

Alternative approaches for studying shared and distributed leadership

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Abstract

Scholars hold different perspectives about leadership that are not limited to a formally appointed leader. Of the abundance of terms used to describe this phenomenon, shared and distributed are the most prevalent. These terms are often used interchangeably resulting in confusion in the way that shared and distributed leadership is conceptualized and investigated. This paper provides a historical development of this field, challenges existing conceptions and reveals inconsistencies and contradictions that are seldom acknowledged. Four distinct approaches to the study of shared and distributed leadership are identified in the literature, each embracing different ontological views and leadership epistemologies. Individually, the four approaches offer valuable — yet partial — understanding. Comparing and contrasting the assumptions and insights from the four approaches raises fundamental issues about how we think about leadership in terms of research, practice and development.

Key words: shared leadership; distributed leadership; relational leadership theory

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Introduction

Over recent years interest has grown within Management and Organization Studies in alternative models of leadership in which leadership is not limited to the formally appointed leader. This change reflects workplace shifts for which individual heroic models are less representative (Gronn 2002; 2003; Fletcher and Kaufer 2003; Seers, Keller and Wilkerson 2003). Increased complexity and ambiguity coupled with the need to respond faster to complex market conditions has led to new emerging patterns of accountability, inter-dependency and co-ordination which constitute a shift in the division of labour within organizations (Gronn 2003). This increased ambiguity and complexity, it is argued, arises in the face of a number of adaptive challenges such as increased domestic deregulation, global economic integration, multiple and competing stakeholder environments, new technology and increased rates of change (Avolio, Jung, Murry and Sivasubramaniam 1996; Houghton, Neck and Manz 2003; Seers et al 2003). In such conditions, senior leaders may not have 'sufficient and relevant information to make highly effective decisions in a fast-changing and complex world' (Pearce and Conger 2003, p. 2). Further, differing expectations and specialized expertise of knowledge workers in the post-industrial era may also contribute to the emergence of shared leadership (Cox, Pearce and Perry 2003; Fletcher and Kaufer 2003; Seers et al 2003; Pearce and Manz 2005; Carson, Tesluk and Marrone 2007). The optimistic tone of many of the articles suggests that shared and distributed leadership are seen as a solution to many of these issues.

While the terms used to describe these leadership models include, dispersed, devolved, democratic, distributive, collaborative, collective, co-operative, concurrent, coordinated, relational and co-leadership, the terms shared and distributed leadership are by far the most common. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably obscuring important theoretical differences, inconsistencies

and contradictions that have evolved from the way leadership has been conceptualized and investigated in two main strands of literature. Two different communities of researchers began conversations on the new concept of shared and distributed leadership as a reaction to the traditional top down leadership formulations. The issues discussed in these conversations addressed different challenges. In the team-based literature, the conversation was about how to develop from self-led teams (no leader) to collective leadership in the team (everyone a leader). In the education sector the challenge was to move leadership away from the top of the organization to create leadership practices throughout the organization. These two separate conversations in separate literatures did not cross over until Gronn's (2002) paper by which time different evolutions of the concepts of shared and distributed leadership with different ontological assumptions had occurred. In much of the recent literature that now draws on both original theoretical domains, these historical threads are unacknowledged and therefore the different constructions they offer are obscured and confused. Thus until Gronn's (2002) paper these disconnected groups of scholars engaged in their work largely oblivious to work in related areas. The literature on shared and distributed leadership reflects the fragmented nature of MOS (Whitley 1984a; b) which has resulted in separate sub fields creating their own distinct questions, hypotheses, methodologies, and conclusions (Baligh, Burton and Obel 1996).

LePine and Wilcox-King (2010, p. 507) identify three main ways in which a literature-based paper can make a contribution: (1) challenge or clarify existing theory, (2) initiate a search for new theory by identifying and delineating a novel theoretical problem, and (3) synthesize recent advances and ideas into fresh new theory. This paper fits the first of these forms. In accordance with LePine and Wilcox-King (2010, p. 507/8) we aim to "ground" the review in the relevant literature on shared and distributed leadership, reveal "significant inconsistencies", "illuminate assumptions that may not be acknowledged and cause confusion" in the way shared and distributed leadership is

conceptualized and investigated. The aim is also to “motivate management scholars to engage with the topic in different ways than they have in the past”.

