as being typical of those non-dominant voices; i.e. those whose 'voice' is not usually heard at this level, directly informing such strategic planning debates, then it becomes clear that this unique approach to collective strategy creation, as evidenced through this relational mentoring perspective, had undoubtedly distinct merit and purpose, by bringing in these new voices and diverse, expertise and perspectives, the results of which, in turn, were being positively received by the board and the senior leadership team.

#### 6.6.3 Acknowledging the limits of follower voice due to power asymmetries.

However, a related point concerns, not the extent to which these 'minority voices' have really been heard but, rather the platform they have been afforded and the inherent power dynamics informing proceedings. Returning for a moment to the earlier point, that such relational mentoring episodes are not occurring in a power vacuum. Consider, once again the earlier visual analysis of the strategy presentation in Chapter 4, as it was being launched to the board. This "launch", as has previously been observed, was one that was highly stage managed and orchestrated, on the part of the Group Senior Manager Team. It is likely that this both facilitated the strategy group to effectively present their story, but also represents a degree of control over the communication, or presentation of the 'message' itself. By managing or controlling the 'voice' of this group to some extent through facilitated Q and A, the strategy could therefore be communicated in the best light, which clearly worked.

An interesting point had been made by the Chief Executive in the final group workshop where key findings were being jointly reviewed by members of the Group Senior

Management Team, the Discoverers and the Visioneers, plus some other staff members, who had attended the full staff launch. The creation of this strategy, she had always maintained, was a “low risk” endeavour, adding that, had this “experiment” of collective strategy creation not worked, the only real loss would have been time, as the senior leadership team would have been able to draft a strategy themselves, as they had previously. This implies that, notwithstanding the considerable degree of support and investment that had been afforded the Discoverers and Visioneers, such trust was not unbounded, not without its’ limits, which may therefore be more fully appreciated, when one considers the extent to which the narrative was being directed by the Director of Culture during the presentation, for the benefit of the board, for example.

When the visual analysis of this Board event is compared to the subsequent presentation of the same strategy to staff, it is notable that the strategy was latterly being presented in a much more succinct manner, rather more as a *fait accompli*, to those who would have to actually implement it. (See Learning History: Presenting the Strategic Vision at the Full Staff Conference).

Notwithstanding the fact that there were opportunities to explore key aspects of content, and strategic themes in small group sessions, between this group and their peers, any further possibility of changing it, or updating it in any meaningful way was not an option, on the part of those who were directly affected by it. In power terms, the opportunity for final input and influence, was one that had been exclusively afforded to the board.

## 6.7 Further reflections on ceding power to support shared leadership.

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This raises the rather paradoxical issue concerning how power may be ceded by essentially, hierarchical leaders, to effectively encourage, and therefore facilitate greater influence on the part of wider staff groups; in other words the challenges is for hierarchical leaders to create less hierarchy (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002). This had been achieved within this organisational context to a significant extent. However, this shared leadership influence is not without its limits. Wider organisational contextual factors that have informed this undertaking will now be considered, in terms of delineating the limits of this shared leadership experience.

### 6.7.1 Recognising power at the organisational level.

In addition to acknowledging systemic power dynamics present at a societal level, and influencing the nature of such relational mentoring relationships, we are also invited to consider the influence of power dynamics at the organisational level within RCT. Specifically, this concerns how such “hierarchical power and status differences” may impact these mentoring relationships and those affecting their “group memberships”, which is (present) in the relationship (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 391) (See also: Ragins, 1997; Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989).

From an RCT perspective, it is posited that power impacts “expectations, roles, and behaviours.... and is a key contextual feature that affects the development and outcomes of relational mentoring episodes and relationships” (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 391) Such contextual, structural factors, combined with the organisational

norms and culture at the research site, therefore merit some examination at this point. This is to better understand **why** and **how** such shared leadership practice has evolved, within this organisational context.

By examining such historical influences, it facilitates a better understanding of **why** this shared leadership undertaking has even come about, and the extent to which such an occurrence was being maintained, or supported, both at the time and afterwards. From this examination, it becomes possible to further determine the scope and the limits of this collective, leadership approach, occurring within this organisation.

In this sense, such an examination of these historical factors, or antecedents is in keeping with other shared leadership studies: see (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012) where cultural climate and other environmental/organisational factors may typically be considered, in terms of their contribution, or otherwise to shared leadership effectiveness (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Such studies typically consider historical perspectives, or influences, in support of the rationale for shifting to this way of working, e.g., environmental factors, organisational climate. Within Relational Cultural Theory, the impact of key organisational influences, on relational working is recognised; namely, “organisational norms and mentoring climate”, plus “hierarchical roles and relationship structure” on relational, working (See RCT Model of Relational Mentoring Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 379).

#### 6.7.2 Considering the impact of these contextual factors on relational dynamics.

According to a range of published, internal and external reports, plus interviews recorded with each of the GSMT in 2016, the shift towards a more pluralistic expression



of leadership had been forged over a significant time period, i.e., since the appointment of the Chief Executive, 7 years prior to the launch of the five-year strategy, in 2018. The Chief Executive, on her appointment, was actively seeking a shift in the culture for a number of reasons; many of which echo the points made by Fletcher in her writing on relational leadership and why it is necessary to embrace this relational outlook, despite inherent paradoxes in its implementation, and related to those in power needing to cede that power to some extent, to thereby facilitate more relational, collaborative, leadership (Fletcher, 2012) See (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002). The Chief Executive, similarly, recognised the complexity and volatility of the external environment in the housing sector from 2010; a factor that directly informed this decision to shift the leadership approach, in order to engage the expertise and capabilities “of the many, not the few” (Interview with the Chief Executive, 2016). This shift towards a more pluralistic, leadership approach was therefore necessitated by the sheer pace and complexity of change, that would require planned and informed responses by all stakeholders, according to her.

However, the decision to embrace collective leadership was paradoxically a decision, imposed by her, (she maintained) on the organisation, as opposed to being decided in some other, more inclusive manner. This therefore represents a conscious imposition of authority on her part, to begin to engender a culture, where others could, over time, rather paradoxically, enjoy a far greater degree of authority and control for decision-making. See appendix H for a timeline of key policies and supporting activities informing this shift to a more pluralistic leadership approach.

This policy trajectory supports the argument concerning how this particular, shared leadership undertaking had been rooted in a range of earlier leadership decisions and interventions, that supported this desire for change and of itself denotes a process of habituation in this way of working.

“People are encouraged to take ownership and responsibility by being involved in decision-making” (IIP, 2014 report; p.14).

#### 6.7.3 Incorporating the principles of shared leadership into corporate policy.

Fast forward to 2018, post the launch of the collectively conceived strategic vision/plan, where two board papers are subsequently produced. The first paper entitled:

**“The XX Approach to Shared Leadership”** , sets out in quite some detail, how shared leadership is conceived within this organization.

In the second paper entitled: “Keeping Culture and Shared Leadership alive within X” , it is noted that, as part of all staff induction, the Chief Executive sets out the organisation’s history and espoused culture, while the Head of People Services supports this historical overview, with an introduction to the culture, tools, and approaches, that inform and make up a culture of “shared leadership” at this organisation (Board Paper, 2018, p.1).

Both these papers once again highlight the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous environmental drivers, that necessitate this particular shared approach to leadership (See also: Johansen, 2013a). Operating successfully within such an environment means:

“no one person or people has all the answers and therefore we wanted to involve and include more people” (Board Paper, 2018, p.1). The paper goes on to describe how this organisation approaches this more pluralistic approach to leadership.

“The distributed leadership model we agreed to develop, has required more people to be leaderful, to be more accountable and to have more influence” (Board Paper, 2018, p. 2)

What is immediately noticeable within this policy document is that, looking beyond this particular collaborative, strategic planning undertaking, that involved, up to “30% of the total workforce”, moving forward, any further shared leadership activity would be occurring within a broader collective, leadership setting. This policy approach incorporates the interconnected spirit, if not the letter, of Relational Cultural Theory, and those associated facets that make up a relational mentoring ‘stance’, or approach. As reflected in the egalitarian ethos and approach of relational mentoring, there is an assertion that all relationships within this organisation, would continue to be conducted in an “adult to adult” manner (Board paper, 2018, p. 3). According to Berne’s original theory of communication, this “ego” state was the most conducive to open communication and healthy relationships (1964). The inference here is that less productive, even controlling relationships and behaviours would therefore not be tolerated, e.g. such as those associated with Child and Parent ego states that are rooted in the past, and from where unhealthy behaviours may be invoked. In organisational terms, it becomes relatively easy to draw parallels with the ‘command and control’, or more directive leadership style, being alluded to here.

Equally, it is assumed that any growth fostering interactions that may result, are being informed by a degree of openness and inclusivity, where all parties involved derive a degree of mutual benefit, learning and growth as a consequence. In this organisation, this translates to ideas such as the adoption of “personal responsibility”, “fairness” and a commitment to “honest and transparency” in working relationships (The X Approach to Shared Leadership, p. 3). In the case of this Housing Association, “personal responsibility” is emphasised and characterised as being involved within the business and being capable of demonstrating “reciprocal behaviours”, including “challenge and feedback”, to influence proceedings (ibid). Again, this is very similar to the nature of relational practice of reciprocity explored earlier.

#### 6.7.4 Acknowledging power dynamics in shared leadership practice.

The cultural journey to develop this “chosen approach to leadership”, where the workforce becomes increasingly “influential, leaderful and accountable”, is one that has ultimately culminated in this unique strategic planning process. Importantly, what also stands out, within these board briefing papers, is the presence of power dynamics.

*“Such an approach requires courage... for the leader to trust in ‘letting go’ and in distributing power and responsibility through the organisation... for those in receipt of greater opportunities for influence, that they are open to taking responsibility in a different kind of way, whilst differently relating to and with others at all levels within the organisation” (Board Paper, 2018: The XX Approach to Shared Leadership; p.2).*

Here, as within the relational mentoring RCT framework, power differentials are being recognised. One first reading, these appear to be managed in a way that de-emphasises the power associated with the individuals' role, or position within the hierarchy.

However, this acknowledgement of power sharing between levels, although justified, still feels a little skewed, in terms of those 'followers', in receipt of these new 'powers', to substantially influence upwards. In other words, it is the wider staff groups, who are now being invited to change their habits and behaviours. There is a clear assertion that, with this organisation:

*"Our default position is to always involve staff in identifying and exploring new ideas, delivering transformative change and shaping new approaches".*

**(Keeping the Culture and Shared Leadership alive within XX, 2018, p.3).**

If these two policy statements are re-considered in light of the relational skill of "reponse-ability" for instance, within the context of its relational mentoring application, examined earlier, then this reveals certain assumptions being played out here. As a reminder, this relational skill involves the "ability to hold one's own perspective while at the same time fully engaging with another's, in order to allow mutual influence".

(Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 384). By logical extension, the notion of response-ability also extends to those leaders in positions of higher authority too. Notably, the benefits of such mutual influence are not being referred to in either of these statements, or elsewhere in these policy documents, although they were clearly evident during this collaborative strategy building process.

*"I found that so inspirational as well that people put so much effort in.. Culture was one of the areas I looked at and the information that I was reading that what had been discovered was brilliant. That depth of research was wonderful as well. It meant that we had something solid to work within, but we weren't constrained by it. It helped us to go forward. So the whole journey was really rewarding. I felt really proud that day when we went into Board and presented it, to be just part of this big team. It was all ours. We all owned it. We all cared for it and we were all responsible for where it had got to". (Visioneer 9: Executive Director of Finance and Business Support).*

Interestingly, such benefits echo the findings other scholars in the relational mentoring arena, who point to a range of benefits for "mentors" provided by their "proteges", including: personal learning and growth, information on role expectations and behaviours, technical expertise etc. (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007) What is immediately noticeable is the degree of interdependence between these proteges and their senior leadership mentors, which is pronounced and celebrated at the time, but which doesn't translate into new relational leadership development policy for these senior leaders or Board.

#### 6.7.5 Working relationally with power and vulnerability.

Developing this point further, the linked condition, or state of "co-responsibility" that informs relational interactions in the RCT sense, refers to the idea that those in positions of power "must also be comfortable showing their own needs, lack of competence and vulnerability" and those "proteges must be able to acknowledge their own sources of

expertise and be willing (and comfortable) to share this expertise”, with others (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 383). Such an assertion is not only much more egalitarian in its tone and sentiment, it also requires something from those in power and authority, to also acknowledge that they too may equally benefit from the opportunity to learn and grow, as a result of the expertise and input of others in a relational sense. This assumes that they recognise and are willing to share their vulnerabilities, be it a lack knowledge etc. with these other staff groups, lower down the hierarchy. It is evident that some degree of vulnerability of this kind was also being experienced by senior leaders in relation to these followers, throughout this collaborative strategic planning undertaking.

#### 6.7.6 The absence of this shared leadership experience in corporate policy.

However, this rather unique chapter in this organisation’s history, only gets the briefest of mentions in these two corporate policy papers, concerning the approach, plus specified workforce interventions, supporting shared leadership moving forward. It is not replicated, or translated into other similar interventions, that could be facilitated across these organisational levels, either between senior leaders and board and others, or between staff groups working at different organisational levels. Instead, the commitment to enable staff, in turn, to become more “leaderful and more accountable”, is being specifically supported within conventional, shared leadership structures. In this case, it is occurring horizontally, within the functional, team level. This is described in plans for the “development of individual teams and project teams”; in effect 8 “functional groups” being formed in a similar way to that of the formation of the group of Discoverers and Visioneers. **See appendix I.**

6.7.7 The absence of formalised, on-going relational development for senior leaders, or board, in relation to their followers.

Notwithstanding the desire for shared leadership to continue, i.e., to,

“move beyond a culture focussed on those in leadership positions... (and therefore) work.. outside of the usual boundaries and territories, whilst continuing to with within a traditional hierarchy”, (**The X Approach to Shared Leadership** p.3),

there is no further mention of any formal inter-group collaboration, i.e., working collaboratively **across** organisational levels, as had been the case during this strategic planning process, where 3 Group Senior Management Directors were actively working alongside staff from all organisational levels. This organisation has already developed clearly sound, developed, business practices, involving devolved authority and decision-making to the functional areas directly affected by such decisions, (Reference: Learning History, Functional Reviews). However, from a relational leadership perspective, it seems somewhat of a missed opportunity that such formal collaboration across organisational levels, this does not feature further in this organisation’s development plans. This is despite the obvious successes of this co-created strategy, which included significant opportunities for mutual learning, teaching, and information exchange across leadership levels, plus the application of key leadership relational skills, behaviours, and processes accordingly.

Perhaps more significantly, there is no mention of any further, formal development plans for members of GSMT, or Board that directly involve other staff levels, or groups;



specifically, where further growth fostering, or relational episodes of the kind being examined here could once again occur, to support organisational learning. It is also notable in these corporate briefing papers that, the GSMT group are already considered to be “Well Developed” as a functional team and therefore propose to limit their ongoing development to four, residential Away Days with the Board exclusively (The X Approach to Shared Leadership p.2).

#### 6.7.8 The absence of further opportunities for growth fostering interactions between senior leaders and followers.

Such opportunities for further growth-in-connection and mutuality, that characterise a self-in-relation attitude and approach, to therefore facilitate “mutual empowerment”, are not being actively promoted further, across organisational levels, for the benefit of senior leaders or the board. (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007)

Notably, there is also an absence of recognition in all these corporate statements of the relational stance, or perspective, that may enable senior leaders to acknowledge their own vulnerabilities, lack of knowledge, or further need to develop their own relational leadership practice. Nowhere in any of these papers regarding the evolution of shared leadership practice, is there any formal recognition of the powerful, relational support, or the fresh perspectives, dynamism and insights staff may have brought to others more senior than them, through this unique, collaborative strategic planning, ‘experiment’.

## 6.8 Reflections on the lack of further opportunities for such growth fostering interactions.

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In conclusion, the potential for positively and directly influencing the on-going growth-in-connection possibilities for the senior leaders and even board, is distinctly curtailed from this point onwards. This also appears somewhat at odds with a key policy statement, regarding how this organisation seeks to address huge challenges ahead, “societal, organisational etc., that require courage, flexibility, innovation, robust relationships and partnerships”, plus the **“creation of robust internal relationships, working outside of the usual boundaries and territories, whilst continuing to operate within a traditional hierarchy”** (The X Approach to Shared Leadership( *my emphasis*)).

This raises two issues:

- Firstly, at some level this collective strategy planning intervention positively challenged the conventional hierarchy and associated power dynamics in the ways already described throughout this chapter.
- Secondly, to what extent, moving forward to 2023, could, or should a relational leadership approach, of the kind advocated by Fletcher and Ragin (2007), have served any further use, or benefit, if it were once again formally applied, for the benefit for senior leaders working in relational ways with staff, in support of strategy implementation, for example? This question will be explored in the next chapter. With reference to continuing to positively challenge the conventional operating structures at this organisation, it was evident that, the appetite was clearly there, on the part of the Discoverers and Visioneers, for such collaborations to continue.

*“It would be great to co-opt Board members into task based working groups, if they wish to shape these ideas into reality and get their support”.*

(Reference: The Launch of the Strategic Vision to the Board: Learning History).

Notably, a related concern was raised at various points during this research process by the Discoverers and Visioneers, who were concerned with how they could effectively engage and involve other staff within their teams and more widely, throughout the development of the strategic plan. Interestingly, their concerns were borne out, when the strategy was eventually launched at the full staff event in March 2018. Although ultimately accepted by all staff, it also received some mixed reviews, coupled with a degree of ignorance, concerning its precise stage of evolution. For example, some staff at the launch had not progressed much further in their thinking about the strategy from the previous year. Others were particularly “obsessed” about matters of implementation.

*“They (staff) needed to be constantly reminded that this was the start of the process and not the end (i.e., implementation)”*

*“I found it quite challenging, quite naïve of me really... it was like we’d rewound a year because the sticking points were already discussed a year ago”.*

(Learning History, Presenting the strategic vision at the full staff conference).

### 6.8.1 Hypothesising an alternative scenario to foster growth-in-connection opportunities.

On reflection, had the strategy planning group been able to effectively connect with their wider peer groups and other staff in a more meaningful, relational manner prior to this final launch day of the strategy, it is possible that more of the resulting outcomes, or relational states associated with this type of working approach might have resulted; specifically, during these wider staff encounters, or episodes. These are described within the RCT framework variously as 5 Good Things:

- Energy, or “Zest”, “
- “Empowered Action”; whereby more staff could have taken more ownership earlier; in this case, of the strategy that is being handed over, with resulting
- Increased confidence, or “Self-in-Relation esteem”,
- “New Knowledge” and finally
- “Desire for more Connection”,,, being fostered between staff and this group moving forward (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007).

As mentioned in the Learning History itself and within the visual analysis of this final launch event, it appeared instead that certain, inherent power dynamics were being played out, which resulted in a degree of “Dis-connection”, on the part of the Discoverers and the Visioneers, in relation to these wider staff, and in relation to their senior leaders (ibid). They themselves, exhibited a degree of self-censorship by not challenging the presentation format that they felt had been imposed on them by their senior leaders, who incidentally refuted that recollection (see Learning History: Presenting the strategic vision at the full staff conference). This group also privately voice concerns to me regarding some staff having to present in such a large public forum

(ibid). When we reflected together on this experience at the fourth workshop, it also became apparent that this group had made a number of assumptions about the purpose of this event and about staffs' role therein, which for them did not reflect the ethos of the shared leadership they had previously enjoyed. Instead, this strategy launch event had created a degree of disconnect in its presentation to staff.

As examined earlier in this chapter, the degree of attention paid to each strategic theme for the purpose of board review, had resulted in a high degree of information being shared in a meaningful way, with a view to the board improving it further. The staff at the strategy launch day were not afforded the same luxury.