In order to achieve these aims, firstly, we outline the review methodology. Secondly, we explore the historical emergence of models of leadership in which leadership is not limited to the formally appointed leader. Thirdly, we review the development of shared leadership and distributed leadership. Fourthly, four distinct perspectives of shared and distributed leadership are presented and explained: relational-entity, relational-structural, relational-processual and relational-systemic. Finally, conclusions and research implications are offered which raise fundamental issues about how we should think about leadership in terms of research, practice and development.

Methodology: a historical review, critical analysis and synthesis

Over recent years there has been an upsurge in interest in approaches to reviewing the literature and the development of novel methods of research synthesis (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart 2003; Rousseau, Manning and Denyer 2008). Denyer and Tranfield (2009) argue that the choice of review methodology is dependent on the purpose of the review, the characteristics of the field being investigated, the nature of texts to be synthesized and the time and resources available. Due to the idiosyncratic nature of each review there is a requirement to develop a ‘fit for purpose’ methodology. Our particular approach is summarized below.

Our first task is to define the boundaries of the review and to specify what is included and excluded and why. Our focus is on shared and distributed leadership within Management and Organization Studies (MOS). Primarily our searches are restricted to this domain. Whilst, we include studies from the fields of education and health we only do so if the study contributes to our understanding of shared and distributed leadership within MOS. Therefore, some studies in fields such as school leadership and nursing are omitted. Likewise, our searches are restricted to the databases that are

readily available to the MOS community such as EBSCO, Proquest and Web of Knowledge and did not include specialist education or healthcare databases. The main search terms are shared and distributed leadership.

Greenhalgh and Peacock (2005) have shown that in reviews, which address complex questions, database searching can often account for as little as 30 per cent of the total number of relevant articles. Our experience with this review confirms this. Therefore, we supplement database searching with hand searching known journals and online resources, books, recommendations from people working in the field, and most importantly cross-referencing. As part of this cross referencing and branching method, searches were also conducted on the key authors in the field.

Once the studies on shared and distributed leadership relevant to MOS were collated we mapped the historical roots of the field, identifying three distinct sub domains of shared and distributed leadership: team-based, education and health. Drawing on the meta-narrative mapping approach of Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, Kyriakidou and Peacock (2005, p. 417), we traced “the influence of seminal theoretical and empirical work on subsequent research within a tradition. We then drew variously on the different storylines to build up a rich picture of our field of study”.

Where relevant, we first unpack the concepts, perspectives, metaphors, theories, models, assumptions and/or ideologies (Wallace and Wray 2006) in each research tradition, and then by comparing and contrasting the different strands of research, we make sense of the inherent tensions and contradictions in the field. We then attempt to produce a thematic synthesis by developing a set of sub-categories or concepts that provide a more holistic understanding and categorization of shared and distributed leadership.

The historical roots of shared and distributed leadership

Scholars within the field of shared and distributed leadership make reference to a number of early influences that represent important steps toward the exposition of the shared and distributed leadership constructs. The following represent a range of contributions which have been cited as potential precursors to models of leadership that question the legitimacy of formulating leadership as exclusively the province of formally appointed individual leaders. The list is not exhaustive but does reflect the diverse and disjointed emergence of the field.

Follet's Law of the Situation (1924) states that leadership could stem from the individual with the most relevant skills in a particular situation. In contrast, Benne and Sheats (1948) suggest that leadership is not to do with an individual but with functions and that several individuals could take up differentiated roles in relation to these functions. Similarly Gibb (1954; 1969) argues that leadership is best thought of as existing on a continuum from focused or individual leadership to a distributed pattern. Stogdill (1950) suggests that leadership is based on role differentiation related to influencing the goal setting and goal achievement behaviours of others. An oft-cited empirical study by Bowers and Seashore (1966) indicates that leadership can come from peers and that this could have a positive impact on outcomes. Katz and Kahn (1978) espouse the potential competitive advantage that can accrue to an organization in which reciprocal influence is widely shared.