*"So we had to do Petch kutchra, so you are condensing four months' worth of Discovery work into 20 images across four minutes and not only putting over what you had actually done but how that had affected you personally and how you had developed and how you grown, which was brilliant.*

*I really enjoyed— I thought it was great fun. But then the people on the other side there are only getting that tiny little snapshot (the audience as if reacting) "oh you did that but what did you do the rest of the time?" But there was no where you can sit down and explain to everyone everything that's been done. Consider everything you've gone through- the same for the Visioneers.*

*...It was good fun for me but I'm not sure how much that's benefited the wider staff".*

**(Participant 4, Discoverer Property Asset Manager.)**

The Discoverers and Visioneers began to appreciate that this had somewhat of a distancing effect on their audience, an “Us versus Them” attitude was created, as this work was “somewhat of a mystery to other staff”. (Workshop 4 group findings). Power asymmetries were also identified, as the group realised that staff had been somewhat done unto, “talked at” without any real opportunity to challenge findings significantly, other than to “roast” the Discoverers and Visioneers about discrete aspects of the strategic vision during the afternoon sessions (ibid).

#### 6.8.2 Accounting for the reinforcement of unconscious power dynamics.

RCT points to “systemic power dynamics” at play, which need to be factored in, when considering relational mentoring in action within organisations; thereby predicting that “power influences the expectations, roles and behaviours” accordingly within these relationships and is a “key contextual factor (impacting) the “development and outcomes of relational-mentoring episodes and relationships” (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 391). Judging from the Discoverers’ and Visioneers’ reflections, it may be concluded that, this was playing out unconsciously, or unintentionally, on their part. This lack of emphasis on the cultivation of a relational attitude, or approach, that characterised the launch of the strategy to staff groups, reinforced in some respects, “the perpetuation of the myth of ..independence”, as described by Jean Miller (1976). This is insofar as this group were presenting the definitive, or authoritative version of the strategy, on behalf of their senior leaders and board, rather than working more interdependently and in a more relational way with others, thereby collectively debating in a more meaningful way, with others, the future direction of the organisation.

Significantly, this also marks out the limits of this shared endeavour, and where it becomes an exclusive, as opposed to an inclusive endeavour.

### 6.8.3 What may be lost through dis-connection.

Turning once more to the question posed earlier in this chapter as to the supposed benefits of maintaining such relational working across organisational levels and functions. In the case of the wider strategy launch to staff, by that stage it was too late to facilitate any meaningful staff input, to further develop this work, or start to consider issues of operationalisation for instance.

However, the potential benefits of cultivating a relational approach with wider staff, may have benefitted both this group of Discoverers, Visioneers and senior leaders, in ways that have already been outlined earlier in this chapter, in terms of personal learning, information and expertise etc.

The other benefits of cultivating such relational approaches, are inherent to those RCT outcomes outlined earlier; (Zest, Empowered Action, Increased Self-Confidence, Desire for New Knowledge, and Connection). These therefore may be summarised as an inquiring attitude, a curiosity to learn further with others, which may in turn inform further learning and innovation, as had evidently been the case within this strategy planning. This also complements the type of culture of shared leadership being advocated by the organisational leadership team from 2018 onwards.

It is evident that this organisation still had some work to do, in terms of fostering completely open and transparent working relationships. This is characterised by the degree of self-censorship on the part of the Discoverers and Visioneers, who at key

moments during this strategic planning undertaking, were not completely open with their senior leaders, regarding their distinct feelings of stress and pressure, or their overwhelming sense of responsibility for this undertaking, while maintaining their day-to-day work activities simultaneously. (See for example: Learning History: Joint reflections on managing existing workload with this new undertaking. See also Joint Reflections on the Strategy Launch).

## 6.9 Conclusion.

In this chapter Relational Cultural Theory has been extensively applied to facilitate a richer exploration of shared leadership; one that extends beyond the more conventional considerations associated with studies of shared leadership as ‘type’, focusing almost exclusively on behavioural, or cognitive leadership dimensions. Notably, through consideration of RCT as a mentoring, leadership relational framework, a more holistic and dynamic view of the shared leadership experience has started to emerge; whereby an appreciation of the more nuanced, more heterogeneous experience of shared leadership as it was occurring within here, may therefore start to be appreciated.

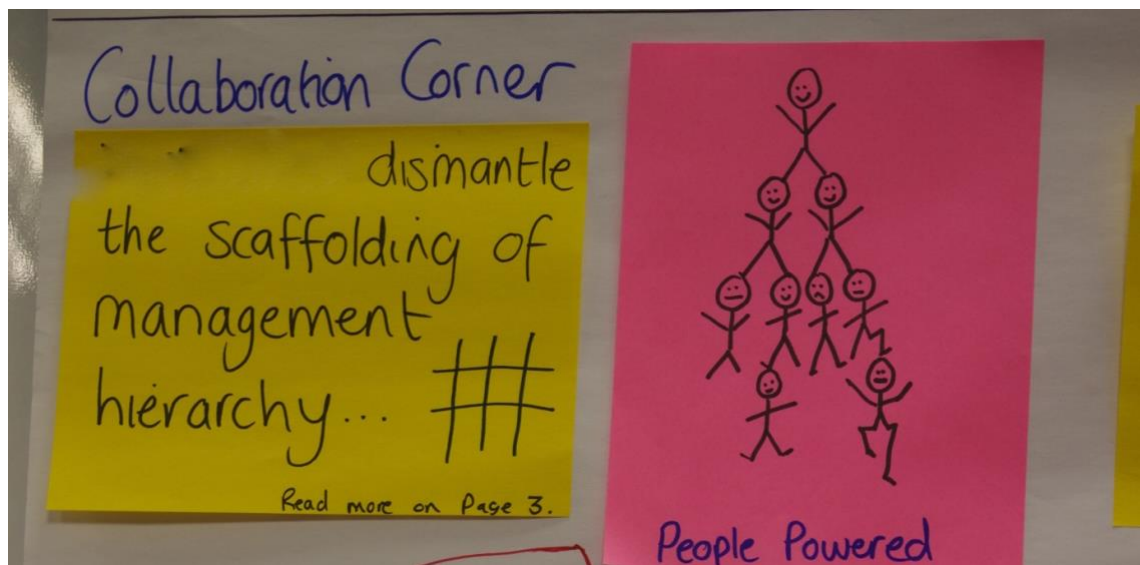
The key relational experiences that have been described throughout by Visioneers and Discoverers have consequently enabled associated attitudes, skills, and practices to be explicated. To that end, relational dimensions of “mutuality”, “vulnerability”, “response-ability”, “fluidity of expertise”, “reciprocity” and power dynamics have been explored in some depth. This is to provide a more nuanced understanding of how shared leadership was actually being experienced, formally applied, and duly operationalised



by those involved, as well as starting to appreciate the inherent power dynamics affecting such collaborations.

In chapter 7 I will seek to build on and develop some of these key arguments presented here, through the detailed examination of these key RCT dimensions. This is with a view to drawing together my key findings, and as a response to those research gaps that still persist in this shared/collective leadership arena. These include:

- Further consideration of the temporal nature of these shared leadership activities and actions, with a particular focus on locating key relational moments, or episodes, that illuminate these interpersonal relationships during this period of collaborative strategy building.
- Consideration of more situated knowledge regarding those shared leadership dimensions, specifically those notable relational leadership skills and practices being demonstrated at this research site.
- Further exploration of power dynamics as it has affected such pluralistic leadership arrangements.



*Figure 22 Workshop image depicting shared leadership.*

### Introduction

Before I consider further my findings, it is useful to first position these in relation to my overarching research inquiry. The aim of this thesis has been to explore how followers experience shared leadership, operating within a hierarchical setting, with peers and in relation to their senior leaders.

To that end I have sought, over the previous three chapters, to develop and therefore set out in some detail my analysis of data, which has resulted from 1<sup>st</sup> person and 2<sup>nd</sup> person participatory action research methods. These methods have been specifically used to inform an expanded view of shared leadership and followership, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. My intention in this chapter is to present the following findings, in line with this study's purpose and objectives.

***Objective 1: Summary: Understanding more fully the nature of the relationality followers experience, in the context of sharing leadership with their peers and in relation to their senior leaders.***

**1. Accounting for the follower ‘voice’.**

In this chapter I seek to demonstrate that this study facilitates a fuller understanding of the nature of the ‘lived’, shared leadership experience, the relationality followers experience in the context of sharing leadership, with peers, and in relation to their senior leaders. Specifically, the follower “voice” is meaningfully acknowledged, explored, and given primacy throughout, to elicit a more nuanced expression of follower experiences, feelings, and actions, as these were occurring over time, within a shared leadership arena. Through the systematic application of Relational Cultural Theory key attitudes, motivations, collaborative and connected leadership experiences and practices are fully explored, plus those “dis-connected” relational episodes accordingly. In short, this framework enables key relational episodes to be explicated beyond the lived moments themselves. Its dynamic and temporal nature, whereby relational episodes and moments may be successfully examined against RCT criteria, thereby facilitates a more processual understanding of the nature of shared leadership, as it was being experienced within this organisational setting.

***Objective 2 Summary: Understanding more fully the processual nature of shared leadership itself: how such leadership is operationalised or practiced.***

## **2. Exploring shared leadership in processual terms.**

A key issue has concerned:

“the investigation of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process” (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p. 89). As a co-operative inquiry group, we have therefore been able to understand more fully the processual nature of shared leadership itself, from the perspective of those followers working collaboratively, and in relation to their senior leaders. Through the creative application of co-operative inquiry methods, we are able to appreciate, how shared leadership itself has been occurring, over time, within a given setting and operationalised, by those involved. These more processual accounts of shared leadership are generally lacking, in favour of studies determining the quality and effectiveness of those relationships, with an exclusive emphasis on the consideration of discrete leadership variables (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012; See also; Ospina, 2020; Döös and Wilhelmson, 2021).

Additionally, the nature of the shared leadership relationship itself is explicated, revealing many of those “microprocesses between actors that would, (in turn), operationalise two-dimensional concepts such as egalitarianism, or mutuality in a hierarchical leadership context” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 87) This is with respect to those key relational states, attitudes, skills and actions, that illuminate the shared leadership relationship, in all its richness and complexity.

***Objective 3 Summary. Understanding the Power Dynamics Informing these Shared Leadership Relationships.***

**3. Exploring the influence of power dynamics on follower relationships.**

As RCT evolved, a recognition of cultural context became increasingly significant and the associated influence of culture on human development and in working life. (Jordon, J.V., 2022). This framework is deliberately value laden and invites an examination of power dynamics within workplace settings such as this one. Recognition of the role of cultural context and norms speaks directly to the third objective within this study, concerning the gear shift on the part of followers, from an 'agentic' to a more pluralistic leadership approach. RCT, not only explicitly acknowledges differences in power structures and their impact on working relationships, but also the often-unconscious influence of wider, societal power dynamics, that may be dictating the limits of such collaboration. Through its application here, the dynamic and shifting nature of power and fluidity of expertise between actors is explicated and found to be mainly positively supported. Additionally, the nature and extent of these interdependent working relationships are illuminated with rich insights accordingly.

Significantly, important aspects of these unconscious influences are also 'captured', here and elsewhere within this thesis, through the lack of "voice", or challenge, at key moments, on the part of the followers during this undertaking, in response to certain requirements placed on them by senior leaders.

#### **4. Embracing different methodological possibilities for this research.**

The novel step has been taken, to apply participatory action research methodology, in order to facilitate this more processual, enriched understanding concerning the nature of shared leadership, in ways that aim to benefit both academic and non-academic audiences. The resulting learning history artefact itself has been welcomed accordingly as a useful organisational tool, by the senior leadership team at the research site.

#### **7.1 How this chapter is organised.**

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Chapter 7 begins with some further explication of the relational dimensions of shared leadership that emerged in chapter 6, with a view to expanding our understanding of these relational perspectives even further. Themes such as fluidity of expertise, vulnerability, and reciprocity, that have proved significant in this shared leadership undertaking and will therefore be expanded upon, to further inform the shared leadership experience itself, as well as to specifically demonstrate its operationalisation here. Another key consideration will be the practice of challenge. Power dynamics were also investigated in some depth in chapter 6, where the limits of this shared leadership endeavour were delineated. In this chapter I will therefore focus on how shared leadership as a relational practice was itself at times being curtailed and consider more the role of power dynamics influencing such occurrences of non-relational practice.

It is important however to start by first reiterating the position outlined in chapter 2, regarding this approach to the examination of shared leadership from the follower

perspective, as a reminder that such examination provides a counterpoint to the prevailing focus on powerful, individual leaders, that has dominated much public sector leadership research, (Ospina and Foldy, 2016). This is important as the intention is therefore to frame or position these expanded perspectives of shared leadership within this alternative, relational arena.

## 7.2 Recognising collective leadership beyond the formal leader.

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Leadership is changing within publicly funded, social sector organisations, such as this housing association, to therefore embrace more pluralistic, or collective forms of leadership, which is reflected in both changing, flatter organisational structures and with the direct, co-operative involvement of key stakeholders, ranging from professionals and citizens (Ospina and Foldy, 2016). It is recognised that public sector leadership research still privileges ‘powerful’ individual leaders, operating within hierarchies. This is despite an extensive number of research studies exploring collective forms of public governance and their associated networks and systems. (See for example Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Osborne, 2010). This is reinforced in their call for empirical research, that moves away from the “leader-centred” approach, which itself provides an “incomplete picture”, regarding pluralistic forms of service provision (Ospina and Foldy, 2016, pp. 2-3). This study therefore may be described as an attempt to redress the balance.

Subsequently, there has been a call for more studies that facilitate an evolving understanding of the development of leadership conceptualisations, in ways that

embrace “processes, context and complexity, and to consider actors beyond formal leaders (and) arenas beyond the bureaucracy” etc. (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). This speaks directly to this study’s purpose, to widen out the leadership debate in this manner and thereby embrace the perspective and voice of those, in this case followers, who are not conventionally, explicitly recognised for their leadership efforts.

According to Schlappa *et al.* (2021, p. 472), “leadership is increasingly recognised as a social, collective and relational phenomenon where no individual or a group is in full control” . This too speaks to the aspirations of this collective leadership undertaking, in ways that reflect such a collectivist and relational leadership ethos; notably a phenomenon which is still considered somewhat unorthodox within this sector, according to the executive team and the board. In their paper on relational leadership, Schlappa *et al.* (2021, p. 472) propose an analytical strategy that “focuses on context, motivations, and power”. This too has similarities with the analytical objectives and findings of this study, as we have sought to ‘lift the lid’ on the lived experiences, processes, practices of those staff in their given operating context, who had actively engaged, both with each other, and in relation to their senior leaders on this shared leadership endeavour.

### 7.3 Re-locating this study within the expanded field of collective leadership.

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As examined in chapter 2, regarding this study’s fit within the wider field of collective leadership, as it has developed from 2012, the focus has become that of locating “leadership (with)in the immediacy of the group” , while acknowledging the organisational “system”, or context in which such leadership is occurring (Ospina *et al.*,



2020, p. 445) Ontologically speaking, leadership in this study is similarly being examined from the perspective of “leaders and followers” , occurring within a “relatively bounded social context”; in this instance, within a specially formed team. We have produced a learning history that attempts to identify the sources of shared leadership “within these distinct relationships and patterns of interaction among concrete social actors” (ibid). In this study shared leadership is positioned as an “empirical reality”, distinct from other leadership types (ibid).

It is necessary once more the two-dimensional analytical framework introduced in chapter 2, which categorises collective leadership studies according to the ‘locus’ and ‘type’/ ‘lens’ respectively, these present, not only distinct ontological positions but also offer distinct epistemological possibilities and therefore opportunities for researchers, to adopt different/distinctive research strategies to study collective leadership accordingly (ibid).

**Table 1.** A map of collective approaches to leadership.

		View of collectivity	
		Collective leadership as type	Collective leadership as lens
Locus of leadership	Leadership residing in the group	Cell 1: 'Collective' refers to plural forms of leadership and leadership resides in interpersonal relationships Dual/co-leadership Shared leadership Social network leadership Team leadership	Cell 3: 'Collective' refers to a theoretical lens and leadership resides in interpersonal relationships Practice theory studies (including leadership-as-practice) Relational leadership
	Leadership residing in the system	Cell 2: 'Collective' refers to plural forms of leadership and leadership resides in systemic dynamics Multiteam systems leadership Distributed leadership Network leadership Collective leadership practices Complexity leadership	Cell 4: 'Collective' refers to a theoretical lens and leadership resides in systemic dynamics Collective constructionist leadership Discursive/communicative leadership (some) Critical leadership studies

Source: Authors' elaboration.

(Ospina et al., 2020, p. 443)

Despite these creative research possibilities, it is interesting to note that, between the period of 2012 to 2020, there have been no shared leadership studies, featuring participative action research as a methodology, (Fairhurst et al., 2020). Another observation concerns those ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in this classification. Where collective leadership resides within the group (locus), and as a distinct "type", e.g., as shared, or team leadership for instance, occurring within interpersonal relationships, the dominant focus is on the study of cognitive and behavioural dimensions accordingly.

Yet, if we embrace the study of collective leadership, and acknowledge the same locus, but instead adopt a theoretical collective leadership "lens", such as practice theory, or relational leadership, once again "residing in interpersonal relationships", this affords

the opportunity for a deeper “consider(ation).. of “process, context and relational interactions”, that are not really attended to in those Collective Leadership as “type” studies (Ospina *et al.*, 2020, p. 447). Bolden (2011, p. 262) reinforces this point, referring to these ontological assumptions informing entity leadership theories, where individual actors are privileged, and their agency is exclusively favoured.

### 7.3.1 Considering shared leadership beyond the entity perspective.

The key issue therefore becomes whether such entity perspectives might therefore be usefully extended, to embrace those broader dimensions afforded to those who would typically embrace the theoretical, collective leadership as “lens” perspective?

Fletcher proposes this in her exploration of the relational practice of leadership, through Relational Cultural Theory, where she extends such conceptualisations of entity perspectives of leadership, to embrace those that are explicitly relational, when assessed against more “traditional conceptualisations” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 85). In addition to describing those relational characteristics, that can set these models of leadership apart; namely those associated with key leadership skills, leadership processes and leadership outcomes respectively, two important gaps are also identified in the evolution of these leadership conceptualisations, which require further investigation.

In action research terms, addressing these gaps can therefore contribute to “Practical Knowing” within this study, through developing a greater understanding of how such shared leadership practice is effectively being realised, or otherwise, and its impact on those involved.

**The first gap** concerns the micro-processes between actors, which would “operationalise two-dimensional concepts such as egalitarianism, or mutuality in a leadership context”; where the context is characterised by status differences within the organisational hierarchy (Fletcher, 2012, p. 87).

**The second gap** is a recognition of the social context in which these entity perspectives on leadership may be recognised, alongside its associated relational aspects, and where power dynamics may also be recognised. These gaps identified by Fletcher, are reflected in the distinctive dimensions of the Collective Leadership ‘typology’, specifically in the third dimension of this CL framework devised by Ospina et al.(2020). However, unlike this later framework, where a separation is represented, of such processual, relational, and contextual aspects of leadership, from their cognitive and behavioural counterparts, Fletcher significantly calls for an integration of these dimensions, to therefore facilitate a fuller, deeper understanding of the leadership experience, as it is occurring within such interpersonal relationships. It is the reconciliation of these perspectives, which this study seeks to achieve.

### 7.3.2 Expanding the relational horizons of shared leadership.

Notably, Fletcher’s assertions in this regard, informing her call for a more relational view of leadership, significantly these also relate to a range of research challenges regarding more pluralistic forms of leadership. These are explored in a follow up article in the special series on the study of collective leadership, nearly a decade later. Fairhurst et al. (2020) set out a rich stall of potential research challenges yet to be tackled within the field of collective leadership studies and therefore a considerable range of, as yet

untapped research opportunities within this collective leadership space, many of which reflect Fletcher's proposed conceptualisations for relational leadership studies.

These specific challenges are centred around:

- Processual factors, or challenges – where relational, experiential factors are embraced, to reflect the diversity / heterogeneity of human experience in this regard. Specifically, they recognise the difficulty in empirical terms, in “Understanding (the ways) in which the lived experience of CL in relation to hierarchy is a dynamic and ongoing process “ (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020, p. 73) There is therefore a recognition of the temporal nature of such leadership in play and the need to recognise the inherent fluidity of the endeavour itself and “activities over product” (ibid). As examined previously in the previous chapter, the Relational Cultural Theory leadership framework, and its constituent, supporting conditions, skills, processes, practices, and contextual influences, informing relational ‘episodes’, is inherently dynamic, recognising the interdependency and mutually reinforcing nature of these “growth fostering” factors that are being experienced within any given relational experiences. It is for these reasons that RCT has been found to be illuminating, through its systematic application within this thesis, to explicate these shared leadership experiences, as they were occurring over time within this setting.
- Recognition of contextual factors, that facilitate a fuller understanding of what such collective leadership behaviours “really look like in a given setting, (through) a situated knowledge of individual leaders, their settings and followers, to determine whether a specific behaviour will be received as participating leadership or something else

entirely”(Iszatt-White, 2010, p. 411 cited in ; Chreim, 2015). As has been demonstrated in the chapter 6, the RCT framework similarly invites an investigation of organisational dynamics and cultural norms, that inform growth fostering leadership interactions, or otherwise.

- The ambiguous / contested spaces in in which Collective Leadership may be occurring, in order to overcome “the positivity bias in CL research, emphasising the rational (depoliticized relational and power convergence)” (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020, p. 73). As noted earlier, in Fletcher’s case power dynamics are similarly considered as a significant influence in the ‘relational’ space and therefore also worthy of examination.

### 7.3.3 De-constructing and operationalising Fluid Expertise within this study.

In relation to the ‘gaps’ outlined here, Fletcher specifically focuses on key aspects of RCT, which she asserts could expand our understanding of entity perspectives of leadership, i.e., operationalising key RCT concepts within this conventional, hierarchical, setting. These will now be explored in some depth.

The first of these is **Fluid Expertise**. As a reminder, the process by which fluid expertise may be enacted is as follows:

“**Fluid Expertise** requires that power, or expertise shifts from one party to the other, not only over time but within the course of one interaction” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 88).

This necessitates the following leadership skill of empowering others: through sharing one’s own “skills and knowledge and even tailoring it for others” (ibid)

**“Fluid expertise** also requires that one is simultaneously “being empowered: thereby actively and willingly “stepp(ing) away from the expert role”, in order to be able and prepared “to learn from, or be influenced by the other” (Fletcher, 1999 cited in Fletcher, 2012;p.88). The expectation of mutuality occurring within such interactions is predicated on the “expectation that others (too) possess these skills” and are “motivated to use them, regardless of the individual status of the parties involved” (ibid). She therefore proposes a “deeper explication of this construct of fluid expertise to understand the inner workings of the co-creation process, (its supporting) “skills and how, specifically it is enacted in relational interactions, in which there are power differences” (ibid) By systematically analysing such ‘moments’, or episodes, against the specifications of the RCT framework itself, once again the dynamic nature and interactions of the various conditions, skills and practices may actively be demonstrated. This is also significant in action research terms, where the ultimate goal of such research is to contribute to practical knowing (Reason and Heron, 1986).



*Figure 23 Image of collective leadership development*

#### 7.3.4 Locating where Fluidity of Expertise is being enacted. Event 1: The Takeover.

As illustrated in chapter 6, “FoE” was being enacted through various interactions and activities occurring across the hierarchical levels, that facilitated this strategy building process. This includes the “Open Space” launch event, where staff, literally **take over**, with their peers, the devising of the strategic agenda. In turn, their superiors actively step away from their expertise to listen to, without prejudice, or active rebuttal, what were at times presented as some quite uncomfortable, organisational truths related to performance, customer experiences, staff well-being etc. This open display of what may therefore be regarded as vulnerability, on the part of both followers and leaders, flies somewhat in the face of conventional wisdom. This is specifically where “F o E”, informed by vulnerability and associated relational skills, might otherwise be viewed as



indicative of personal weakness, as opposed to being presented here as key leadership capabilities (Miller, 1976)(Miller, 1976).

#### 7.3.5 Locating Fluidity of Expertise between peers. Strategy handover.

Returning once again, to the episode, where Fluidity of Expertise was being enacted between peers, in a manner that recognises power dynamics. (See: The Learning History. How Strategy Planning was Organised).

As a reminder this relational episode, concerns those ‘research’ findings, presented by the Discoverers within the group to their Visioneer counterparts, for further scrutiny and peer review. Re-visiting this relational encounter, it is evident that this episode is also informed by a palpable sense of connection between the two parties; one that may also be characterised as a boundary that is both “fluid and multi-directional”, and underpinned by qualities of mutual authenticity and mutual empathy (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 383). The Visioneers are actively aware and sensing the Discoverers’ reality, while maintaining a sense of their own), combined with a sense of co-responsibility; namely “approach(ing) the interaction expecting to grow from it, and feel a responsibility to contribute to the growth of the other” (ibid).

#### 7.3.6 Fluidity of Expertise across the organisational hierarchy. The Handover of strategy to board.

Consider again the presentation of the completed strategy to the Board and other senior leaders. (See Learning History, The Launch of the Strategic Vision to the Board). In this context, once again those senior leaders actively step away from their usual role and expertise, to openly embrace the detailed knowledge, expertise and innovations put

forward by this staff group: in other words, enacting “FoE”. This is with a view to seeking and drawing out further understanding and knowledge, relating to the strategy’s contents. Once again, these particular demonstrations of Fluidity of Expertise, manifesting across status differences, when analysed from this perspective, indicate that there is clearly more at work. It is evident from earlier analysis that, a dynamic suite of relational attitudes, skills, and processes are at play, informing mutual teaching, learning and information exchange. Key component elements, “micro-processes” in other words, will shortly be explored in greater depth, in order to appreciate their important role in supporting how Fluidity of Expertise may therefore be operationalised.

#### 7.3.7 The role of culture supporting Fluidity of Expertise.

The influence of prevailing cultural norms and climate should also not be underestimated within this collective undertaking (Kouzes and Posner, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003). Such influences have been reviewed in chapter 6, concerning how such influences have been positioned and developed from a corporate perspective, in order to support such demonstrations of vulnerability, as part of “FoE-in-action”. A suite of organisational interventions has been identified, that influenced how collective leadership relations, both horizontally and vertically across the organisational hierarchy, were subsequently developed. Such relational leadership processes and practices, ranging from Mission Possible to 7 C’s had become normalised and integrated into organisational operations. What was more novel, was the way the board and the senior leadership team were subsequently becoming much more **directly** involved in these

relational interactions and activities with their ‘subordinates’, during the strategy building process itself, and actively engaging in such demonstrations of Fluidity of Expertise. The extent of such involvement will now be examined in greater depth.

#### 7.4 Examining the practice of Fluidity of Expertise, informed by vulnerability and reciprocity.

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It became evident, within those learning history accounts that, a special, or unique role was being played within this construct of “FoE”, featuring those RCT skills *of vulnerability* and *reciprocity* respectively. These shared leadership skills were being uniquely applied here, both between peers, and in relation to senior leaders and board. As such, they served some very important and unique functions, within this organisational context, in support of strategy development- where power dynamics remained present.

##### 7.4.1 Exploring vulnerability or the art of “not knowing”.

Breaking the conceptualisation of Fluidity of Expertise down further, the ability, or skill itself, to move from the expert to non-expert role with relative ease, is being viewed within this organisational setting as a dynamic leadership practice and realised through these formal shifts in expertise and role between parties. Inherently, within these particular organisational instances, such FoE demands open and authentic expression, on the part of all involved, actively demonstrating one’s own needs, lack of competence, and vulnerability; de facto, admitting to ‘not knowing’, and therefore seek(ing) help and

expertise, with no loss of self-esteem (Fletcher, 1998). From the relational perspective of those followers, who were working alongside their senior leaders and board, sharing knowledge, plus both positive and negative feedback, all this represents a complex working process. As discussed in chapter 6, the paradox of sharing leadership itself for all parties involved, amounts to a letting go of some degree of control, in order to accept new information and influences, to inform decision-making (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002). Also, the demonstration of vulnerability on the part of those followers engaged in this process, is not limited to just those more overt expressions of individual discomforts, or distresses. Through the active experience of vulnerability, literally through not knowing at times, from moment to moment what exactly to 'do' next, and those associated feelings of "confusion", "overwhelm" and "unsteadiness", such absence of knowing itself becomes a creative stimulus for learning in this instance, *in collaboration with* (my emphasis) others. Such vulnerability demands that those involved seek out and therefore draw on the collective skills, expertise, and know-how, within the group, and beyond it including with specific board members and senior leaders and even researching beyond organisational boundaries. Significantly, this was also originally reflected in the role profile for this group. **See appendix J for role profile.**

#### 7.4.2 Using "not knowing" as a creative stimulus for inquiry.

An example of this creative, research pursuit, related to this idea of Fluidity of Expertise involves Discoverers, who actively sought the help and expertise of others beyond the Housing Association, in accordance with their research motivation and interest.

See appendix K for an illustrative example of this activity. This exploratory attitude and approach, to seeking out help and expertise, is akin to the entrepreneurial activities that inform start-up ventures. The overall practice is referred to as effectuation. The key principle that underpins it is known as “a bird in the hand” (Sarasvathy, 2001))

It is informed by **Who I am** (my motivation and interest), **What I know** (my expertise) and **Whom I know** (my network of expertise and resources). Specifically, this practice recognises both expertise and a recognition of its limits, thus motivating those involved to connect with others for this strategic undertaking. Such a practice of seeking expertise, without loss of face, or self-esteem, was bounded, or tempered by 3 criteria and described as:

- **What do I know? -What do I think I know? - What do I not know and need to find out?**  
(Interview with OD External Consultant, who co-designed and co-facilitated the strategy building process, 2019)

#### 7.4.3 Letting go of assumptions and pre-conceived ideas.

The application of such search criteria arguably starts to invoke another aspect, supporting vulnerability as a demonstrable skill; namely one that involves letting go of assumptions held about one’s knowledge, expertise and even prior experience, in the manner advocated by psychologist Argyris (1990). These ‘search’ criteria correlate with the propositions set out in his learning framework, known as The Ladder of Inference (Senge, 1994a; Senge, 1994b) Working with Argyris’ framework requires a recognition of the extent to which our reality, our beliefs, from which we draw our conclusions, may often be untested; instead, being inferred from what we observe, combined with other

past experiences. Where such ‘realities’ are untested, or unchallenged, there is a tendency to filter out and select future data, reinforced by these beliefs; what is known as a “reflexive loop” (Isaac, 1992).

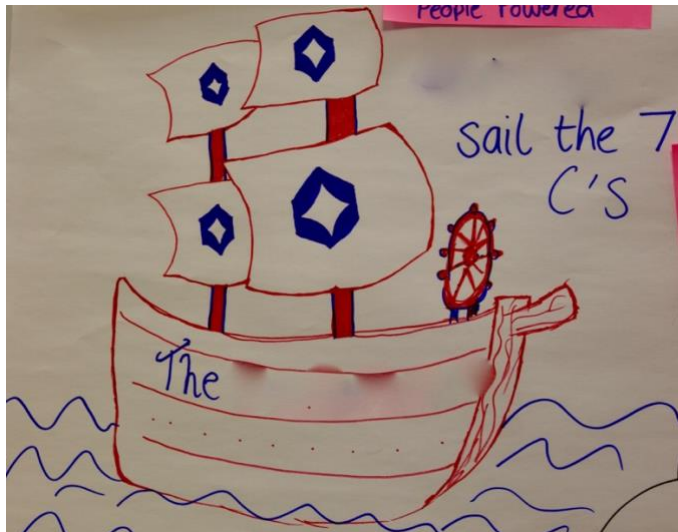
Therefore, such search criteria, adopted by this group, start to offer a starting point for generating greater awareness and reflection with each other, through highlighting the need for awareness and reflection regarding one’s own “thinking and reasoning” (Senge, 1994b, p. 280) . In that way vulnerability becomes re-positioned, or reframed, not as a weakness, or something to be exploited but rather as a liberating force, or skill, one that invites more robust inquiry and reflection, with others. To that end, all research endeavours were periodically shared with others, and the underlying thinking and reasoning behind it made more “visible to others” as a result, enabling them to inquire more fully into their colleagues’ “thinking and reasoning” (ibid).

The aim of this approach was ultimately to “add rigor” to the strategy building process, rigor that would ultimately be tested by the Chief Executive, prior to presenting it to the Board.

This approach by the group to their inquiry relating to developing content for the strategic plan, incorporates another key relational practice, namely **Reciprocity**. It is this relational skill which will now be further examined in greater detail, to analyse its constituent facets accordingly.

## 7.5 Deconstructing reciprocity as a key organisational practice.

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*Figure 24 Sail the 7 Cs*

“Reciprocity highlights the importance of individuals working together within relationships, leading to consensus as they share back and forth”.

(Miller and Stiver, 1997, cited in Lewis and Olshansky (2016), p.388).

As explored earlier in chapter 6, section, 6.5, reciprocity was being actively applied, through a formalised, relational organisational framework, or, practice, known as “The 7 Cs”, that informed interpersonal, working relationships, occurring between peers and across hierarchical levels with senior leaders. This relational practice had been established prior to and actively applied, throughout the strategy building process.

(See Learning History: The Start of the Process of Co-creating a Strategic Vision).

Within this organisational setting, “The 7 C s” formalises the process of “thinking together”, by actively applying those tasks and skills more usually associated within coaching and mentoring environments (Association for Coaching, 2022)(Association for

Coaching, 2022). The key phases of this “7 Cs” relational framework are mapped here against their commensurate coach/mentoring skills and competencies. See Table 7. This is in order to support the explication of key aspects of reciprocity-*in-action*, that in turn informs Fluidity of Expertise, and thereby facilitates the ability to:

- Move easily from expert to non-expert role.
- Acknowledge help and give credit to others with no loss of self-esteem.

(Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 384)

*Table 7 7 Cs compared against AoC 1*

7 Cs Relational Framework Stages	Focus on:	Mentoring and Coaching Competencies
<b>CONTACTING</b>	Rapport and Relationship Building: Active Listening Skills: Questioning etc.	“Establishes a high-level of rapport to build an open dialogue” “Demonstrates effective listening.. skills”
<b>CONTRACTING</b>	Practical matters, roles, timings of meetings, mutual responsibility Establishing commitment for change, boundaries and outcomes Skills of negotiation/checking Managing power (relationships)	“Helps.. establish..goals and outcomes and agrees an approach to working.. that will achieve them.”  “Formal .. agreement is established. Establishes clear roles, responsibilities and boundaries between the different stakeholders.” “avoiding collusion (within the relationship)..on issues that block progress”.
<b>CLARIFYING</b>	Seeking permission Enabling understanding Identifying issues and questions, themes and patterns. Skills of paraphrasing/reflection, open questions, testing understanding, summarising etc.	“Demonstrates effective listening and clarifying skills”. “Asks questions to ..elicit new insights, raise self-awareness and gain learning” “Provides observational feedback where relevant”.



<b>CHALLENGING</b>	<p>Identify the impasse</p> <p>Encourage consideration of options and self-confrontation</p> <p>Holding the challenge</p> <p>Develop new and latent strengths</p> <p>Skills of focusing, defining and Confronting “Tough Loving”</p> <p>Cathartic skills</p> <p>Specifying examples</p>	<p>“Asks questions to challenge assumptions”</p> <p>“Developing of (others’) self-awareness and learning by offering ‘here and now’ feedback”.</p> <p>“Paying close attention (to the other) and staying fully present and engaged.</p> <p>“Acts openly and honestly, including tackling difficult conversations, using self and personal reactions to offer ..feedback, avoiding colluding.. on issues that block progress”.</p>
<b>CHOOSING</b>	<p>Opening new perspectives, widening options.</p> <p>Generating and creating choice, anticipating consequences</p> <p>Moving towards change.</p> <p>Skills of identifying resources, problem solving, re-contracting, dreaming, and imagining, testing out ideas</p>	<p>“Support others to generate options to achieve agreed outcomes</p> <p>Maintain an outcome focused approach</p> <p>“Checks and acknowledges progress and achievements”.</p> <p>“Inspires (others) to identify and implement opportunities”</p>
<b>CHANGING</b>	<p>Enabling individual to tackle change and manage it</p> <p>Action</p> <p>Maintain and evaluate results and manage consequences.</p> <p>Skills of goal setting, action planning, accountability etc.</p>	<p>Supports (others) to build strategies, to meet outcomes</p> <p>Accountability with (others) while following through on own actions and commitments</p> <p>Checks and acknowledges progress and achievements</p> <p>Provide relevant information and feedback to serve learning and goals</p>
<b>CLOSING</b>	<p>Bringing work and relationship to a close</p> <p>Review and evaluate effort.</p> <p>Skills of managing endings and letting go.</p>	<p>“Maintains forward momentum and evaluation”.</p> <p>“Measuring effectiveness of the process”.</p> <p>“Discourages dependency”.</p> <p>“Checks motivation of others and applying learning”.</p>

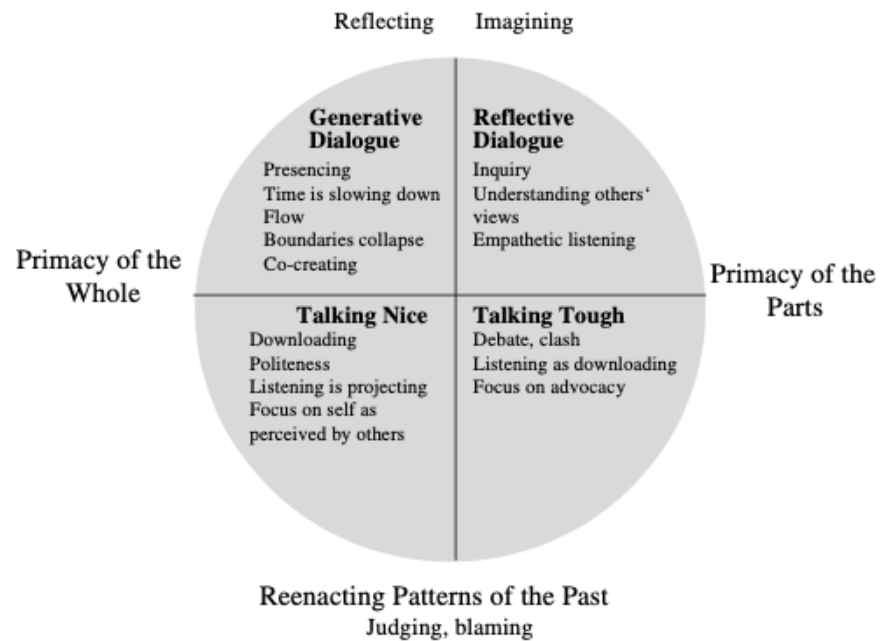
### 7.5.1 Reciprocity informing the progress of the shared leadership relationship.

This mapping activity provides an overview of the key steps, and micro processes, informing the operationalisation and progression of the shared leadership relationship. This framework has parallels to other relational/team-based frameworks, where the emphasis is similarly on progress and evolution (Bonebright, 2010). As such it offers further insights concerning the process of sharing leadership, and how this was **actually** being experienced and operationalised by this group. To that end, “Reciprocity” in its broadest sense was being enacted through this 7 Cs, relational leadership framework. It may therefore be described as a significant organisational practice, in view of the specific “micro-processes” that define the attitude, approach, activities, skills, evolving relationship and even ‘progress’ of those engaged in the collaborative, strategy building experience.

### 7.5.2 The process and practice of 7C s as a relational framework.

There now follows a step-by-step application of the 7 C S relational leadership framework to the Open Space event. Consideration of this key event in this manner facilitates a better understanding regarding how each step in the 7C’s process was being operationalised. It therefore provides the opportunity to examine key facets of this relational framework in action. Accordingly, key aspects of this 7 C s framework will also be evaluated shortly against Scharmer’s Relational Dialogue Framework(2001). Scharmer’s framework serves as a comparator of sorts, to enable key differences in this organisation’s relational approach to be explicated, with a particular focus on the idea of “challenge”, that features in both relational frameworks.

Figure 25 Scharmer's Relational Dialogue Framework



Notably, Scharmer's framework has formerly been appropriated, as part of the exploration of RCT within shared leadership. Relational dialogue becomes recognisable as a key leadership activity, enabling "organisational learning and adaptive change" (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002, p. 35). Relational dialogue is therefore characterised by the listener welcoming and engaging with issues at hand, as viewed from the others' perspective which (s)he is seeking to understand (ibid). This framework, like other team-based development frameworks, is similarly progressive in its trajectory. When comparing 7C's against Scharmer's 4 stage dialogue framework, it becomes apparent that openness and trust is fostered to a greater extent, in the latter stages of Scharmer's framework.