Other early contributions such as Hodgson, Levinson and Zalesnik's (1965) exploration of 'the executive role constellation' of three leaders of a hospital, co-leadership (Heenan and Bennis 1999), strategic leadership (Hambrick and Mason 1984), and collective collaborative leadership (Denis, Langley and Cazale 1996) all propose a model of leadership in which leadership can come from group/organizational members other than the designated leader. In addition, there were two studies of social movements in which traditional leadership structures did not emerge (Brown and Hosking 1986; Brown 1989). Despite these notable exceptions, until recently there have been few papers that conceptualize leadership as emanating from multiple individuals.

Other roots of shared and distributed leadership can be seen in work that widens the concept of influence to all group members such as Social Exchange Theory (Festinger 1954; Homans 1958), and studies that explore subordinates' roles in decision-making (Vroom and Yetton 1973) and the concept of 'empowerment' (Blau and Alba 1982; Conger and Kanungo 1988). However, since empowerment is based on the demarcation of leaders and followers it can only be considered a pre-requisite for the emergence of shared leadership (Pearce and Conger 2003). Leader Member Exchange theory and Substitutes for Leadership (Kerr and Jermier 1978) can also be included. It was this latter concept that was used by Manz and Sims (1980) to propose a model of 'self-management' as a substitute for leadership. Later developments in the Self-Leadership concept evolved into one of the main conceptual frameworks of the shared leadership literature.

There are clear distinctions between the way that shared and distributed leadership developed during the 1990s. Shared leadership is studied as an *emergent* phenomenon within what we will term the team-based shared leadership literature in this paper. With some exceptions and occasionally as a grammatical device to avoid repetition, this literature uses the term 'shared leadership'. In parallel, a second strand of research activity developed primarily in the education literature concerned with distributed leadership; in this literature the term 'distributed leadership' is clearly distinguished from shared leadership (Spillane 2006, p. 3). Prior to Gronn's (2002) paper advocating 'distributed leadership as a unit of analysis', the distributed leadership literature in education was rarely referenced within MOS highlighting the fragmented nature of this field. We will discuss the development of the literatures on shared and distributed leadership in turn.

The development of shared leadership

The theoretical origins of shared leadership occurred predominantly within the 'team-based' leadership literature. In a landmark volume of 'Advances in Interdisciplinary Studies of Work

Teams’, authors expressed concern that leadership in self-managed teams was insufficiently explored (Avolio et al 1996). Beyerlein, Johnson and Beyerlein (1996, p. xvii), note that ‘it was but a short time ago that many practitioners believed teams and leadership were mutually exclusive’, and that through a process of trial and error, ‘we learned we could not ignore the need for leadership’.

Therefore, shared leadership can, in part, be traced to a transition in the Self-Leadership, Super-Leadership constructs (Manz and Sims 1989; 1991) from individuals Self-leading, to the conceptualization of Self-Leadership at the team level (Neck, Stewart and Manz 1996). The mandate of Super-Leadership to ‘lead others to lead themselves’ thus evolved from a focus on helping individual followers to Self-Lead through mechanisms of self-management (Cox and Sims 1996) to one which focused more on a team level of Self-Leadership which attempted to integrate, albeit superficially, work emanating from the system psychodynamic school such as ‘group-as-a-whole’ (Wells 1985) and the ‘group mind’ (Bion 1961).

In the conceptual model centred on the related constructs of Super-Leadership and Self-Leadership (Manz and Sims 1989; 1991; 2001; Houghton et al 2003) the role of the formal leader is central to the emergence of shared leadership. Self-Leadership is defined as a ‘process through which people influence themselves to achieve the self-direction and self-motivation needed to perform’ (Houghton et al 2003, p. 126). It is through the enhancement of self-efficacy perceptions and subsequent performance outcomes that Self-Leadership is theorized to create conditions in which individuals will engage in sharing leadership roles. Super-Leadership is often contrasted with three other leadership types – the Strongman, the Transactor, and the Visionary Hero (Manz and Sims 1991; 2001). It is suggested that these three types of leadership can be shared among team members leaving the fourth type – the Empowering leader - to be taken up by the vertical Super-Leader.