### 7.5.3 Re-visiting Open Space as a high-level relational process embracing 7 C's.

Consideration of the Open Space event from a 7 C's perspective, facilitates an examination of how each of these stages in the "7Cs" relationship was being attended to accordingly.

#### **Stage 1. "Contacting" at the Open Space event.**

This was being demonstrated through the initial rapport/relationship building activities, whereby staff started to offer others in small working parties, their initial ideas and areas of discussion and further exploration, supporting the creation of the initial strategic themes.

#### **Stage 2. "Contracting".**

The relational process of "Contracting" was in evidence during the initial negotiations, regarding which themes would be selected for further discussion and exploration. "Formal agreement" or commitment was then achieved through individuals signing up to a given theme, to take forward and develop further in discussion, with others.

"The flow of the day

Using (an) Open Space facilitation approach, to maximise staff participation, 100+ people spent the early part of the day working in groups. All staff were free to go and explore the topics that interested them most. They initially nominated strategic themes for discussion and 'brainstormed' associated ideas for more in-depth discussion in the afternoon. These discussions took place in break-out rooms. Topics included: Customers, Culture, Partnerships etc." (Researcher overview: Learning History).

"The positive side of that eventually was that we got to set the agenda for the day and actually, one of the things we sort of talked about was, you might go to a staff conference and shoehorn yourself into something, like a workshop and go "I think I can talk about what I want to there" but here you could be really specific. (Visioneer 12: Community Investment Officer)"

(The Learning History *Open Space Event: The call to contribute to strategy*).

### **Stage 3. "Clarifying".**

Staff subsequently worked alongside Board members and senior leaders in named, break out discussion groups, to begin to further expand the selected draft strategic themes. This phase on the surface has certain parallels with the relational dialogue framework developed by Scharmer (2001). In particular, the second phase of his relational dialogue approach, is characterised in part as talking "with authenticity", whereby groups may express different views to others while being listened to, in order to evaluate different perspectives on a given topic.

Although characterised also by listening, throughout the "Talking Tough" phase of Sharmer's framework, the primary objective is not just to be understood, but also to "exert... influence over the group rather than learning from others" (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002, p. 37). This phase is also depicted as quite adversarial, even combative.

In contrast, within the "Clarifying" stage within the "7 Cs framework, any such "tough talking" is largely being mitigated, through the application of "active listening" and therefore the adoption of a far less adversarial, or even judgemental approach to inquiry

from the outset; thereby enabling the drawing out of key issues and points by each group member, regardless of their status, or role. Such an approach was being observed during the topic-based discussions. (See Learning History: *Open Space Event. The Call to Contribute to Strategy*).

#### **Stage 4. “Challenge.”**

Importantly, the nature of challenge being exhibited during these Open Space proceedings differs again in good measure from the more oppositional, even adversarial tenor and approach indicated by Scharmer’s framework, during the second, “Talking Tough” phase of relational dialogue. This, he contends, is a Rubicon that must be crossed, in order to connect more deeply and fully in mutually, generative dialogue. By the time the skill and practice of “Challenge” is being applied during the topic-based, breakout sessions, much relational groundwork has already been laid, to consolidate the relationship and establish mutuality, in a similar vein to that described in RCT. As a reminder:

“ mutuality occurs when those involved experience mutuality when they share experiences with others in order that each may understand more fully the others’ experience (Miller and Stiver, 1997,cited in Lewis and Olshansky (2016), p.387).

Therefore, challenge in this organisational context is being expressed as a considerably more supportive and authentic process, undertaken to facilitate greater levels of mutual understanding, (in the RCT sense), and in order to collectively work through the challenges and difficulties being presented.

This organisational approach to challenge therefore facilitated the development of greater awareness relating to the nature of issues, as they affected current and future strategy and plans, be they the nature of organisational partnerships, or customer complaints etc. Challenge was also being applied to “confront” issues openly, and thereby enable individuals to express their emotions and concerns honestly and authentically; expression that in other circumstances could otherwise have been easily withheld. (See also Learning History for our observations: Joint Reflections on the Open Space)

Within these organisational episodes it becomes apparent that, the challenge skill of “Tough Loving”, (reference 7C’s framework), either peer to peer, or upwards to senior leaders and board, was being applied here in the spirit of RCT “Response-ability”, i.e. “holding onto one’s own perspective while at the same time fully engaging with another’s to allow mutual influence”; thereby informing the process of Fluidity of Expertise, or “moving easily from expert to non-expert role”, a skill that was being demonstrated throughout these dialogues (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 384).

### **Stage 5. Choosing.**

Another important aspect of the Open Space event and approach was for staff to freely explore the strategic themes that were beginning to emerge, in topic-based group discussions.

*"And the choice of being able to go from one room, go “ Mmm, that’s not right for me” and then go to another one".* (Visioneer 8: Group Co-Ordinator ICT)

(The Learning History Open Space Event. The Call to Contribute to Strategy).

## **Stage 6. Changing and 7. Closing.**

These final phases are represented within this organisational episode as the checking-out, or plenary phase, where staff groups at the Open Space event were invited to share their initial findings and experiences with others, in groups and in a wider plenary forum. From this point onwards, those who would quickly become the Discoverers and Visioneers within this process embark on their new, collaborative journey together.

### **7.5.4 Further Reflections on reciprocity-in action.**

Describing how 7 Cs was applied as a high-level relational process enables a fuller examination of reciprocity-in-action. The application of this relational leadership framework within this initial, strategy 'launch' phase, therefore, facilitates a demonstration of those key shared leadership practices at work. Challenge is identified as a key practice, and its operationalisation was seen to be comparably different to Scharmer's conceptualisation. In accordance with Fletcher's assertion for the need to expand our conceptualisations of entity based relational leadership perspectives, further attention will now be paid regarding how challenge was being experienced by this group, in an appreciably different manner, " where the context is characterised by status differences within the hierarchy" and recognising where power dynamics may therefore also be in play.(Fletcher, 2012, p. 87)



## 7.6 The changing nature of challenge within a social context.

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It is interesting to observe how the quality, or nature of “Challenge” at times shifts at certain points throughout this collective undertaking. It embraces, not just those supportive, authentic qualities, as illustrated during the Open Space event, but also a rather more forceful tone, or aspect at key moments during this undertaking.

**Two** specific examples serve to illustrate this:

**The first** example concerns a Discoverer-(Discoverer 3- Welfare Benefits Officer). The Discoverer recalled that a key strategic theme of Social Purpose, (located within Profile and Reputation), that she had been researching, was being vigorously challenged by her peers and the GSMT, in terms of its explicit inclusion in the plan.

*“There were some moments when we were doing the discovery work that were really difficult within PROFILE and Reputation. We felt, not conflict at all, but there was some real challenge in terms of some of the areas and I just felt really pleased that we stuck with it and continued to stand our ground a little bit because it came out.*

*I remember one of the board members saying “yes, we’ve done a piece of work on that and it wasn’t continued. It really needs to be picked back up” ..... (Discoverer 3: Welfare Benefits Officer)*

**See also appendix L for Discoverer contribution to “Profile and Reputation” informing strategy.**

According to her she “held the (not inconsiderable) challenge” from others to discount this theme from the strategy, and was in a position, through her knowledge and understanding of the topic, as well as her experience of this 7 cs practice, to meet the challenge posed by them. She declared in fact that she “quite enjoys challenge” and had become accustomed to it during this planning process. On one level, this certainly fits into the kind of supportive challenge, that is superseded by significant relational groundwork, to establish mutuality, within the 7 Cs framework.

What is noticeable here is that her critical position regarding Social Purpose represents a direct challenge to the Board’s work to that point as a governing body, in other words a direct challenge to those in power, in a manner similarly expressed in the second phase (Talking Tough) of Scharmer’s relational dialogue framework.

This is where “ in this mode of communication, the person who speaks up takes on a leadership role, or challenges other leaders” (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002, p. 40). However, Scharmer also notes that such “Talking Tough” is necessary, to generate shared understanding, “ because it allows groups to articulate opposing views and to talk with authenticity” (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002, p. 37)(ibid:p.37). However, it seems that the quality, or nature of challenge, as it was being applied here with others, is much more in keeping with Scharmer’s 4<sup>th</sup> phase of Relational Dialogue, being both generative and co-creative, ultimately enabling new perspectives to emerge, that are related to this topic of purpose (Scharmer, 2001)

### 7.6.1 The role of challenge informing these relational dialogues.

Through this application of challenge, this topic of social purpose, as with others, becomes significantly expanded; in other words, richly realised throughout the strategic vision. **Please refer also to an extract from the Vision Statement appendix M.** Such rich expansion may therefore be directly attributed to this accepted, relational, 7Cs leadership process and practice. Without the practice of challenge being embedded within this undertaking and integrated into wider organisational life, it may have been easier for this Discoverer to disengage from the debate, to even concede to her peers and her 'superiors', especially given the political tenor of the topic. However, through the application of this relational practice, as part of this organisation's overall approach to reciprocity, Fluidity of Expertise was being expertly realised within this setting, enabling those involved to progress; "to learn from, or be influenced by the other" (Fletcher, 1999, p. 64)

### 7.6.2 Challenge Example 2.

Within the 7 Cs relational approach the practice of challenge was noticeably more forceful, verging on confrontational, during the passionate debates that ensued, during the 'launch' of the strategic plan to all staff.

(LEARNING HISTORY) PRESENTING THE STRATEGIC VISION AT THE FULL STAFF CONFERENCE.

*“The afternoon sessions were organised in an Open-Space style, where people were invited to attend Breakout sessions and explore the morning sessions in greater depth”.*  
(Researcher overview of the event).

*“There was a lot for staff to take in and because at times people couldn’t hear properly, they “homed in on a particular subject”. Therefore, the afternoon discussions, at times, became a bit challenging and yet people were getting “passionate about it” (the strategic vision). (Visioneer 10- Customer Services Assistant).*

*“They (Discoverers and Visioneers) realised that, while they had the opportunity to work through in great depth the creation of the strategic vision, others hadn’t shared that experience”.* (Visioneer 12- Community Investment Officer).

Once again, it is noticeable that in this particular moment and context, the practice of challenge assumes a different quality, more akin to Scharmer’s second phase of relational dialogue (2001). This is where the emphasis is on “listening to and evolving different opinions. Individuals want to make their perspectives understood and exert influence over the group rather than learn from others”(Fletcher and Kaufer, 2002, p. 37)

From the Discoverer/Visioneer group’s perspective,

*...” the people on the other side were only getting that tiny snapshot. There was no way to explain to everyone the amount of work that had been done up to this point”.*  
(Discoverer 4- Property Services Manager).

*“They, (the staff at the conference), needed to be constantly reminded that this was the start of the process and not the end”. (Visioneer 8- Group Co-ordinator ICT)*

The reasons for this response may be further explained by Scharmer’s relational dialogue framework. The second phase, or “Talking Tough” phase emphasises an orientation towards past events, patterns, and experiences, which is in keeping with this broader staff group’s experience. Their direct involvement in the strategy building process had essentially ended a year earlier. Any further communication concerning the strategy building had otherwise taken place informally within teams, at the discretion of those who were directly working on the strategy itself.

*“I found it quite challenging, quite naïve of me really... it was like we’d rewound a year because the sticking points were already discussed a year ago”. (Discoverer 3 Welfare Benefits Officer)*

#### 7.6.3 Dis-connection with shared leadership relationships.

Within RCT it is recognised that, not all interactions are in fact growth fostering. Disconnection, as was occurring here, is part of the relational process. RCT recognises that such dis-connection may be characterised by qualities such as one-directional communication, akin to “downloading”, in Scharmer’s terms (2001). The Discoverers and Visioneers subsequently reflected further on this dis-connection between them and the wider staff group.

## **“(LEARNING HISTORY) FINAL JOINT REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM VISIONEERS AND DISCOVERERS CONCERNING THE FULL STAFF CONFERENCE**

“In response to the “them and us” attitude the group perceived during this event, the Discoverers and Visioneers wanted to stop the idea of” (Researcher reflection):

*“Separating those involved and those not involved”.* (Discoverer 6 – Asset Manager).

The group therefore felt that they could have engaged staff differently and to have:

*“stopped talking at people” (Visioneer-8 Group Co-ordinator ICT)*

The manner in which the high-level strategic vision had been presented clearly did not facilitate mutuality, or significant opportunities for mutual growth, or learning, in the RCT sense.

“With hindsight the group felt that the vision itself and the supporting planning process needed to be better positioned”. (Researcher introduction to this Learning History section).

*“We needed to be clear that this is the vision, not the fix”.* (Visioneer 12- Community Investment Officer).

“The group wanted staff to understand that this wasn’t the end point of the planning process, rather the beginning. This may have therefore created an opportunity for the wider staff group, to engage more fully in the development and subsequent implementation of the plan”. (Researcher reflection, Learning History).

#### 7.6.4 Reflections on the practice of challenge and the paradox of relational dis-connection.

This episode demonstrates that the group as a whole did possess the “skills, desire and ability to move from and through episodes of dis-connection back to connection”(Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 382). This was evidently underpinned by this open culture, where authentic and transparent dialogue was actively encouraged. This, plus the capability, cultivated through the practice of 7 Cs as a relational dialogue practice, to therefore effectively hold and confront the challenges being presented to the Discoverers and Visioneers from peers, in order to facilitate those “passionate” , and cathartic debates with those, who cared equally about their organisation’s future.

In this way such episodes of dis-connection, or what RCT theorists refer to as “relational paradox”, may therefore be avoided (Miller and Stiver, 1997)

The group, throughout these episodes of challenge, does not falter or move away from their knowledge, expertise, and experience, due to a fear that their authenticity might at some level be damaging to the relationships with others (ibid). They stay with the debates, “confronting”, in other words addressing the immediate concerns of their peers directly, which itself demonstrates another aspect of the skill of challenge-in-action. Subsequently, the Discoverers and Visioneers received “some really positive feedback and practically all staff signed up to the Vision” (Researcher reflection, Learning History).

Both these challenge examples demonstrate, to a greater or lesser extent, a power, or expertise shift from one party to the other: through sharing one’s own “skills and knowledge and even tailoring it for others” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 88).

Simultaneously, empowerment of a kind is happening to those involved in the leadership relationship at these moments, be it the board, senior leaders, or the wider staff, as they actively “step away from the expert role”, in order to “learn from, or be influenced by the other (ibid).

#### 7.7 Recognising the shifting nature of power dynamics within this social context.

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The nature of these interactions generally seems unusual, rather less typical of follower/leader relationships. Not only does it speak to those benefits that can occur as a result of relational mentoring such as the cultivation of organisational “innovation and constructive creative change” (Lewis and Olshansky, 2016, p. 391); the episodes outlined here are also a far cry from the acts of self-censorship that can often characterise followers’ feedback, in relation to their leaders (Collinson, 2006). These interactions may also not be considered as analogous to the problematic acts of resistance against organisational control; where knowledge and authority of others more senior is being challenged (Collinson, 2011).

The interdependence between followers and leaders has long been recognised (ibid). Nonetheless, it must also be recognised that such negotiation is not happening within a “depoliticized relational and power” free environment (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020, p. 604). Other historical influences still prevail, such as the conventional, hierarchical, structure and overarching authority associated with that. Fletcher recognises this, with the second of her RCT gaps to be explored, as it relates to social context, where power dynamics are acknowledged.



To that end, it is evident that such “relational behaviour”, is actively being applied and valued as a “strategic intervention” , with recognised benefits for the organisation, through this strategy work(Fletcher, 2012, p. 93). At a group level, this refers to those positive, “growth-in-connection” episodes with peers, senior leaders and in relation to the Board, e.g., occurring at critical handover junctures of the strategy.

At the individual level, such positive, relational working, clearly had resulted at key moments, in those “5 Good Things”, or resulting RCT states that can occur, namely:

***Zest, Energy, Empowered Action, Increased Confidence, New Knowledge, and a desire for more Connection (Dignity Care) (Fletcher,2012).***

See links to web site for how these RCT outcomes were being demonstrated by those involved.

#### **On being empowered**

#### **How we now work**

7.7.1 The impact of such connection between these followers and their leaders.

Such positive impacts were by no means limited to the Discoverers and Visioneers alone. Their senior leaders, some of whom had worked alongside them throughout this undertaking as Visioneers, were similarly deeply affected by this relational experience.

*“I was proud of the outcome... .. When we had the “Rattle and Shake” of the strategy with the board they didn’t change it. That is testament to the good work that the Visioneers and Discoverers had done. It didn’t need a lot of changing and that said something. You could visibly see the Board’s emotion; they were affected by it. There were tears in their eyes and that is not an understatement. They were so humbled by the*

*passion that they saw through individual staff, through their development... It got them. It got me. Through all the strategy work I've ever done; I've never seen anyone fill up and have such an emotional reaction to it. That's stayed with me".* (Visioneer: Group SMT: Partnerships and Strategy Director)

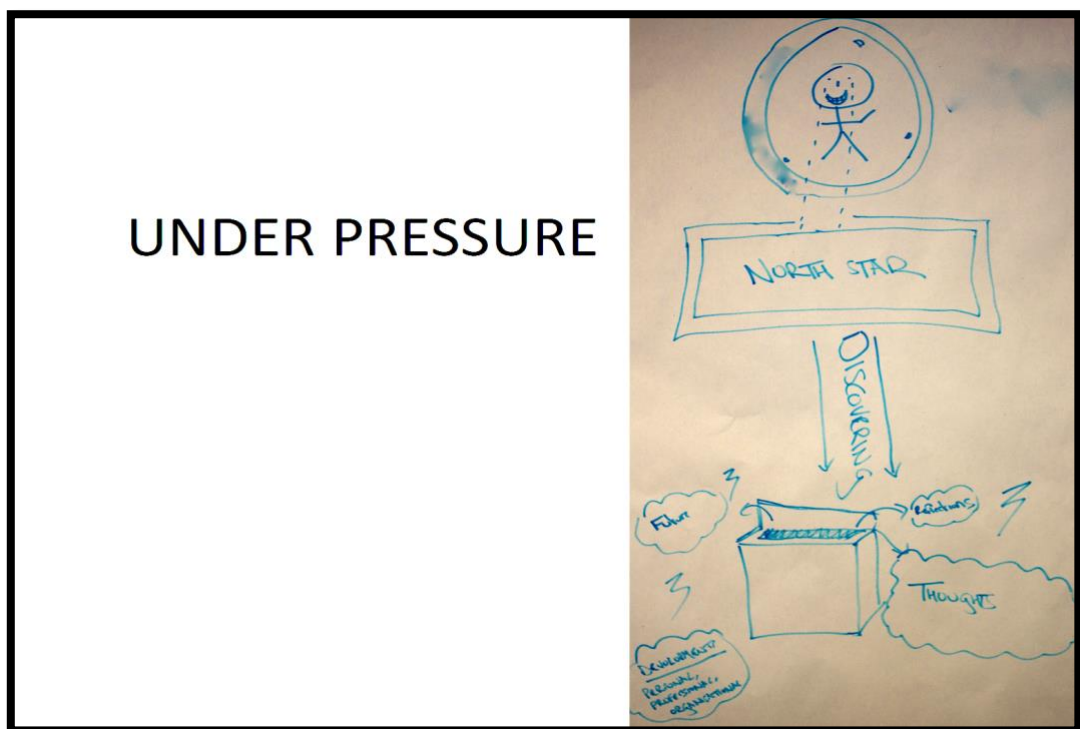
#### 7.7.2 Unintended reinforcement of power asymmetries.

The application of visual methods has already been shown to be effective in eliciting an understanding concerning the nature of power dynamics at play during this undertaking. On the positive side, they reveal a palpable sense of empowerment on the part of Discoverers and Visioneers and the associated sense of voice, ownership and influence expressed by them, during our workshops. These visual methods, or processes, therefore enabled a visual reading of key growth fostering / "Growth-in-Connection" experiences on their part. As identified in chapter 4, various visualisation activities relating to participants' motivation and desire to volunteer for this work, produced many very positive visual expressions, of energised empowerment, positive excitement, and active commitment for this strategic agenda.