The model of Team Self-Leadership suggests that effective acts of individual self-management can be aggregated to a team level in an unproblematic way. Aggregating such processes to the group level is merely a process of addition. Research in this domain is concerned with measuring the influence of the 'group-as-a-whole' by taking questionnaires which refer to individual leadership styles such as 'transformational', 'transactional', 'directive', 'aversive' and 'empowering' (Pearce and Sims 2002) and applying them at the group level.

Shared leadership in the team-based literature domain is defined as a

'team process where leadership is carried out by the team as a whole, rather than solely by a single designated individual. To this end, vertical leadership is dependent upon the wisdom of an individual leader whereas shared leadership draws from the knowledge of a collective.

Further, vertical leadership takes place through a top-down influence process, whereas shared leadership flows through a collaborative process' (Ensley, Hmielski and Pearce 2006, p. 220).

However, the role of formally appointed leadership has been hotly debated within the field (Pearce, Conger and Locke 2008).

The domain of shared leadership is relatively small, cohesive and is dominated by a small number of overlapping writing partnerships between Manz and Sims (1987; 1989; 1991; 1993; 2001), Pearce and Sims (2000; 2002) Pearce and Manz (2005) and Pearce, Manz and Sims (2008; 2009).

Our research revealed only seven seminal empirical studies within MOS (Avolio et al 1996; Pearce and Sims 2002; Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio and Jung 2002; Pearce, Yoo and Alavi 2003; Ensley et al 2006; Mehra, Smith, Dixon and Robertson 2006; Carson et al 2007). In their study of shared leadership processes, efficacy, trust and performance, Avolio and colleagues (1996) applied

Bass and Avolio's (1995) Team Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (TMLQ) to identify the relationship between leadership behaviour from the team as a whole with measures of high team functioning. Subsequent studies (see for example, Pearce and Sims 2002; Sivasubramaniam et al 2002; Pearce et al 2003; Ensley et al 2006) apply similar research designs to different settings. All these studies attempt to measure the relative significance of vertical versus shared leadership for team outcomes using survey methods to measure leadership behaviours at the level of the team.

There are several conceptual models within this stream of literature that provide tentative frameworks for future research (See for example, Pearce and Conger 2003, chap. 2-6). Cox et al (2003) studied the development and maintenance of shared leadership in New Product Development teams focusing on vertical leader behaviours including boundary management and empowerment. In contrast to this, in an effort to highlight the theoretical reasons why patterns of reciprocal influence should emerge and be sustained across group members in self managed teams Seers et al (2003) developed a model which does not include formal leaders. The model highlights the importance of factors such as social status differentials and group member ratings of each other's ability to contribute to task achievement, as influencing positively or negatively the likelihood of shared influence emerging (Seers et al 2003).

Team adaptability in the face of complex tasks and the transference of the leadership function are explored in a conceptual framework focused on shared cognition as a factor enabling shared leadership and team adaptability (Burke, Fiore and Salas 2003). Shared meta-cognition is seen as an important factor determining the development of both shared team mental models and shared situation mental models which when combined with attitudinal factors such as open climate, and collective efficacy, influence when, and to whom leadership should move (Burke et al 2003). This model focuses on the serial emergence of individual leaders.

Alvarez and Svejenova (2005) explore shared leadership at the top and the emergence of shared cognition. They argue that tensions and paradoxes in the organization create unavoidable dualities in executive work, for example between tight alignment with the environment and the need to remain flexible. These are often best resolved by small numbers, such as closely working dyads, at the top of the organization: for example, the CEO and chairman, or CEO and COO, or in some cases joint CEOs which are put in place to manage transitions, or provide a broader range of leadership styles. (Arnone and Stumpf 2010). Role sharing across different tasks, complementary roles in which different personalities, cultural backgrounds, different skills sets and relationship networks work in synergy, lead to shared cognition and even affection. These allow the executives to act as a unit and provide integration where dilemmas might otherwise divide.