Therefore, the tenets of Growth-in-Connection, with its alternative view of the path to human growth and development, informed by connection and interdependence, are being explicitly positively demonstrated within this hierarchical structure, with its associated power dynamics, with some very encouraging results (Fletcher, 2012, p. 91)

### 7.7.3. Exposing the shadow side of this shared leadership endeavour.

In contrast, other visual metaphors created by participants, were similarly revealing of the more negative aspects of this collective undertaking. One participant literally depicts themselves as sweating, due to the associated work and time pressures of this undertaking:



*Figure 12 Under pressure*

Such pressure was additionally noted in the Learning History itself and described as a form of self-censorship on the part of those involved, who felt at the time otherwise unable to describe to their senior leaders the extent of the pressures they were experiencing, combining this strategy work with day-to-day operations.

#### 7.7.4 Journey Mapping revealing other negative impacts of this work.

Another visual technique that was similarly revealing, concerned the high-level mapping technique whereby the key activities were set out, in chronological order, supporting this planning journey, from the perspective of the Discoverers and Visioneers.

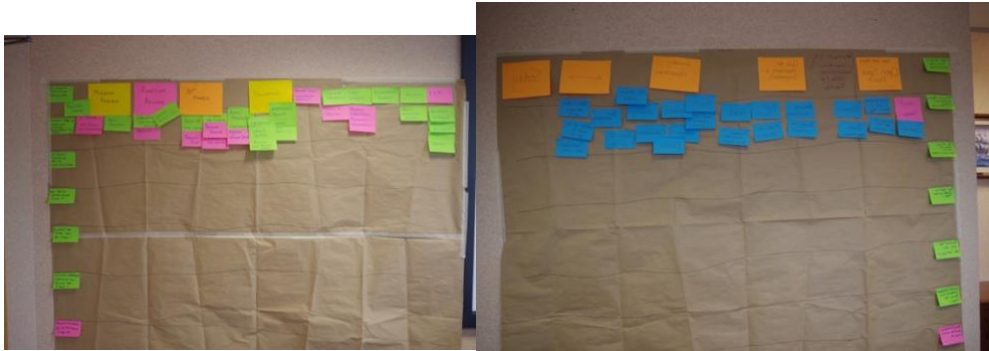


Figure 13 Figure 14

By visually juxtaposing these key activities, other competing organisational factors and conditions were revealed, that were affecting some participants acutely during this work. This concerned the fact that some of the ‘team’ were simultaneously involved in IIP accreditation, and/ or affected by staff leaving. I reflected on this with the group at the time.

*“Prioritisation in this context is really hard so it is stressful.. So, this, combined with IIP and people leaving, makes this undertaking really difficult” (Researcher Two-Column reflections- shared with the group in Workshop 2).*

Why did staff carry these pressures throughout this undertaking and not share them openly with their senior leadership team who had overall control of this planning process? Raelin maintains that power asymmetries “ cause either conscious or unconscious self-muting” among those who are “disenfranchised” (Raelin, 2016, p. 148).

Fletcher (2012) offers some additional contextual, systems perspectives on power, which may help shed some further light and insight concerning these moments of self-censorship. She maintains, with regards to relational practice within work settings that, in addition to a “gender power dynamic” , “ a more general power dynamic influencing relationality” exists, that is recognised within RCT (Fletcher, 2012, p. 92). She draws on the work of Miller (2012) and Jost (1997); both of whom acknowledge the unequal nature of certain power systems “ (e.g. iniquities based on race, class, organisational level, sex), it (therefore) behooves those with less power to be.. attuned to the needs, desires and implicit requests of the more powerful” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 92). In such systems “the more **‘powerful’**, (my emphasis), carry the entitlement of having others anticipate/respond to your needs without being asked” . For the less **‘powerful’** (my emphasis), their role is to “do the anticipating/accommodating without any expectation of reciprocity” (ibid).

With reference again to those accounts, regarding the pressures brought about by this work, these may therefore be interpreted as being characteristic of those less powerful staff being accommodating and willingly undertaking a substantially increased workload, (without being asked) and without any “expectation of reciprocity” and without further complaint.

## 7.8 Identifying the relational limits of the follower leader connection.

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This manner of conformity, or acquiescence, on the part of this group could feasibly be added to those “codified blueprints of the perfect follower”, that figure in many studies

on followership; namely the exhibiting of those “exemplary followership behaviours”, honesty integrity, courage etc.(Collinson, 2006, p. 183). Such categorisation is however viewed as somewhat of an oversimplification of followers’ behaviour, to conformist ideal types, neglecting any negative aspects of their behaviour (Bratton, Grint and Nielson, 2004 cited in Collinson, 2006 ). Foucault (1980) contends that such influence/power and control over others invariably creates resistance, resulting in acts of rebellion, or resistance. In these instances, characterised by self-censorship, no such rebellion, or defiance was prompted. This is in sharp contrast to the many instances elsewhere during this planning, when followers were visibly and even ‘courageously’ voicing their concerns constructively, relationally to their leaders, related to their decisions in the manner advocated by Chaleff (1997).

#### 7.8.1 Acknowledging the influence of history on participants’ experience of power dynamics.

Despite the corporate call for transparent communications and open and honest dialogue, being advocated in this housing association, other formative, leadership experiences may have had nonetheless an enduring impact on individuals’ perceptions of leadership, and these acts of compliance. Within this participatory paradigm of reality, grounded in our experiences and expressed in the practice of our lives, individual realities are constructed locally and informed by our own critical, subjective, experience(Reason, 1998). It is recognised that individuals never really escape their social and historical structures. Instead, they may become increasingly aware of them. “We are born into historical and cultural situations, where objects are already clothed with meaning” (Merleu-Ponty cited in Walsh, 1985, p. 531). The impact therefore of such formative leadership experiences within other hierarchical settings should

therefore not be dismissed. Fletcher, who worked with executives exploring similar issues found that individuals may find it difficult to recognise any such, subconscious, 'stereotypical' patterns of non-relational practice (Fletcher, 2012, p. 97). The key issue becomes rather how do " individuals involved", in these leadership relationships, "understand and reflect on opportunities to resist... the way we ourselves are actors in the discourse, perhaps unwittingly reinforcing the very dynamic we seek to interrupt(Fletcher, 2012, p. 96). Similarly, this group did reflect on the dynamics that were, unintentionally, being reinforced by them in some depth. This experience will be explored further in concluding section of this chapter. (See also Learning History: Joint Reflections on the Staff Conference)

#### 7.8.2 Recognising the impact of power asymmetries on follower leader relationships.

This is not to diminish in any way the desire on the part of the group to address "inequalities" at some level, by proposing a widening of stakeholder involvement in this process, horizontally and vertically, in active collaboration with their wider colleagues and subordinates and with the board respectively. Such views were expressed at several workshops. (See also Learning History: Developing On-going relationships with the Board).

However, there appear nonetheless to be certain limits, or boundaries, curtailing this desire to maintain and extend such relational working between and across levels.

I had started to identify the limits of such collaborative participation through my visual reading of the strategy, as it was first being presented to the Board, and then in turn to the full staff cohort at the conference. As previously considered in chapter 4, such visual

construction of events, when considered as a “cultural process”, or “set of practices... concerned with the production and exchange of meanings”, become symbolic, “representations... structuring the way people behave”(Rose, 2016, p. 2)

As noted previously, the differences were significant, in terms of the event design and the time and space afforded to these two different audiences, to give their due consideration to the strategic plan. It may therefore be interpreted, from this visual reading, that the more powerful audience to be influenced were in fact the board, as opposed to the staff. From an RCT perspective, the group’s dissatisfaction regarding how the strategy was to be presented to staff, once again did not result in any significant opposition, or challenge on their part. Once more, the group acquiesced, (without complaint), to the presentation format they considered had been imposed by their senior leaders. Once more the group were anticipating/ accommodating their senior leaders’ needs, without “any expectation of reciprocity” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 92)

### 7.8.3 Recognising relational versus non-relational, shared leadership practice.

In Drath’s conceptualisation of shared leadership, both the strategic planning activities, and the presentation of the same, conforms to the principle of “Relational Dialogue”, whereby:

“ people sharing work create leadership by (co-)constructing the meaning of direction, commitment and adaptive challenge” , the practice of which he too regards, like Fletcher, as a “strategic imperative” (Drath, 2001, pp. 152,161). In this sense, the locus of control over the construction of the plan itself lay beyond the personal possession, or indeed “personal expression” of any given, individual leader (Drath, 2001, p. 152).



However, by comparing and contrasting the nature and quality of the relational dialogue that occurred between Discoverers and Visioneers and Board, and subsequently wider staff groups, this highlights a distinctly contrasting attitude, and approach, as evidenced both through the visual reading, plus individual accounts of those involved. Staff in organisations who experience leadership from the perspective of the relational dialogue principle, can appreciate this fully “ whenever people are making sense of shared work” (Drath, 2001, p. 154) It is evident therefore that the such joint sensemaking was being enjoyed by Discoverers and Visioneers in relation to the board and SLT members, but that was not entirely the case, in relation to the wider staff.

#### 7.8.4 Recognising the limits of shared leadership practice with wider, staff groups.

The group reflected critically on their experience of presenting to the full staff group, using a creative problem-solving framework, applied to test out beliefs and assumptions referred to as (Theory of Inventive Problem Solving), or TRIZ. This approach seeks to acknowledge and address limiting assumptions, in a similar manner to Argyris’ Ladder of Inference. The application of this method encouraged further critical reflection on the groups’ presentations to staff, raising their awareness of the inherent assumptions driving their overall communication approach (See Learning History Joint Reflections on the Staff Conference). The Discoverers and Visioneers appreciated that this presentation was rather more reflective of what Fletcher (2012) refers to as non-relational practice. In particular, the morning presentations were not really in service of cultivating a Self-in-Relation stance, or outlook, where Fluidity of Expertise would be easily enacted for example. Quite the opposite. It appeared in places to be rather more

dysfunctional at times, where a “Top Down” communications approach, was being imparted.

*“It (The staff conference) was not experienced as a shared, or collaborative leadership responsibility with the wider staff at that point”* (Learning History. Joint Reflections... concerning the Full Staff Conference: Researcher reflections).

Drath (2001) also positions the significance of collective “sense making” or meaning making and the vital need for its cultivation in organisational processes, to facilitate understanding, direction, and alignment in the face of the adaptive challenges, which the leaders of this organisation recognised were being faced. **See corporate briefing extract: Appendix N.**

#### 7.8.5 Unintended reinforcement of power asymmetries by Discoverers and Visioneers.

Such relational dialogue processes, explored earlier in this chapter, were evidently engrained in the culture of this organisation and as such facilitated far greater “perspective taking (and giving), reframing, suspending assumptions” etc.(Drath,2001,p.153). In general this organisation’s approach to relational dialogue generally afforded far greater opportunities for reciprocity-in-action; in ways that recognise “ the importance of individuals working together within relationships, leading to consensus as they share back and forth” (Miller and Stiver, 1997 cited in Lewis and Olshansky, 2016, p. 388).

This cultural backdrop provides a stark contrast, where the final presentation, by this group to wider staff, is concerned. They demonstrate at that moment, adoption of “ The Principle of Interpersonal Influence” (Drath, 2001, p. 153). These are “leaders’, who

at that moment, represent the executive and board, and who have “emerged (as a result of) reasoning and negotiating as (those) with the most influence over direction who (are) thus best able to gain commitment” from other staff (ibid). However, in this ‘role’, the group admitted that, on reflection, they had unwittingly reinforced those more negative, aspects of such power asymmetries, which they too had previously experienced in other staff forums.

*“There’s a difference between “Having a Say” and “Making a Contribution”*

(Discoverer: Group ICT Assistant)

*“Sometimes when you are given an idea and they (leaders/managers) say: “Right I want you to see that through”. It’s less easy for you to get enthusiastic about that”.*

(Visioneer 12: Community Investment Officer)

#### 7.8.6 Hypothesising a more relational approach to the launch of this strategy with staff.

It is useful to evaluate this groups’ final encounter with the wider staff against Fletcher’s relational practice rubric. With the benefit of hindsight, in our fourth workshop, the group did acknowledge that their orientation and approach towards their peers may, unwittingly, have had more in common, at times, with non-relational practice. This is where a more individualistic, more stereotypically heroic/” masculine”, leadership style and approach was being enacted, with a focus on the “task” of rapidly disseminating the strategic vision, without really seeking significant “input”, or contributions to that plan from fellow colleagues at that point, e.g. relating to implementation etc. See

*Table 7 Relational Practice Versus Nonrelational Practice and Relational Malpractice*  
 ((Fletcher, 2010, p. 131)

<b>Relational Practice Versus Nonrelational Practice and Relational Malpractice</b>		
<b>1 Nonrelational Practice</b>	<b>2 Relational Practice</b>	<b>3 Relational Malpractice</b>
<b>Dysfunctionally command and control Self Task</b>	<b>Relationally intelligent Self-in-relation Create conditions where task can get done (process and task)</b>	<b>Dysfunctionally relational Other Process</b>
<b>Knows everything (never gets input) Authoritarian Good for my career?</b>	<b>Fluid expertise (nature of task decides) Authoritative Is it good for the work?</b>	<b>Knows nothing (always gets input) Authority-less Will they like me?</b>
<b>Concerned with enacting masculine gender identity</b>	<b>Concerned with doing good work</b>	<b>Concerned with enacting feminine gender identity</b>

These critical reflections serve a powerful purpose within the learning history, by providing a critical account from those involved of their experiences, processes, and activities, and from which all involved, could invariably learn to inform future, relational leadership practice. Additionally, such accounts reveal the palpable influence of power dynamics, significantly affecting key aspects this undertaking. This builds on Raelin's proposed solution for making progress with the practice of collaborative agency in organisations, encouraging the creation of a 'voice' for all, through participant directed learning. This is achieved, not simply through modelling highly tolerant and empathic behaviours, as evidenced here, but also the commitment to on-going organisational learning, prompted by reflective practice and facilitation, to therefore reframe and

“challenge existing assumptions and beliefs” , in this instance those associated with power asymmetries and non-relation practices (Raelin, 2016, p. 149).

## 7.9 Conclusion.

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This chapter has involved a more forensic examination of those relational dimensions of fluidity of expertise, vulnerability, and reciprocity, in order to provide an expanded view of shared leadership-in-action. This is to elicit a greater understanding of the nuanced nature of such relational activity and associated interactions. It is akin to viewing a film in slow motion, in order to appreciate those relational micro processes more fully, that inform and make up this shared leadership experience. In that way, vulnerability becomes less associated with conventional notions of weakness and instead a catalyst to learning, creative thinking and action. Reciprocity-in-action has been demonstrated through the systematic application of this organisation’s 7 C s relational leadership framework. As such it demonstrates those more nuanced qualities that make up the “to and fro” of these relational interactions, that occurred. It also highlights the differentiated qualities and powerful role of challenge throughout, demonstrated as a rigorous, empowering and even courageous practice on the part of these followers.

Finally, the appreciable presence of power dynamics is seen to be both positively and negatively influencing, at different times, the attitude, and actions of these Discoverers and Visioneers. From a positive perspective, and linked to this practice of challenge, it has resulted in significant empowerment and influence, in terms of shaping both strategy and informing the development of their own work practices. Such power

dynamics have also played out subconsciously leading to, at key moments, an unwitting reinforcement of control over others.

Considering once again the broad aims of this chapter, the manner in which these relational dimensions have been examined has enabled the nature of the 'relationality' itself, experienced by followers engaged within this shared leadership undertaking to be effectively explicated. Their 'voice', both here and in preceding chapters, 4,5, and 6, provides a rich demonstration of the less conventionally accepted attitudes, behaviours, and practices, that make up this particular relational approach, in support of creative and collaborative strategic planning across the hierarchy.

The processual nature of shared leadership, demonstrated over time has also been effectively developed and explicated within this chapter. Specifically, the enactment of Fluidity of Expertise as a high-level organisational/organising process has been demonstrated, where knowledge and expertise are richly expressed as consciously and dynamically shifting, from one party to another.

At the follower level, such fluidity of expertise- in – action is encapsulated by the skilled, coaching style, “7Cs” process, that systematically facilitates “thinking together” in such collaborations.

Such investigation of these experiences, from the follower perspective over time, has meant accordingly that shifting power relationships could be effectively critiqued, by shining a light on the often-hidden influence of power dynamics, occurring due to differences in power structures at the organisational level, but also the influence that characterises wider, societal power structures. The intended, as well as the unintended consequences of such power influences as therefore been captured within this chapter.

In my concluding chapter, these findings will be drawn together, to inform my achievements and contributions to the field, related to the lived experience of shared leadership from a followers' perspective.

**Beginning with personal reflections....**

This research journey has been invaluable for me, as a coach, leadership consultant and facilitator of leadership teams. To that end, it has already been influencing my practice in new and unexpected ways. For example, my inclusion of such, new, shared leadership topics as “Creating Trust based Vulnerability in Teams”, would previously not have figured explicitly in my leadership work within the public sector, working with teams. . It does now. Previously, I would have theoretically acknowledged the importance of such facets, rather than fully appreciating their significance within leadership collaboration. Such recognition of our relational interdependence has become much more important to my work with public sector leaders, who themselves are increasingly seeking to overcome the conventional boundaries of their functional roles and accountability, in favour of co-creating solutions, to collectively address complex, adaptive, challenges, in line with their common purposes, or service goals (Grint, 2008). My learning on this research journey has also influenced my coaching practice. As such application of potentially, discomfiting skills and practices of vulnerability, or challenge, are now being reframed and explicitly addressed with others, within my coaching relationships, as potential sources of creativity, new understanding, and learning. I also believe I had somewhat underestimated the reciprocal nature of these working relationships- coaching, teaching, and facilitation relationships with others. It is now that the inherent opportunities for mutual learning and growth are being explicitly



acknowledged in this work, and built upon, to better serve these relationships and my own leadership practice as it evolves.

Additionally, the image/filmmaker in me has been satisfied, by bringing this unique story to life with others, in a multi-media manner. The intention is that this learning history may inspire and stimulate readers in their leadership thinking and action. It is therefore aimed at the following audiences:

- Aspiring staff and board members at this organisation, or elsewhere.
- HR professionals seeking to appreciate the effort involved in shifting to a more collaborative leadership culture.
- Other researchers seeking to extend their understanding of shared leadership and / or methodological repertoire.

Finally, the practical knowing contained within this story and the resulting thesis may interest those senior leaders, seeking to work in more relational ways, and to explore with their teams, the rich interconnectedness that binds our endeavours. To that end, I am reminded of the words of Rumi, who perfectly expresses our need for connection with others.

***“Be grateful for whoever comes because each has been sent as a guide from beyond”.***

## 8.1 Overview of my contribution to knowledge.

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My contribution reflects the following propositions:

### **Beyond a discrete conceptualisation of follower “voice” within shared leadership.**

This study has facilitated a ‘rethink’ of some of the predominant attitudes and assumptions related to followers and followership, in favour of recognising and embracing their power and potential in new ways. Subsequently, we have moved somewhat beyond the more traditional conceptualisations of “follower voice”, that “expression of self, *verbally*, through *action*, or *both*”, (my emphasis), and followership, within hierarchical settings (Kelley, 2008, p. 11) This conceptualisation has conventionally been depicted as “those who are led by managers or executives who possess the authority to delegate work and have ultimate accountability for results” (Morasso and Mierzwa, 2012, p. 1).

“Traditionally, we have viewed the world from a leadership-centric vantage point’, a view that still prevails (Kelley, 2008, p. 11). In contrast, this study provides is a far deeper appreciation of the degree of *interdependence* occurring between followers and their leaders, plus a recognition of the deeper levels of mutual knowledge, understanding and learning that can occur as a result.

This provides a countervailing view to the dominant research perspective, that persists in public sector leadership studies, where the focus of study still favours those individual “powerful” leaders (Ospina and Foldy, 2016). By conceiving of followers and

followership in a social, collectivist and relational way, this study demonstrably appreciates the lack of any one dominant, or controlling individual, in favour of a much more dynamic reading of connected and collective leadership positions, and perspectives. As discussed in chapter 7, this is in keeping with trends in collective leadership studies more generally (Schlappa, 2021)

#### 8.1.1 Considering emotion within shared leadership relationships.

The contribution of emotion in the examination of collective leadership is often underestimated, or even ignored. I have advocated for its usefulness, to profoundly enrich our knowledge and our understanding regarding shared leadership, from the followers' perspective. Such recognition of emotion in this thesis has also unlocked the opportunity to examine power dynamics differently, recognising the highs and the lows, and even the potential barriers to be overcome, in such leadership work.