Empirical work in the team-based domain has also examined the outcomes of shared leadership. Avolio and colleagues (1996) found shared leadership in undergraduate students doing community volunteer work to be positively correlated with self-reported ratings of effectiveness. Similarly Pearce and Sims (2002) found shared leadership to be more predictive than vertical leadership of the effectiveness of Change Management Teams responsible for implementing innovation. More recently a study by Ensley et al (2006) demonstrated that measures of shared leadership accounted for a significant amount of the variance in new venture performance beyond that accounted for by measures of vertical leadership. There is sufficient evidence in these and similar studies to argue that teams in which leadership is shared are considered effective.

The development of distributed leadership

The distributed leadership literature, which emerged principally within the educational sector, contrasts strongly with that of the team-based shared leadership literature. Prior to 2002, we found little or no cross-citation between the 'team-based' and education literatures until Gronn (2002)

integrated these two strands of work. Gronn, in particular, is now widely quoted within the managerial team-based shared leadership literature.

The educational literature is less theoretically diverse than the team-based literature. Indeed debates about the paradigmatic limitations of distributed leadership research in schools are beginning to surface (Hartley 2010). The literature is unified around a central conceptual model developed largely by Spillane and his colleagues at Northwestern University (Spillane, Diamond and Jita 2000; 2003; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2004). Their research involved a longitudinal study of 15 schools in the Chicago area. Spillane's research was ostensibly aimed at making the 'black box' of leadership more transparent by carrying out an on-going study of leadership practice (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2001). The aim of this study was theory development of a pragmatic kind allowing individuals to think and talk differently about leadership and providing practical tools. This study has dominated research and practice development in the USA and is a key influence on the materials produced by the UK's National College for School Leadership.

Distributed leadership, for Spillane (2006) has a pragmatic focus on leadership as a *practice* and focuses on the school as the unit of analysis, rather than the team. Distributed leadership addresses questions related to discovering how leadership practice is enacted in schools by asking 'who takes responsibility for leadership work' and 'how do individuals get constructed as leaders?' Spillane (2006) found that 'followers' – those not designated as holders of formal leadership roles such as teachers and other school support staff – also contribute to leadership. However, distributed leadership goes beyond acknowledging that multiple individuals are involved in leadership practice (termed 'leader plus' or shared leadership), by also exploring the interactions between individuals and investigating the situation in which leadership is enacted (distributed leadership).

Spillane and colleagues identify three forms of distributed leadership - collaborated, collective and co-ordinated distribution (Spillane 2006). Collaborated distribution involves leadership practice stretched over the work of two or more individuals working in the same space and time. Collective distribution is similar to collaborated except that individuals are working separately but interdependently. Co-ordinated distribution refers to leadership practice that has to be performed in sequence. Of these three Spillane suggests that distributed practice in which individuals work together in the same space and time - collaborated distribution - requires more attention to what he calls 'the affective dimension' (ibid. p. 61). In asking the question how collaborated distribution is achieved Spillane refers to the work of Weick and Roberts (1993) and their concept of heedful interrelating or mindfulness. From this Spillane develops a description of how intelligent practice can be achieved. He makes no further attempt to explore the 'affective dimension' although complex work in organizations particularly organizational transitions, are likely to raise anxiety because identities, loyalties and commitments are threatened (Gronn 2003). Such challenges constitute adaptive challenges and demand that leaders are able to respond and contain the powerful emotions that such learning entails (Heifetz and Laurie 1997; 1999).

In this model, elements of the situation are considered to define and be defined by distributed leadership practice (Spillane 2006). This is based on the concept of distributed cognition and activity theory that emphasize how social context is an integral constitutive part of intelligent human activity. Based on aspects of distributed cognition (Hutchins 1995) and Activity Theory (Leontiev 1981), distributed leadership emphasizes how human cognition is both held between individuals and aspects of the situation and thus cognitive activity is 'stretched over' both human actors and aspects of the context they are in. Context is not merely a stage on which humans act but is an integral part of what meaning-making can emerge as complex tasks are engaged with. Individual sense-making is not merely a function of the individual's mental capacity but is enabled by the situation itself (Spillane et al 2001). Definitions of the situation in this model therefore go

beyond contingency descriptions in which the situation and objects within it constitute a passive recipient of the actions of leaders. Instead, this model sees aspects of the situation such as organizational 'routines' such as 'the Breakfast Club' as actively constituting and shaping leadership practice in a reciprocal relationship.