In this thesis we have sought to understand and explicate the nature of the phenomenon that is the relationality that followers experience, as they concertedly share leadership. To that end, this thesis embraces emotionality, through exploring the lived experience of these followers, *their* feelings, and *their* emotions. It is the foundation stone in the process of understanding the nature of relating and relationships achieved through such collaboration.

*"Emotion has become once again an accepted means of social expression"..*

*"feelings and emotion are embedded in cultural learning... and practices, of which work organisations are inevitably a part" (Fineman, 2003, p. 9)*

This represents a shift beyond the notable work of Goleman(2008) and others; see for instance (Ashkansay, Humphrey and inseed, 2017), proponents of the role affect and emotional intelligence play as the requisite tools of leadership influence, and which themselves are so often characterised as key competencies, or discrete skills. What is missing from such perspectives is essentially a recognition of what *actually* may be involved, for those directly concerned with bringing this emotional tool kit effectively to life. This study has demonstrated the emotional experience-in-action; in particular how expressions of vulnerability, mutuality, connection/dis-connection, response-ability etc. are being directly experienced by those involved and how these in turn influence the approaches to and operationalisation of shared leadership in this organisational setting.

#### 8.1.2 Explicating reciprocity-in-action within the follower/leader relationship.

As has been demonstrated in this thesis, there is demonstrable value in cultivating such relational interdependence, as evidenced throughout this collaboration. Although a somewhat novel occurrence within this sector, it is certainly not a new one. Mary Parker Follett (1970) draws on the analogy of the teacher/ student relationship, to propose a different view of the interactive nature pertaining to leader-follower relationships, which notably takes account of differences in status.

*“(T)here is the idea of reciprocal leadership. The relationship is also an interdependent one” (Follett, 1970, p. 137).*

This echoes the ambition that defines RCT, that dynamic “Fluidity of Expertise” passing between followers and leaders and vice versa, in the joint pursuit of mutual learning, teaching and information exchange, that was occurring here (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007;

Fletcher, 2012). It is precisely such reciprocity that elevates the status and power of followers considerably in this study, in a manner not usually appreciated to this extent in the followership literature.

Certainly, the symbiotic nature of the leader follower dynamic is itself acknowledged by writers on this topic. However, the 'how', or *actual* experience of these working relationships in action, is not that well understood. To that end, this study has sought to explicate such reciprocity-in-action, through the identification and enactment of those significant shared leadership processes and practices, identified in this study, that support the dynamic operationalisation of "Fluidity of Expertise" between organisational actors, within a hierarchical context (Fletcher, 2012). In this context, I am referring to the positive enactment of vulnerability and challenge, that have been examined as key leadership practices and extensively operationalised within this undertaking. I am also referring to the high-level relational leadership framework, (7Cs), that has systematically informed the overall approach to this collaboration, as much as informing the dialogical approach more generally. The in-depth review of this framework's component elements therefore facilitates a more detailed understanding of such micro-processes-in-action, which is often not apparent within shared leadership studies. This in turn informs our understanding of how dialogue and negotiation, leading to effective joint decision-making were navigated by those involved.

### 8.1.3 Deconstructing power dynamics within follower leader relationships

The dynamic nature of power and influence occurring within this shared leadership work has been identified and examined from various epistemological perspectives; from

follower-leader experiences and accounts to other presentational episodes detailing contrasting, power positions being played out. This speaks to the locus of this study, which lies within the dynamic flow itself between following and leading, that has been demonstrated within this thesis, rather than fixating, exclusively on stable leadership roles, or positions. This study demonstrates a rather, different expression of follower power, through follower 'voice'; their words and action being potentially transformational for this organisation's work and strategic direction.

As Kellerman asserts:

*"The 21<sup>st</sup> century is destined to be different. Instead of leaders calling most every shot, followers will have more say, more often than they ever did before"*

(Kellerman, 2007, p. 25).

This study therefore posits a different view, by identifying and exploring the ***interdependence***, that occurs between followers and in relation to their leaders, which can lead to mutual growth and development for all involved.

#### 8.1.4 Contribution to methodology and notable developments in the application of learning history methodology

I have sought to evolve the learning history 'genre' somewhat through an innovative application of this action research methodology, to provide expanded and enriched perspectives regarding the lived experience of shared leadership, as it was occurring, for the benefit of those directly involved and more widely.

Notably, this learning history reflects the aspirations of the earlier participatory action research tradition of empowering new voices to be heard, and achieved through an inclusive and collaborative, research approach; one that gives primacy to the voice of those not usually 'leading' and learning from such learning and change efforts, accordingly (Park, 1993; Shah, 2001) In that sense it remains faithful to the spirit of this research tradition, by authentically capturing, and collaboratively facilitating the expression of the follower voice; representing **their** stories, emotions and **their** presentational accounts of sharing leadership, in collaboration with an ethnographic visitor to their world of work.

There are several important differences in the construction of this 'jointly told tale', that differentiate this learning history from its predecessors.

- In the data collection and data distillation phases, key data that was produced and reflected upon by participants during workshops included visual data; specifically, their visual depictions, illustrating their feelings, attitudes, activities, and experiences, during the process.
- Additionally, other less conventional, qualitative research methods were utilised, such as Freefall Writing, etc.

Such methods facilitate an examination of key aspects of these lived experiences, in their immediate aftermath. This helps avoid a key problem with other forms of 1<sup>st</sup> person and 2<sup>nd</sup> person inquiries, oral history interviews for example, where there is a distinct danger of " bias induced by memory lapses and distortions Grele (1998: cited in Bryman. A., 2012).

Secondly, such research methods, seek to capture and explore the often, unconscious feelings and emotions associated with a particular event, or episode, by bypassing

conscious thought processes (Gearty, 2017). This reinforces the point made earlier in this section, which celebrates the role and contribution of emotion and feeling in research, as enablers of learning about cultural processes and practices; in this case relating to how these followers have cultivated particular outlooks and attitudes, skills, and operational activities, adopted to support sharing leadership within this particular organisational context. The recognition of feeling and emotion through the considered application of this collaborative learning history methodology in turn gives rise to greater situated knowledge of those shared leadership dimensions being described here.

## 8.2 Reflections of findings and methods and their limitations

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It is perhaps unsurprising to learn that this shared leadership space is complex, dynamic, even messy. Despite my attempts to encapsulate these key shared leadership experiences, processes, and operational practices within a propositional expression for this thesis, such attempts still represent somewhat of an approximation of the shared leadership phenomenon itself, as directly experienced by my co-researchers. This also highlights the situational limitations of my approach. Whereas the application of the learning history methodology itself may be usefully transferred to other organisational settings, to explore other leadership phenomena, the 'outputs', or findings themselves remain local, or contextually specific.



### 8.2.1 The universal power of story.

Another reflection concerns the fact that, while this study's findings are localised and specific, and by implication somewhat limited in terms of being able to present generalised findings, despite that, these stories in and of themselves have universal qualities, inviting the reader to relate to, and empathise with these characters' experiences, and to learn from that accordingly (Gearty, 2009). As such these episodes of organisational life speak to the mythic imperative, which is often underreported in organisational life, and which informs our sense making and our need for meaning (Roth and Kleiner, 1998). Nevertheless, appreciating such lived experience from this mythic perspective provides a significant learning opportunity for other leaders in similar situations.

Also, despite my best efforts to compile and reflect findings to my fellow co-researchers in a timely manner, as part of the research cycles of action and reflection, that underpinned this study, my perspective is invariably partial, or limited, in terms of being able to fully capture every aspect, or nuance of this undertaking. Therefore, the need during these sessions to test assumptions, challenge findings together and to draw on other ways of 'knowing', was vital, to mitigate the effects of a singular viewpoint on this topic.

Covid notwithstanding, it may also have been useful to test out key aspects of the final learning history narrative once more with this wider stakeholder group, staff, senior leaders and even board members, by conducting a final learning review related to our key findings.

### 8.2.2 Reflections on methods.

This study has sought to provide an enriched understanding of the nature of sharing leadership responsibility, within a specific time frame and a specific set of organisational circumstances. When the opportunity arose to participate in this research undertaking, the intention was to explore this domain of shared leadership experience with this group of followers, with a view, not just to “exploring (such) practice, (but also) being transformative of it” , in some way (Heron and Reason, 2001, p. 183). By conducting a co-operative inquiry, in the manner set out in this study, I have reflected on the need for pragmatism, necessitated by this research approach. The ‘transformational’ intention was originally that, this learning history should directly contribute to the on-going “practical knowing”; i.e., the development of leadership practice, for them, plus others like them. They should have been able to directly access this guide, and be inspired not simply by the story, but also by the leadership provocations, reflections and questions posed therein. However, due to the Covid pandemic, such an opportunity was curtailed, as staff at this housing association had to turn their immediate attention to other, more urgent priorities. Also, this resulted in the final stage, of what Roth and Kleiner refer to in their learning history framework as “Dissemination”, being somewhat truncated (1998). Although this learning history was disseminated to participants and the board, it was not effectively integrated into a proposed leadership development programme, as was originally anticipated. Therefore, further consideration of this shared leadership ‘pilot’ and its impact on these leaders’ outlook experiences and practices, remains unknown.

### 8.2.3. Pragmatic application of co-operative inquiry principles.

Another reflection concerns the extent to which the creation of this learning history remained truly faithful to the pure ideals, or principles, regarding conducting a co-operative inquiry *with* people. While we were able to adhere faithfully to such principles of “interplay between reflection... and action” and the adoption of “agreed inquiry cycles, moving several times between reflection and action” , it is not true to say that all subjects were “ fully involved as co-researchers in all research decisions” (Heron and Reason, 2001, p. 179).

While all content was openly shared, jointly negotiated and collectively agreed throughout, the research methods explored here, were not. Rather, the decision to adopt and customise mixed, qualitative methods, reflected my expertise as a facilitator and coach. As such this deployment of my expertise was a response to address the time limitations for the volunteer research participants, who could not break off from their day-to-day activities, to invest a considerable amount of time, either co-designing, or running the co-operative inquiry itself.

In a way these adaptations of the method speak to the pragmatic, research tradition, whereby “ inquiry is an investigation to understand some part of the reality and to create knowledge to bring change to that part of the reality”, much like Roth and Kleiner’s original learning histories (Dewey (1931,1938) : cited in Kaushik and Walsh, 2019, p. 5) To that end, such inquiry is informed by certain important, epistemological considerations including: that knowledge is generated as a direct result of experiences, that are socially shared, in order to support improvement, at some level (ibid). Therefore, on reflection, while this inquiry’s transformational ambition was a key motivator of this research on my part, the more likely, pragmatic reality is, its

informative, explanatory contribution, relating to the nature of shared leadership as it was being experienced, i.e., “socially constructed”, by those directly involved.

#### 8.2.4 Learning History versus mixed methods approach.

The efficacy of learning histories is also an important, related point. A mixed methods approach that consisted of qualitative interviews and focus groups, combined with secondary data, would have been a more efficient, timely approach to this study. It undoubtedly would have produced some useful results related to this study’s first two objectives, i.e., consideration of the lived, felt, experience of followers and concerning those key processes and practices, informing this shared leadership undertaking. However, there were additional benefits of being able to observe experiences in situ., or in their immediate aftermath; thereby embracing these extended epistemologies fully, to provide a much richer account of feelings, attitudes, reflections etc. Also, the impact of power dynamics may not have been fully drawn out, without being able to analyse these presentational accounts of the same.

Overall, by extending my research method palette to effectively reflect these extended epistemologies, this has facilitated a much more processual, on-going, and dynamic reading of shared leadership within this hierarchical setting. This study has therefore, in its own way sought to address some of the challenges set out by Uhl-Bien (2006) and Fairhurst *et al.*, (2020) concerning empirically reflecting the processual nature of such collective leadership activity, plus the often ontological mismatch occurring, between the examination of such pluralistic leadership phenomena and research methods adopted for such an undertaking.

### 8.3 Opportunities for further research.

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It has become apparent to me that further opportunities exist, to explore the following: To expand our understanding of the nature of shared leadership from a follower perspective, as it may be occurring within different organisational contexts, e.g. within other hierarchical, public/social sector settings; where shared leadership may be tentatively described as “an unequal influence relationship that produces direction” (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016 cited in Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020, p. 607). This is significant, given the call for greater collective involvement in addressing complex issues in our organisations, and where typologies of roles and skills already exist, to address such complexity: See for example Johansen (2013b), Kotter (2012), Arena *et al.* (2017).

Their accounts, however, do not necessarily enlighten those who may oversee and, or facilitate the adoption of such approaches, nor support those leaders, who may be directly involved. Being therefore able to consider how such roles and skills practically translate into action, into significant, leadership practices and activities, alongside staffs’ experiences of such practical application, could therefore be pivotal in the consideration and take-up of new, or different strategies, supporting collective action in complex work settings. Therefore new research should aim to capture “the lived experience of collective leadership, in relation to hierarchy (as) a dynamic and on-going process” (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020, p. 608).

Despite the increased interest in shared leadership in professional disciplines such as education, health, management etc., there is still much more opportunity to increase our understanding of what constitutes shared leadership within specific local contexts. This is in terms of appreciating more fully the degree to which leadership influence is

being shared, or not, and how that is being realised, or not, in practice. Such conceptualisation still remains under researched within this field of study (Lord *et al.*, 2017). This study itself represents one attempt to address these questions, as they relate to the nature and the extent of shared leadership influence within a specific, localised context, but there is much more opportunity to research the nature of shared leadership, as it is being operationalised over time.

A related point concerns those factors, or antecedents that affect the emergence of shared leadership within a given organisation. By drawing on Relational Cultural Theory as a guiding framework to inform my expanded conceptualisation of shared leadership and followership, I have been able to recognise and account for some significant precursors by way of organisational development interventions and policies, that have directly underpinned and supported the emergence and practice of this shared leadership phenomenon. There is therefore an opportunity to examine which cultural and other organisational factors, e.g. structure, etc. would therefore effectively drive, or even impede the development and sustainability of such collective/shared leadership approaches, in other organisational settings. Once again this would address help to address the relative deficit of inquiry into this area, which I elaborated on in Chapter 2, which is characterised as “still in its infancy” (Zhu *et al.*, 2018, p. 847).

### 8.3.1 Exploring other aspects of shared leadership.

Within the scope of this thesis, I have prioritised certain leadership topics over others, in response to certain patterns, that emanated from our cycles of inquiry.

There may be further opportunity to explore other aspects of this undertaking, with regards to other shared leadership themes and perspectives that have emerged, informing relational/collaborative outlooks, and, or other dynamic followership and leadership practices, leading to mutual learning and growth, or otherwise. Other aspects of this relationship that emphasise reciprocity and reveal more about leadership interdependence in organisational life, could therefore provide a counter view, to the more conventional, idealised notions of leadership independence, that still dominate much of leadership discourse.

### 8.4 Addressing power issues within collective leadership settings.

The topic of power in these relational, follower/ leader arrangements is significant and merits further investigation. This thesis moves away from an exclusive focus on either one side, or the other, of the power dichotomy, where such relationships are assumed to be either wholly positively, or negatively conceived, to one where the more nuanced nature of power dynamics that may occur, has been explicated. This itself is worthy of further research due to the lack of studies exploring power dynamics, occurring within such interdependent relationships, that prevail in our public sector organisations. It would also be interesting, to explore further how such power dynamics may be experienced, and operationalised through collective leadership practices, where leadership is considered to reside beyond the group settings that inform this study. This

includes power dynamics that prevail within wider system settings and leadership configurations.

### 8.3.2 Evolving the learning history genre.

With reference to the research challenges set out by Fairhurst et al. (2020, p. 608) ,to capture “ relational, experiential and temporal details in both collective and hierarchical leadership” there is therefore merit in advancing the learning history further as a research methodology, to facilitate more dynamic investigation of this order. This ‘genre’ offers great potential to facilitate such understanding, while additionally, as an artefact in its own right, it offers a highly accessible route to reflection, learning and understanding of key organisational issues, for both the academic and the non-academic audience; to therefore support learning and practice in leadership topics, or otherwise. There is much more scope to embrace extended epistemologies in this regard, vis a vis accessing experiential and presentational forms of knowing, as advocated by Seeley and Reason for example (Seeley, 2011; Seeley and Reason, 2008).

This includes: the use of highly accessible and inclusive research methods such as smart phones, in order to capture key events and experiences, via digital audio, video, and photographic images/representations of key events and activities. These in turn may be collated and analysed via digital web site platforms to construct such living histories of organisational life. Additionally, other ‘bricolage’ methods involving working with whatever is at hand, such as performance/role play, or constellation work, collage, making etc., these may also play their part, in accessing such organisational spaces, in



more kinaesthetic, embodied ways, that engage and inspire as well as inform and educate.

#### 8.4 Further discussion of contribution.

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##### **Reframing Notions of Followers and Followership**

In this thesis, I have sought to recast followers and followership in a more positive light, through an extensive and in-depth examination of their powerful, shared leadership experiences with their peers and in relation to their senior leaders. In that respect, this thesis challenges some of the more negative connotations that may surround this concept; connotations that include powerlessness, or subservience, for instance (Uhl-Bien, 2018). For many who are not researchers in this area leaders remain stubbornly privileged (Uhl-Bien, 2018). Some go as far as problematising the follower in the leader follower equation, that characterises much leadership theory (Kempster, Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2021).

The followers, who figure in this study, are a far cry from such connotations, that can verge on caricature. Their ‘voice’, i.e., their story and actions, that make up their motivations, skill, expertise, and activities within this study, provides a welcome contrast in this debate.

Followers have been unapologetically privileged in this study. They have demonstrated a quality of leadership relationship-in-collaboration in powerful and meaningful ways. This accords with the key tenets of followership theory, where a more balanced view of leadership is proposed, where leadership is

“ a relationship in which outcomes are jointly determined, i.e. co-produced by those acting as leaders and those acting as followers (Shamir, 2007 cited in ; Uhl-Bien, 2018)

#### 8.4.1 Challenging letting go of followership.

Others, go as far as to propose that, variously letting go of notions of both follower and leader is liberating, enabling:

“ emphasis and attention to the dynamic practices of leading and following within the line manager-direct report relationship” (Kempster, Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2021, p. 119).

Such an orientation paves the way for greater attention to be paid to the context, processes, and outcomes of leading and following (ibid). This study demonstrates sympathy for this orientation, as I have sought to recognise and account for the contextual influences and relational processes and dynamic practices, that make up such interactions.

Despite these dichotomous positions, organisational hierarchies continue to prevail, especially within most public /social sector organisations, where power asymmetries are likely to be accommodated, due to proscribed roles that have been hierarchically defined, in relation to subordinates and line reports. Whatever your position, the call for greater collaboration within and beyond teams persists, driven by reasons of increasing complexity. This is a call for greater involvement in those leadership decisions, that historically would have been within the ‘gift’, of those in more senior positions. The need therefore to understand even more about what is involved in practice, in undertaking such collective leadership activity is vital, given such complexity,

or “rich interconnectedness”, that characterises the 21<sup>st</sup> century operating environment (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017).

#### 8.4.2 Reading emotion: Re-igniting the relational space within shared leadership.

This window on the lived experience of followers during this endeavour, provides an important placeholder, in terms of understanding the nature of relating within a collaborative context, and in terms of how that is being approximated, or emotionally navigated by those involved. Also, by accessing this lived experience, we are invited to empathise, as much as rationalise, about what it means to be involved in actively collaborating, in sharing leadership.

This study marks a distinct shift away from the persistent trend, identified by Reitz (2014, p. 32), regarding the notable absence of studies focusing on the experiential, “non-linguistic processes of relating”, i.e., those concerned with the affective and embodied sense of relating, characterising the body of work “Advancing Relational Leadership Research”, (2012). Notable exceptions include: (Bathurst and Cain, 2013; Ladkin, 2013b). Even those relational leadership studies within that volume, embracing affect or emotional processes, these are typically positioned within an entity frame of reference, where discrete variables, located within individual ‘knowing’ minds are studied. This is in order to determine the positive impacts, or otherwise, of a given leadership relationship (Ashkansay, Paulsen and Tee, 2012). Therefore, reading emotion in this thesis, as it has been occurring within these shared leadership relationships, instead, facilitates a (re) connection to our own lived experience. It invites

us to inquire, reflect on and potentially recalibrate our own assumptions and ideas of what it may take to fully relate in this manner, with a view to action.

Reading emotion also facilitates a better understanding concerning the nature of power dynamics, that infuse these shared leadership relationships and can therefore provide insights concerning how these may be successfully navigated, or otherwise. Through the consideration of emotionality within this shared leadership setting, it has been demonstrated that power dynamics in such hierarchical relationships are not necessarily negatively conceived, in the manner outlined by Collinson (2011), or Gordon (2011). In fact, quite the opposite. Empowerment was positively experienced throughout much of this undertaking. For some, this sense of empowerment persisted, even after the completion of this work and was positively informing their working relationships with peers and wider staff groups.

#### 8.5 The operationalisation of Fluidity of Expertise: Expressing vulnerability and challenge at work.

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In line with this study's objectives, I have sought to recognise and examine not just the "where", and "why" of shared leadership, but significantly the "how"; in other words, the actual ways in which leadership has been shared latterly, vertically, or otherwise, within this organisational context. Through the adoption of RCT as a guiding relational leadership framework, I have therefore been able to account for "fluidity in expertise-in-action. The fostering of such relational conditions within this organisation has provided the necessary driving force, to enable all those involved, "operating from a Self-in-Relation stance", to progress at key moments towards a "dynamic state of

Mutual Authenticity” (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p. 283). This has facilitated honest and open expression regarding key strategic matters, which are founded on mutual trust. Of all those RCT dimensions informing a reading of shared leadership, within this learning history and thesis, I have argued for recognition of fluidity of expertise, as it was being operationalised in two ways:

- Firstly, informing the high-level organisational processes and activities that characterised this specific, strategic planning undertaking.
- Secondly, in this study it is also characterised as an embedded practice, that consolidated these shared leadership relationships.

In this study fluidity of expertise has been deconstructed; that

“shifting of power (and expertise) from one party to another”, over time and within given episodes, or interactions, whereby one’s own skills and knowledge are therefore being openly shared and even customised, or “tailored for others” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 88).

It is predicated in this organisation on a partnership ethos, in the Follett sense (1970), whereby all become empowered, through actively “stepping away from the expert role, in order to facilitate learning and influence from other(s)” (Fletcher, 1999, p. 64) This is coupled with the “ expectation that others possess these skills” and are “motivated to use them” regardless of status (ibid).

#### 8.5.1 The operationalisation of fluidity of expertise – The practice of vulnerability.

It is this interdependence that enables, what I have argued to be, a much more positive conceptualisation of vulnerability to be realised. Being vulnerable in this context, becomes a gateway for professional learning and growth, as well as the creative exploration of new organisational solutions, informing this strategic plan. However, suggesting that vulnerability may be positively received within organisational life, in any meaningful way, is not commonplace. Consider the mythical story of Achilles, whose own mother sought to protect him from any sort of invulnerability, except for one point- his heel- which as we learn was exposed in battle with disastrous consequences. The message is clear. Do not expose any weakness. Newton (2015) writes that “myths are symbolic and significant stories- (their) meaning is shared through our joint social and cultural narratives and from these myths or stories we derive concepts and ideas about who we are and how we relate. The social systems that we generate as a result can become normalized and accepted as inevitable” (Newton, 2015, p. 31). In such systems exposing one’s vulnerability can quickly become regarded as weakness, and that can lead to disaster.

#### 8.5.2 Vulnerability conceived in growth terms.

By comparison, within Relational Cultural Theory, RCT, vulnerability is much more positively conceived and supported within leadership relations. In this study it became evident that the process and practice of vulnerability was mainly, positively experienced by those involved.

It is evident that relationship is pivotal to the positive realisation, or expression of vulnerability, as it was manifested throughout this undertaking. This enabled the

associated feelings of uncertainty, risk and even legitimacy at times, to be mitigated and managed. Here, vulnerability is identifiable as a gateway to learning, with the implication that these followers and their leaders were thereby empowered to move out of their “Comfort Zones”, to some extent, in order to extend their skills, knowledge, strategies and their relationships (Vygotsky, 1962). Hence, there is ample evidence of how they all experience at times distinct discomfort, uncertainty and even some measure of cognitive and emotional conflict, experienced when new information is being presented, that may challenge prior beliefs, assumptions, and ideas (ibid).

#### 8.5.3 Practices supporting vulnerability.

It has also been identified that, the key leadership practices that were actively promoted and applied, supporting Reciprocity-in-Action, (7 C s relational framework), these represent a kind of platform, or supporting scaffold, whereby vulnerability could therefore be positively embraced by followers and their leaders, with the purpose of cultivating mutual learning, creativity, and growth. It is vulnerability, carried through relationship, that facilitates such growth, development and learning and which was being expressed through such social interaction; which is itself critical to such flourishing (Vygotsky, 1962). At its heart, it is the state of the shared leadership relationship itself, its cultivation and its application in the ways described throughout this study, that creates permission, even protection for vulnerability to be expressed.

#### 8.5.4 The operationalisation of Fluidity of Expertise: The practice of challenge.

The skill and practice of challenge has played a demonstrable role in support of organisational learning and adaptive, strategic change. Interestingly, the idea of challenge itself does not feature explicitly as a key tenet of the RCT leadership framework. Given its specific application here, it evidently provides a suitable 'fit' within this relational arena. Challenge, as it was being enacted in this organisational context, was a key aspect of relational dialogue and embraced important facets of key RCT tenets. For instance, challenge was informing mutuality, where experiences and perspectives are being openly shared with others, in order that each party could understand more fully the others' experience. Importantly, challenge was being constructed on strong, relational foundations, which included a range of rapport building activities, more usually associated with coaching and mentoring settings, that paved the way for a quality of dialogue that would generate new insights, ideas, and options for change.

Uhl-Bien and Arena in their work on the leadership of complexity (2016) describe those operating conditions, which are reflected in this housing association's corporate policy statements., and which necessitated the cultivation of a "Culture of Shared Leadership".

Such challenges for leadership must be met, in order to avoid the approaching the future feeling overwhelmed and chaotic, where " there is a growing sense of dismay about what the future holds and the inability to control it" (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017, p. 9). This helps explain the senior leaders' motivation, to embrace the diverse perspectives and views of Discoverers and Visioneers, plus at key points the wider staff and board. This paved a way to systematically address such complexity, by providing a



collective and unique, “adaptive response”<sup>8</sup> to formulating these key leadership decisions.

#### 8.5.5 Integrating vulnerability and challenge within shared leadership.

Having considered these two key relational practices informing the overall shared leadership dynamic, it is interesting to note that, such relational practices may appear somewhat paradoxical, when aligned within this shared leadership endeavour. Both, on first reading appear to be more readily associated with the more negative, even destructive aspects, of collaborative encounters in the workplace. Instead, their application here facilitated a powerful and authentic ‘voice’ for those followers in their strategic work, with enduring results. Both these practices, in their way, catalyse a two-way flow of Fluidity of Expertise, horizontally between peers and vertically across organisational levels, to therefore actively and engage senior leaders and board, over a sustained period.

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<sup>8</sup> This term itself refers to those innovations, which are “the result of richly connected interactions that allow diverse people, ideas and pressures to collide and combine in ways that generate emergence “ Uhl-Bien, M. and Arena, M. (2017) 'Complexity leadership: Enabling people and organizations for adaptability', *Organizational Dynamics*, 46, pp. 9-20.).

## 8.6 Power realised through interdependence.

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Expressions of empowerment have been conceived and articulated in a spirit of mutuality, which is significant. It denotes an altogether different quality to the conceptualisation of power, and empowerment, as it was occurring here, as one being positively realised through relationship. The relational aspect, or quality of such empowerment effectively challenges the myth of individual achievement, as explored by Miller(2012), which still dominates our institutions, and which:

“belies the essentially interdependent nature of the human condition” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 92)

This is significant, particularly for those afforded the opportunity to become more “leaderful”, more “responsible”. If we are to embark on such developmental journeys, the opportunity to first recognise, in others’ experiences, the potential for significant growth-through-mutual-connection, as evidenced in this study; growth rooted in the fundamentally human nature of interdependence may itself be more motivating, for those embracing leadership responsibility, perhaps with some trepidation. At the very least, it helps to offset those more conventional, idealised conceptualisations of the lone, individual, heroic leader, independent and by implication isolated and exclusively burdened with responsibility.

### 8.6.1 Identifying the limits of power and influence within shared leadership.

This study has examined the ways power has been proactively shared between peers and in relation to their senior leaders and boards. Importantly, it has also identified distinct limits, or boundaries of that influence.

While it is recognised that mutuality does not necessarily equate to equality in relationships, the opportunities to facilitate even greater levels of connection, in the manner developed here, must not be underestimated. Cultivating interdependence, within this particular “adaptive space”, has demonstrated how power can be mutually shared by both followers and leaders, through the flow of expertise, ideas, and perspectives between them. The decision therefore to return to the status quo, in terms of the strategies proposed to keep “shared leadership alive within the culture of this organisation”, does not appear to fully capitalise on the learning from this shared leadership experiment, given that cross-boundary teamwork, across the hierarchy was not subsequently promoted. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) also add a cautionary note, referring to the demands of complexity pressures for 21<sup>st</sup> Century organisations, which create not just the need for “novel solutions”, i.e., new ways of working, but also “new partnerships, people have to work together who have not worked together before”, with “diverse perspectives”, i.e., diverse experiences and a need for “interdependence”, i.e. having no other choice but to work together (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017, p. 14). The appreciation of the power of interdependence demonstrated by this study and located within the relational work that makes up this learning history, is therefore not just a nice to have in organisations. Rather, it is essential to long-term sustainability.

## 8.7 Innovating with learning history as a research methodology:

### Facilitating joint reflexivity with participants.

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This level of reflexivity *with* participants actively involved in the data analysis differs again somewhat from the approach utilised within the Learning History form, as originally conceived by Roth and Kleiner. I am referring, not just to our joint consideration of our different perspectives, through the application of “Dialoguing”, where both staffs’ and my reflections are considered side by side. It is significant that these perspectives were subsequently explicitly merged, thereby informing the final “Joint Reflections on...” insertions at the end of each section. As originally conceived, data analysis appears to be wholly ‘owned’ by external consultants and internal experts, with “side by side columns of text, one column representing the words and stories of the organisational participants and the other... typically the analysis of a learning history team” (Amidon, 2008, pp. 444-445). The main reasons for my adaptation of this approach were practical but also philosophical. I needed to directly call on my reflective capacities and those of the Discoverers and Visioneers, to build up the narrative informing the learning history artefact, relatively quickly, for wider consideration, and before the organisational memory was lost. Adherence to the action research strategy and approach, to facilitate reflection on action, which is a key principle, was also important. It enabled participants not just to reflect on and confirm their own experiences of sharing leadership, but also to directly challenge their own “ underlying assumptions and reasoning leading to choices made on key issues”, that occurred during this work (Kleiner and Roth, 1996, p. 2). Such challenge is subsequently reflected in the

learning history itself and thereby enables authentic dissensus, or difference to be included in this story too.

#### 8.7.1 Accessing presentational knowing in this research process.

The use of a holding web site as a way of enabling co-researchers to easily access their narrative and visual accounts of key events and experiences throughout the research process, represents an important, creative, placeholder for managing data openly and transparently, in collaboration with co-researchers. The inclusion of such presentational knowing, i.e., links to the web site, plus participants' visual depictions, in the construction of this learning history, are not typical features of learning histories created within corporate settings.

Notably, Heron developed this category of presentational knowing to effectively embrace

“intuition and reflection, imagination and conceptual thinking” (Heron, 1999, p. 158 cited in ; Seeley and Reason, 2008)

This, according to Heron, is significant

“for our understanding of the world. It reveals the underlying pattern of things”

(Heron, 1992, pp. 165-168)

It was through this application of presentational methods, that enabled the accessing of more intuitive forms of knowing generally, and which significantly enabled all concerned to engage with the emerging data in an egalitarian manner. These visual ‘short cuts’ therefore facilitated deeper insights from all into the “underlying pattern of things”

(ibid). This included: participants' positive feelings of empowerment, engagement with the process and with each other and the organisation etc. Consequently, they also revealed the 'shadow side' of shared leadership responsibility, whereby underlying power dynamics could be acknowledged. Other visual mapping tools capturing, "moments of truth", additionally facilitated a wider consideration of other contextual factors, as well as emotions and feelings, that had informed the way this shared leadership endeavour had evolved here.

#### 8.7.2 Embracing the mythic imperative within learning histories.

The intention was to utilise imagery alongside textual accounts and reflections, to directly evoke the sensory aspects of the story, through these visualisations of key affective, experiences (Rose, 2016). Such incorporation of visual imagery makes an important aesthetic contribution, in as much as it makes the learning history artefact itself, more accessible to readers generally; less an academic's account, or a corporate report for an exclusive audience, and more a story that seeks to embrace the "mythic imperative", the highs, the lows of organisational life, thereby stimulating the imagination, as much as provoking critical thinking and reflection (Kleiner and Roth, 1997). There is another important and possibly overlooked role that learning histories can play in our understanding of organisational life and dynamics. Mistakes can be disclosed, which is not a typical feature in other shared leadership studies. The presentation of more contested issues, such as the work pressures involved in pursuit of this shared leadership undertaking, or the challenges to and from senior leaders, these are "not (usually) .. good for your career" (Roth and Kleiner, 1998, p. 47). "(T)his

unwillingness to discuss tough issues (is) itself taboo” (ibid). This learning history unlike other accounts of shared leadership provides a formalised framework for learning about the reality of sharing leadership, that was not just limited to its successes but also to those failures that may therefore be avoided in future.

## 8.8 Concluding this thesis.

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The driving question for this thesis has concerned how followers directly experience shared leadership and what may be learned from that.

Subsequently, I have pragmatically applied more novel research methods: cooperative inquiry and 1<sup>st</sup> person inquiry to address the emotional dimensions of that question, and with a view to broadening the conceptualisation of shared leadership, regarding its relational leadership constructs, processes, and operationalisation. Such examination from the follower perspective is significant to redress the balance somewhat, away from the dominant focus on individual leaders and their exclusive influence, that has dominated much public sector leadership research (Ospina and Foldy, 2016).

In line with the call for more research that broadens our understanding of the evolution of collective leadership conceptualisations; in ways that recognise context, processes and complexity, this thesis contributes to these issues and research challenges, by explicating some of the complexities, intricacies, and sheer dynamism of these follower / leader relationships. It signposts the need for further research of this kind, and it is hoped that this thesis will be of value to those motivated to develop alternative paths, supporting the cultivation of interdependence and relational working in meaningful ways.

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## Appendix A-0

The organisational audit consisted of anonymous one to one semi-structured interviews with staff conducted by an external consultant at the organisation.

The poor results included: significant stress levels, poor communication, negativity, alienation, a perceived lack of strategy and high sickness figures for example.

### **Appendix A INVITATION TO STAFF AT xxxxx HOUSING GROUP TO PARTICIPATE IN A CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY**



**UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH, FACULTY OF BUSINESS**

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY**

**TO DISCOVERERS AND VISIONEERS**

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**Title of Research**

**The experience of collective forms of leadership within the UK social sector.**

**Discoverers' and Visioneers' Experience of Co-Creating Strategy to 2023 at Xxxxx**

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## **YOUR INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY**

I am inviting 'Discoverers' and 'Vioneers', (those who are not currently managers or above), to participate on a voluntary basis in a Co-operative Inquiry to create a Learning History. Together, we will explore the process of collectively creating organisational strategy at Xxxxx, to 2023. I would also like to understand more fully the experience itself and what it feels like to share leadership, in this way.

**A C-operative Inquiry** is a collective research undertaking, where groups of individuals explore a given topic of direct relevance to them, to learn more about that experience and to make recommendations for change as necessary. This Inquiry seeks to invite Xxxxx staff to develop their awareness of collectively creating strategy together with others, in order to change and improve their 'work practice' accordingly and to recommend any changes more widely.

Having reviewed this particular undertaking, the intention is to produce a collective account of the experience called a Learning History.

**A Learning History** is defined by MIT as a "process that results in a jointly told tale in multiple narratives, with illustrations on strategies, noticeable results, what happened and why"(2016). It can be multi-media in nature, with stories, pictures, illustrations, etc. and can draw on reports, documents, artefacts associated with organisational life.

### **Benefits of Participation for Xxxxx**

- Development of a collective understanding concerning the creation of strategy as it has been practiced at Xxxxx
- Increased awareness of the value of the approach overall and its effects on organisational life

### **This will also provide an opportunity for you to:**

- Reflect on your learning and development during this process and to share that more widely with colleagues and with senior managers
- Creatively explore ideas around leadership and what it means for you and your development more generally
- Influence how such a process may be improved or altered in the future

### **How the Co-operative Inquiry would run and your anticipated commitment.**

I am inviting up to 16 people, i.e., Discoverers and Visioneers, to track this experience and to explore the effect and impact of that on them and on the wider business.

We would meet over lunchtime for 2 – 2.5 hours, every 4- 6 weeks for 4 sessions.

The sessions would run from 11.30-14.00. Lunch would be provided on site.

An additional 5<sup>th</sup> session would be to present our findings to Carole Richardson and other members of the GSMT as necessary.

During the sessions themselves we would explore the journey of creating strategy by yourselves and others and together identify the following:

- **What happened along the journey key events and activities**
- **“Moments of Truth”: Key experiences and events along the way, turning points critical incidents**
- **Consideration of the impact of this undertaking**
- **Recommendations for further action, change etc.**

In these sessions, we will also explore your experience of leadership at Xxxxx using some creative methods.

Between sessions you will be invited to log your thoughts and impressions further about this process and share these as you see fit to inform this Learning History.

### **The Commitment**

It is anticipated that you will need to:

- Give time to participate in the relevant sessions i.e., up to 4 group meetings.
- Try out some of the in session activities and complete some ‘off-line’ observations, or short activities between sessions, in support of your work and personal learning.
- Co-record this Learning History as it develops, subject to your time and availability.
- Present our joint findings to Carole Richardson and GSMT colleagues.

### **Background and purpose of research**

Building on the pilot research work I have already undertaken with Xxxxx’s Board, there is the opportunity now to learn more about the collective approach taken to develop Xxxxx’s strategy to 2023. Xxxxx seeks to evaluate the impact of that undertaking and

this presents a unique opportunity to review the experience itself, with those directly involved in the process.

**How this research supports my PhD study.**

I seek to explore how such sharing of leadership is experienced by staff, working within Xxxxx Housing Group. The purpose of this study is to understand more fully the actual experience of those involved in this undertaking. I seek therefore to understand more about the actual 'lived' experience of those involved. Relatively little has been written in this way, in terms of gaining insights into the actual experience, or journey itself. I therefore seek to understand the ways this has affects those involved, during the process itself. This includes appreciating what has worked well or otherwise, for those involved in collectively creating strategy and therefore understanding how that approach may be sustained or otherwise in the future.