Gronn (2002) distinguishes between two different kinds of distributed leadership. The first is a numeric or additive view in which distributed leadership is the sum of its parts - the aggregate of attributed influence in a group of individuals in which any member can exercise leadership – this corresponds to what Spillane calls shared leadership. The second of Gronn's definitions describes distributed leadership as concertive action. Distributed leadership construed as concertive action suggests a more holistic view in which leadership is demonstrated through synergies achieved through joint action. Gronn describes three spontaneously emerging types of concertive distributed leadership - all of which are characterized by what he calls conjoint agency. These are spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations and institutionalized practice. Together they represent an increasing degree of institutionalization ranging from unplanned emerging collaborations which may be short term to formalized organizational structures such as the senior executive team which functions as a leadership team for the whole organization (Gronn 2002). These distinctions are similar to Spillane's description of collaborated, collective and co-ordinated distribution. Spillane prefers the term 'co-performance' to Gronn's conjoint agency arguing that joint agency suggests the mutual agreement of goals between individuals whereas co-performance in Spillane's terms allows for the possibility that those performing a practice might intentionally or unintentionally pursue different or contrary goals.

Studies of distributed leadership tend to employ a wide range of research methods in order to provide as comprehensive a view as possible of actual leadership practice. Thus data about the outcome measures of the performance of leadership functions such as literacy scores over a three

monthly period provide not only a benchmark for research purposes but are considered an aspect of the situation that constitutes how leadership is practiced (Spillane 2006). This is a very strong aspect of the research process – a focus on actual leading or leadership practice and an analysis of the possible factors that influence that practice, using diagnostic tools for improvements.

With its emphasis on developing rich descriptions of leadership practice the model developed at Northwestern University has contributed a great deal to managerial debates on shared and distributed leadership by distinguishing what are often considered interchangeable terms, by exploring how and why leadership gets distributed and by suggesting emerging patterns of that distribution. The education literature takes the organization as the level of analysis and has identified factors such as school size, school type - private or public, and subject matter or stage of school development (Harris 2002) as factors in the development of distributed leadership. This focus on the school rather than the team as the unit of analysis highlights the different ways in which debates on distributed and shared leadership are being conducted in the different literature strands. Furthermore, the distributed leadership model in the education strand develops not only descriptions of leadership practice as it is but also explores how distributed leadership might be implemented. For example, a study of the institutionalization of distributed leadership in 30 UK schools revealed the presence of contradictory institutional pressures that inhibited the enactment of distributed leadership in deprived schools where policy-makers hoped distributed leadership would have the biggest impact (Currie, Lockett and Suhomlinova 2009). The issue of implementation had previously been taken up in the practitioner-oriented shared leadership literature emanating from the Healthcare sector literature which focuses on shared governance (Burnhope and Edmonstone 2003), empowering nursing staff (Gavin, Ash, Wakefield and Wroe 1999), or 'a decentralized approach which gives nurses greater authority and control over their practice and work environments' (O'May and Buchan 1999).

Studies carried out on the complexities of achieving strategic change in healthcare settings are characterized by pluralistic divergent objectives, multiple actors, and where power relationships are unstable and ambiguous (Denis et al 1996; Denis, Lamothe and Langley 2001). Other studies suggest that increased external pressures, a complex change agenda required to respond to those pressures, and an emerging and unstable network organization all contribute to the emergence of distributed leadership (Buchanan, Addicott, Fitzgerald, Ferlie and Baeza 2007). This literature supports a broader consideration of context and task environment when thinking about leadership and how to develop it.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Whilst there are significant differences between shared and distributed leadership (see Table 1) these terms are frequently used interchangeably obscuring important theoretical differences. Even within the two strands of literature there is an absence of cohesion, in terms of ontological views, epistemological consensus and research agenda. For example, Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2009) suggest that a lack of clarity as to whether distributed leadership is descriptive or normative, or devolved from the 'top down' or evolves from the 'bottom up' makes the notion of distributed leadership within the education sector less useful except perhaps as a rhetorical device for shaping perceptions of 'identity, participation and influence' (ibid. p. 2). In the following section we reveal four alternative approaches to studying shared and distributed leadership.

Alternative ontological views and leadership epistemologies

We argue that there are important ways in which differences in the nature of leadership and how individuals are theorized can be delineated across this fragmented field. The way relationships, so central to any theory of shared or distributed leadership are construed, the role of context and the way in which leadership is studied vary. Four distinct approaches on shared and distributed

leadership can be identified: relational-entity, relational-structural, relational-processual and relational-systemic (see Table 2). We will discuss each of these approaches in turn.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Relational-entity approach

An entity view of leadership constitutes the dominant paradigm within leadership studies (Drath 2001, Pye 2005, Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O'Connor, and McGuire 2008). Despite the apparent diversity of leadership theory, an entity view provides a unifying ontology based on an atomized worldview that sees reality consisting of entities, described using nouns (e.g. leaders, followers, styles, traits, attributes, behaviours or competencies) whose properties are stable and the relationship between entities as causal.

A relational-entity approach focuses on designated leaders or individuals who take up leadership roles. This is less on fully embodied individuals but on individual minds - 'knowing' minds and the cognitive processes within and between them (Uhl-Bien 2006). Thus the interrogation of individual minds and their properties become the subject of social enquiry. Social and psychological constructs such as particular leadership styles and behaviours can be operationalized as discrete variables which can be identified within individuals, measured and generalized in an unproblematic way to larger populations (Bolden and Gosling 2006). This approach allows powerful analytical methods to be applied that can identify important descriptive and potentially predictive insights into shared and distributed leadership. For example, leadership identities can be explored as co-constructions between individuals in a claiming-granting process through which individuals internalize an identity as leader or follower: shared leadership-structure schemas result when there is a mutual understanding that granting leader identity to one individual does not prevent others from also claiming and being granted a leader identity (Scott DeRue and Ashford 2010).

The consequences of construing individuals as entities are many and nuanced. They lead to theories of shared and distributed leadership that focus on leaders, albeit multiple leaders, and their characteristics, traits, intentions, behaviours, perceptions and evaluations (Uhl-Bien 2006). The focus of research on shared and distributed leadership from a relational-entity perspective is then on discrete individuals and leadership development construed as leader development. Universalist knowledge of what constitutes effective shared or distributed leadership behaviour is then codified into a set of competencies and skills that are then translated into off-site training courses for leaders (Bolden and Gosling 2006).

The potential weakness of construing the individual as ontologically complete is to privilege the cognitive processes of the individual mind as the main source of leadership agency and to over-emphasize the role of individuals and to mute the constitutive influence of context. Relationships are reduced to conduits of communication, strategy and influence, entered into by individuals for instrumental purposes (Dachler and Hosking 1995). In addition, entity perspectives, 'although they refer to process (e.g. social exchange, role-making), never really examine it' (Uhl-Bien 2006, p. 666).

Entity approaches to shared and distributed leadership embedded as they are in an objectivist paradigm, frame new approaches to leadership as alternatives which have emerged in response to new workplace imperatives characterized by complexity and ambiguity. Presented as such they can underplay the potential resistance of 'heroic' traditional leadership models to new approaches (Fletcher 2004). The possible consequences of this are taken up by Fletcher and Kaufer (2003). They highlight the danger that the relational skills associated with creating and maintaining shared and distributed leadership will be 'disappeared' as they are not readily recognizable as leadership. Displays of such behaviours as collaborating, empathy, vulnerability and dialogue may not be

associated in many contexts with leadership and will thus be either rejected or absorbed and co-opted by traditional mainstream discourses of what constitutes leadership (Fletcher 2004). More recent work highlights how one mechanism by which shared leadership will be rejected is when team members' implicit leadership theories (ILTs) mean that individuals lack categories for encoding shared leadership behaviours and therefore do not recognize it (Shondrick, Dinh and Lord 2010).