Appendix B On the practice of how we work together: Extract from my personal journal at the Board Residential with senior leaders 09.11.16

*"The OD consultant refers to this Housing Association's approach and principles-how we are with each other: "locating ourselves as a board when things get tricky".*

*It's about relationship and individual accountability, Adult to Adult relationships and grown-up ways of working, with each other, knowing that we can face each other with the baggage...the experience of that"*

Appendix C On the practice of how we work together: Extract from my personal journal at the Board Residential with senior leaders 09.11.16

*(Later in the session)*

*"The OD consultant who is facilitating the session is highlighting the power in the room and is exploring: "How may I follow a powerful lead?". Having moved to the topic of creating board guiding principles, the debate turns to the detail of X's work on the topic. They vote on this and there is disagreement and Board member A. is surprised by that because his assumption was that everyone wanted to ditch the detail and they didn't all want to do that....*

*The meeting takes a darker turn and once board member openly starts to criticise the other with regards to her commitment to serve as a board member. The OD consultant calls for a break to regroup... As we leave the room the Chairman turns to me and laughs saying: " and there we were celebrating how open and transparent our conversations are here with each other"*

*I'm left alone outside the conference room, while the others gather in small groups to discuss what's just happened. I look outside to the formal garden and pond. I see the beautiful plants and trees and looking down at the pond I see it teeming with life*

*encircled by plants and water boatmen skating across the surface. I consider the following question: What can this scene tell us about what's happening here?*

*There is so much history and life that has been cultivated in this garden; the planting, the trees, formal structures, and decorations- just like that of the boards and this organisation's history and development towards this way of relational working. ... but look down into the pond that is teeming with life and fish and you have no idea how deep it is... It seems so dark and dense beneath the waters. What lies beneath? Roots, fish predators? Currents... This too is part of the formal garden.*

Appendix D Reflections post workshop 1 with the Discoverers and Visioneers

*.. "I want to get down further beyond the burble, the murmur of chattering about this.*

*Some neat observations in the session. The Housing Officer (Participant 3) closest to me was right back in the place I noticed her, remembering how hard it is to talk in front of the Chief Executive and "keep talking when she came in the room".. but she kept going.*

*Linked observation from that day- (Open Space Event with all staff)- the senior management wanted to hear problems "and negative stuff" ( Participant 12). They weren't avoiding them.*

Appendix E PROPOSAL TO BOARD FROM THE EXTERNAL OD CONSULTANT  
CREATING VISION, ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY, GENERATING RENEWAL

**THE XXXXX 2023 VISIONING PROCESS**

**CONTEXT**

It is only a short time until the current strategic picture for Xxxxx to 2018 reaches its chronological conclusion. Board and the Senior Team have all approved a further iteration of the visioning process which will take Xxxxx through to 2023 and this Paper outlines suggestions for process and timescales.

It must be acknowledged that the context in which the 2023 vision is created is a very different landscape to that experienced in 2012 when the previous process was kick-started, and this has implications for both design and delivery.

The 2023 Visioning process has been designed with the following key principles in mind:

- The design will need to take account of both pace and relationship
- Different people will be involved
- There will be the involvement of more people across the organisation
- Board will need to be involved much earlier in the process
- It will be necessary to plan for customer involvement
- The process will call for more innovation (never been done before) and creativity (doing something different with what already exists)
- The Vision will need to be completed by early 2018 (please see spread sheet for more detail)
- The process will be an opportunity to assess 'next generation'
- Will provide a platform for consideration of succession

- The process will be designed, developed and facilitated by Claire Maxwell (with possible support from one Oasis Associate) in partnership with Angela Lockwood and with Carole Richardson taking an internal lead with Claire on process
- Relational leadership, consensus decision making, (where-ever appropriate) and responsibility and influence must be encouraged, enhanced and utilised throughout the process

#### KEY AREAS FOR 2023

- Growth, including geography, services and bricks and mortar
- Partnerships
- Culture
- Customers, including those who have currently not been thought of
- Resources, including people, finances
- Profile, including influence and reputation
- Systems, including digitalisation

#### PROPOSED PROCESS: CREATING A COLLABORATIVE BEGINNING

An Open Space or whole organisation event – Xxxxx to 2023 – issues and opportunities, invited attendees including Board, staff, customers and key stakeholders. Quickly followed by:

#### THE DISCOVERY PHASE

Researching, discovering and uncovering

A 'call' within Xxxxx for people to work individually on aspects of the 2023 Vision

#### CRITERIA FOR INVOLVEMENT

- Can demonstrate a commitment to the 2018 Vision
- Can share examples of where they have been involved in or supported changes within  
Xxxxx
- Have experience in\or able to demonstrate real interest in exploring key areas of research and can see work through to a conclusion
- Has the support of their Line Manager and Team to work outside of the formal meetings
- Able to be both supportive and critical of Xxxxx's future opportunities and build on the outcomes from the Open Space event
- Must have ideas about who to connect with outside of Xxxxx
- Able to work autonomously

#### PEOPLE REQUIREMENTS

One member of staff from each of the following:

Technical Services: maintenance, customer services, development

ICT and Finance: ICT, finance

People Services

Housing: Supported, General needs

(Director of Culture) role to be scoped but it is essential she is involved in every aspect of the process

#### THE INDIVIDUAL TASK

'Discoverers' will be responsible for researching one key area, possibly within their Functional area of expertise but also likely to extend beyond and which will affect Xxxxx's future to 2023

FACILITATION: Four days – one for Open Space event, one to set up the process and two to bring the findings together at the end

Group then present their findings to the people involved in the next phase and to the Board.

*PROCESS NOTES:*

*Engagement in the process is to be encouraged from a personal development perspective as well as an opportunity to play a part in the future direction of Xxxxx. Participants will be stretched in a positive way and work outside usual boundaries and restrictions.*

*From an organisational perspective it is an opportunity to see who has energy and commitment for the future and allows those people to become more visible*

*People to be self-nominating and/or nominated by their function*

*If more than one person from one particular area applies there may need to be an interview process. The invitation to nominate or be nominated will need to be very carefully constructed e.g., providing they meet the criteria, staff can come from any level within the organisation and they are to be encouraged. In the unlikely event that no-one or insufficient people come forward, the process will revert to a more traditional and hierarchical approach i.e., Managers and members of GSMT to create the strategy. In that sense, this approach is an experiment to check out levels of engagement and commitment below managerial level. The invitation is stressed on the basis that 'it would be great if', rather than 'there must be' and Managers will need to be primed to step into the role as a positive rather than a second choice.*

*In the same way as everyone else, Managers can be nominated or be self-nominating or they can see their role as being supportive and challenging of the person representing their Functional area i.e., they are the people who give the findings a good 'rattle and shake' before they are presented into the Discovery Group.*

## THE VISIONING PHASE

Creating, innovating and designing

A 'call' within Xxxxx for people to work collaboratively on aspects of the 2023 Vision

Criteria:

- Can demonstrate a commitment to the 2018 Vision
- Can share examples of where they have been involved in or supported change within Xxxxx
- Has experience in\or is able to demonstrate ability or desire to work creatively or innovatively
- Must have the support of their Line Manager and Team to work outside of the formal meetings
- Must be able to be both supportive and critical of Xxxxx's future opportunities
- Must be able to build on the work from the Open Space event and the Discovery phase
- Able to work collaboratively with members of the Senior Team and Board

*People to be self nominating and\or nominated by their function*

*If more than one person from one particular area applies there may need to be an interview process*

Same representation as in Discovery Phase plus CEX (as often as possible) and GSMT member 1 and GSMT member 2. Also at least one member of the group to be identified who is able to write creatively

#### THE COLLABORATIVE TASK

Visioning Group to work together on scenario building to 2023

To reach consensus on Vision

Facilitation: Four days in total

#### XXXXX BOARD INVOLVEMENT

1. Agreed process is shared with Board as soon as possible
2. Individual Board Members offer any support they may wish to give to those undertaking the research work
3. All Board Members are invited to take part in the Open Space event
4. At the April Board residential, Board work collectively on the 'givens' to 2023
5. The findings from the research phase are fed into the Board
6. The 2023 Vision as 'work in progress' is shared at Board Residential in November and feedback sought
7. Completed Vision is shared with Board for further feedback before being presented at a 'Staff Together event' in 2018 to which all the Board are invited
8. Board sign-off on the 2023 Vision early 2018

#### BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Vision is shared with Functions, GSMT, Board and Customers and feedback requested

Visioning people re-group to 'tweak' vision based on what they have heard

To 2023 is shared at a staff event in 2018 Facilitation: One day



Appendix F Questionnaire for Discoverers and Visioneers informing discussions at the Final Workshop 5.

All feedback will be incorporated anonymously into the Learning History

Please see some further questions, which have arisen as a result of working in this way with yourselves, Carole and Angela and the Board.

1. How do you feel about this way of working collaboratively and co-creating strategy?

1.2 What are the positives, or benefits for you and/or for others of working in this way?

1.3 What are the challenges, tensions for you and/or for others involved in this process?

2. Compared to how you have been previously working at Xxxxx, what makes this different from your typical, day-to-day approach to work?

2.1 Has this changed your attitude/outlook and approach to the leadership tasks?

If so, how and in what ways?

3. What are the conditions that enable you to collaborate, to create strategy differently, to work co-operatively?

3.1 What makes that different from normal interactions?

3. 2 What helps/ hinders that?

4. With reference to your colleagues, your senior leaders, the board and any one else relevant to this undertaking: how have others influenced you and what has been your influence on them in this undertaking?

4.1 What have you learned about yourself and about others as a result?

4.2 How has this undertaking affected you in terms of your attitudes, skills, actions?

4.3 What have you learned as a result?

5. Given that new knowledge/ learning has been generated for the organisational strategy and has been shared, shifting around the organisation across levels, from yourselves to Board etc. to staff groups, what have been the specific activities, or strategies that you have adopted, to support this sharing of knowledge/ learning?

**END:**

Appendix G Individual qualitative questionnaire issued four months after completion of the research.

**CEX: Interview 1 November 18<sup>th</sup> 2015.**

***“We have a culture of adult to adult discussions and relationships, whereby each individual can say things that they need to say, in a very safe place without fear of any comeback. So we have people services that support the culture, as opposed to getting in the way of it and the support, flexibility and freedom we give to managers to have the conversations they need to have”.***

**Extract from the Leading and Growing Strategy (to 2018)- Published in 2013.**

**Providing context for this Learning History Questionnaire.**

**(On) Leadership**

**In 2013 we had become used to a more traditional approach to leading and being led, decisions were made and driven from the top. There was a lot of ‘Angela says’ which we took for granted meant that things had to happen, ‘Angela says’ was also a way of getting things done even when the CEO hadn’t identified it needed to happen. We recognised things needed to change if we were not only to survive but to thrive into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

**Working out what was needed began in 2012 when Group Senior Management Team and the Management Team worked together on the future picture. In separate but intrinsically linked processes there was also an intense period of leadership and team development.**

Now, in 2018, we have a very different approach, which we term 'distributed leadership'. Demanding and challenging though it is, we all now accept that no one person or group of people has all the answers and therefore we work together in a very different way with us all involved in the business: challenging, giving and receiving feedback and being influential. We have adult-to-adult relationships that strengthen our commitment to fairness, honesty, transparency and personal responsibility and accountability and a very different approach and relationship to risk. This way of working isn't easy but we know it is essential, managing as we do higher levels of complexity and uncertainty, which just weren't there in 2013. We need each other, we work across boundaries in a different kind of way and together we achieve more.

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**Introduction to this Review and Evaluation Questionnaire for Discoverers and Visioneers, who collaboratively produced the organizational strategic vision to 2023.**

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This overview forms the background to the work you undertook collaboratively to create the strategic vision to 2023. The questions that now follow build on your feedback throughout our co-operative inquiry workshops and on your written feedback in April 2018, about your role as Discoverers and Visioneers during this process. Drawing on some leadership ideas that focus on certain aspects of working in this 'relational' way, I now want to explore your experiences further with you.

We start with some organizational conditions, and how your culture has influenced, or informed your particular approach to working collaboratively. See for instance: Your

reflections, being part of organizational decision-making during Mission Possible and for Functional Business Reviews, captured in this developing Learning History: See section Mission Possible and Functional Reviews). For some, day-to-day working has also enabled you to contribute- fully during this undertaking as Visioneers and Discoverers, in the ways set out here:

*“ I feel I’ve been given the opportunity to feed into decision-making regularly”.*

#### SPACE AND FREEDOM TO CREATE TOGETHER

Having referred briefly here to some of these organizational conditions that have informed this undertaking, the following quote provides a rich summary of the space and freedom you experienced at the time.

*“Trust, Honesty. Creating a safe environment where you can be yourself and speak openly-Building time in to think differently, creatively and having a space where you just focus on how you work together-*

*What are the expectations, agreeing specific ways of working together, allowing everyone the opportunity to offer opinions, checking in on progress, getting rid of hierarchy and everyone working on one level”.*

Related to this people also referred to this way of working as being very “creative”, with no “ rigid direction- “ *“given the freedom to go where we wanted to go-we talked to people; we interrogated data; we challenged perceptions and ideas”.*

People also commented on some of the disadvantages of this way of working which included it being “*very time consuming, perfecting the resolution, word smithing, gaining consensus voting etc.*”. This organic approach also created pressure on some to complete their normal duties, given staff absence, new job roles etc.

Looking back on the particular organizational conditions that have influenced and informed this collaborative undertaking:

1. How do you feel now about this particular experience of working collaboratively in this way?
2. What, if any value, does it have for you now?
3. To what extent do you practice this approach in your work now?
4. To what extent has this approach, this way of working affected your implementation of strategy?
5. What else may be learned from this experience to inform how you work?
6. Any next steps for how you would apply this in any way in your work?

PLEASE WRITE YOUR RESPONSES ON THE NEXT PAGE.

#### **SAMPLE RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS 1-6**

**1. I feel very lucky to have been part of it. I often travel to conferences and have even spoken at a couple about the visioning process and it always strikes me that other people seem genuinely surprised that we did it and more so that it worked.**

**I am also currently studying a management degree and it is funny how some of the concepts we applied in 2017 are still seen in that arena as ground-breaking.**

**2. It has enormous value. The approach reinforces the idea that ideas can come from anywhere and also, that if we truly want buy in we must bring people with us. This is as important in our community work and tenant involvement work as it was in the development of the vision.**

**3. I try to use a number of the concepts in my day to day work. Most notably, sharing leadership across my team, taking time at the beginning of projects to really make sure we have all the givens and conditions met. We recently undertook a team visioning process and were able to use the learning to design and deliver our own version. We also recognise that there are number of principles we can use in team meetings and**

continuous conversations such as consensual decision making and keeping going when discussing our ideas.

4. I think it is massively useful for the implementation of North Star's strategy. We understand it better because we were involved and when creating plans for the team and for individuals, we are much more conscious of how this links to the delivery of the vision. It helps to see what we are contributing to the organisation's overall aims and objectives.

5. I think one of the major things I have taken from it is the power of avoiding typical corporate speak and instead using language that is direct and expresses the energy and passion you have for what you want to achieve.

6. We have already applied a lot of the concepts in our own visioning process and try to keep some of the learning alive in team meetings and continuous conversations. I think the hardest thing is stopping yourself from falling into traditional models of project delivery. However, the vision itself is constant reminder of what can be achieved by working in this way.

With reference to the relational 'condition' of empowerment that was in evidence

7. How do you feel now about this experience now?
8. What if any value does this idea of empowerment have for you now?
9. How do you now experience being empowered, or empowering others in your work?
10. To what extent have you continued working in this way? Why? Why not?
11. What else may be learned from this experience, to inform how you work, with others in future
12. Any next steps or recommendations about how you would apply this in your work?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share with others, to help them experience, or practice these relational approaches to leading.

PLEASE WRITE YOUR RESPONSES ON THE NEXT PAGE.

#### **SAMPLE RESPONSES .**

**7. I still feel a sense of empowerment from the process. As a manager I am involved in developing parts of our corporate plan and I feel there is much more connection to this process because of how the vision was developed and the empowerment that was given during the process.**

**8. It has a lot of value for me. I try to replicate in my team through the ways in which we work now. The empowerment has helped me to develop both professionally and personally and I really think this it is important that we keep the concept alive as new staff join and take on new roles.**

**9. I think as manager now (I wasn't during the process) I experience it much more as something I'm keen to give and for my team to experience. They are new members of staff who weren't part of the original process and I feel a responsibility to make sure they are able to experience and understand the role they can play.**

**10. As mentioned I have made a lot of effort to continue working in this way because I personally believe it's important to see this through to 2023 and beyond. It would seem such a waste to develop a vision that empowers our staff but deliver in ways that risk taking it away. I think it is also something that requires effort and work. There are times when you feel people don't want this empowerment and responsibility and look to you for some traditional command and control. That can be difficult as you do expect people to take the opportunities, however they have to feel safe to do so.**



**11. I think there's a huge amount of value in understanding the potential all staff have to make positive impacts on an organization. Also, once they have been empowered, how that can lead to a more committed approach and an increased sense of responsibility for the delivery of the ideas. However, this needs to be carefully managed and consistently reinforced as sometimes people take ownership but feel 'left' to deliver rather than leading an organizational approach.**

**12. In terms of next steps, I think it's key to keep the sense of empowerment alive, both in delivery of the vision and also in new work that comes up. As mentioned it could be easy to sit back and admire the work we did, however in order for this process to be truly successful, we must work hard to keep the principles alive because it certainly isn't a given that that happens.**

**13. Not sure if this is the appropriate place to mention it but, I think if we were to do this process again it would be good to have more involvement from tenants. Although there was some engagement it could be much better.**

Appendix H Supporting Timeline informing this shift to a more pluralistic leadership approach.

- By June 2014, when this Housing Association's 'Gold' standard Investors in People report is published, there are already strong indications that more staff will play a greater role in shaping organisational direction, even if by that stage:  
  
"there was a degree of uncertainty amongst some junior managers regarding changes to their role, e.g., what does "being strategic" mean?" (IIP report, 2014, p.3).  
  
This particular report goes on to refer to "key management principles such as leadership, distributed leadership (leading to) to distributed leadership and quicker decision-making"; principles that were informing the people development strategy for this organization to 2018 (ibid). This IIP report, at that time, also cites the Leadership Development Programme for staff, "Tools for Change", as instrumental in the organisational leadership and management culture. This programme that, during that period, was being rolled out widely, was described as one, that sought to "equip all staff with the confidence to make decisions and as a more distributive leadership approach" (IIP report, 2014;p.9).
- By 2014, four different groups and ad hoc task groups are in evidence, in order to foster inclusive decision-making. Notably, by that point staff already believe " that the organisation wanted to consult and provide them with ... information and resources, that enables people to participate in decision-making" (IIP, 2014 report; p.11).

## Appendix I Composition of new collaborative project teams

These “individual Teams and Project Teams: range from Technical Services, Finance to Heads of Service Teams” (Keeping Culture and Shared Leadership alive within X).

## Appendix J Role Profile Discoverer

Discovery phase: Research Activities: Extract from Briefing Document issued to staff prior to the Full Staff Conference

In addition to carrying out desk top research, the Discoverers were encouraged to explore different avenues for fact finding including:

- Attending conferences.
- Assessing the current position of Xxxxx.
- Analysing research.
- Scrutinising national and local strategy, policy, and the direction of travel.
- Working with others in Xxxxx to ensure that their expertise is included.
- Visiting other organisations.
- Arranging interviews with key players in the region and nationally.
- The analysis of research and data.

## Appendix K Creative research activities

The individual concerned contacted the leaders of Burtzorg, the innovative Dutch health and social care provider, to explore directly with them, their operating structure, culture, and ways of working.

## Appendix L Discoverer findings informing strategy related to the topic of Profile and Reputation

### **PROFILE AND REPUTATION**

#### Key Point 1

- Social Purpose, whilst clearly present in everything that xxx does, is not clearly defined.
- Our values reflect that xxxx has a strong social purpose. Almost all of our communication and media coverage has a social value thread. There is a wide range of activity that demonstrates great examples of social purpose/value. However, it is not clearly defined or consistent.
- In April 2016 Board started the discussion around defining social purpose to underpin Leading & Growing Xxxxx 2023. Although Board has worked on the givens to 2023, a shared and defined social purpose is still to be developed.

## **5. PROFILE AND REPUTATION**

Xxx's reputation is excellent. We know our customers and everyone knows us for our values and for creating an environment in which lives can be transformed.

- We all take ownership for promoting Xxxxx and raising our profile. This approach reflects our organisational values
- We actively and regularly seek feedback and have a targeted approach to raising our profile and reputation
- Organisations providing services on our behalf are committed to enhancing our reputation
- We have a co-created, clearly defined social purpose
- Our online presence and digital engagement is innovative, promoting who we are and what we do
- We digitally engage wisely, imaginatively and in a focussed way to enhance and promote Xxxxx.

Appendix N “Why Shared Leadership? Extract from a corporate briefing. The X approach to Shared Leadership 2018.

“It has become something of a cliché to talk about the increasing speed of change but it is a well-researched fact; globalisation, technological innovation and economic shifts are only three ..factors in creating greater volatility and complexity.. All sectors of business and social purpose businesses have to respond to the changes created by this interconnected dynamic...

And some, like X, are thinking more proactively in terms of the kind of internal world that needs to be created in order to ensure flexibility and agility at all times”.