Relational-structural approach

Consistent with the relational-entity approach, the relational-structural approach to shared and distributed leadership sees reality consisting of entities (e.g. leaders, groups, organizations). In this approach individuals are described as nodes or in cases where there is a focal actor this person is labelled "ego". Where this approach departs from the relational entity perspective is its' focus not on the attributes of nodes (e.g. roles, style, and competencies) but on systems of relations (Freeman 2004, p. 16) between people. Measures of centrality within networks can be understood to represent degrees of distribution of leadership within groups.

The relational-structural approach moves the focus "away from individualist, essentialist and atomistic explanations toward more relational, contextual and systemic understandings" (Borgatti and Foster 2003, p. 991). The focuses of research is on "the primacy of relations between organizational actors, the ubiquity of actors' embeddedness in social fields, the social utility of network connections, and the structural patterning of social life" (Balkundi and Kilduff 2005, p. 942).

Networks are both cognitive structures in the minds of individuals and actual structures that shape leadership (Balkundi and Kilduff 2005). Leadership effectiveness is dependent on accurately perceiving the existence, nature, and structure of social ties in the organization (Krackhardt 1990)

and individuals in leadership roles can extract social capital from their network (Burt 1992; Gnyawali and Madhavan 2001). However, due to the embedded nature of social networks it may be challenging for individuals to perceive accurately and to manage the broader networks within which they are located (Uzzi, 1997). Thus, “although the social structure of the organization determines opportunities and constraints for emergent leaders, the social structure is not within the control of any particular individual” (Balkundi and Kilduff 2005, p. 944).

A small number of contributions to the shared and distributed literature employ social network analysis to study distributed leadership (Mayo, Meindl and Pastor 2003; Mehra et al 2006; Carson et al 2007). Carson et al (2007), use social network analysis to explore the importance of ‘internal team environment’ and ‘external coaching’ as antecedent factors in the emergence of shared leadership. Mehra et al (2006), employ social network analysis to test the hypothesis that teams with ‘distributed’ leadership structures will tend to outperform teams with a traditional leader centred structure. The study demonstrates that distributed leadership *per se* may not account for variance in team performance outcomes. Their study distinguishes between two types of distributed leadership. Distributed-co-ordinated networks in which the different leaders acknowledged each other were associated with better team performance. In contrast distributed-fragmented leadership networks in which multiple leaders did not see each other as leaders were not associated with better team performance. They acknowledge that these are only two of many possible forms of distribution which can be explored and that ‘theories of distributed leadership need to make more fine-grained distinctions between different types of distributed leadership if they are to explain meaningful variance in the measures of team performance’ (Mehra et al 2006, p. 241).

The use of the term ‘relational’ in these studies reflects an interest in patterns of relations between and among team members and, as such, has been classified by Uhl-Bien as an entity based approach

because of its grounding in 'cognitions in the mind of the leader' (2006, p. 659). She argues that network theory has still not approached the relational (social reality) perspective (Hosking 1988).

Relational-processual approach

A relational-processual approach focuses on how relational processes evolve - how interpersonal relationships develop, unfold, maintain, or dissolve in the context of broader relational realities' (Uhl-Bien 2006, p. 660). The term relational-processual reflects a commitment to leadership as a distributed practice embedded within on-going social processes in which what constitutes leadership practice is emerging and changing over time. Both Spillane (2006) and Gronn (2002) commit to a view of leadership as a practice embedded in social processes. It represents a commitment to a world view that privileges process over structure, entities and events (Whitehead 1985; Rescher 1996; 2000). A processual view takes what entity approaches assume to be epiphenomena - relationships, interactions and process - and make them central. Unlike Uhl-Bien's use of the term 'constructionist' as a contrast to 'entity' approaches (Uhl-Bien 2006, p. 655), the identification of Activity Theory as one of the intellectual roots of distributed leadership in the education literature makes the use of the term 'constructionist' problematic.

Engeström (2000) argues that Activity Theory emphasizes the constitutive influence of historical-cultural and spatial-temporal aspects of a situation to a degree that requires it to be distinguished from social constructionism which focuses on the way in which individuals continually engage in and are constituted by socially embedded meaning-making processes (Uhl-Bien 2006). Such a distinction may be controversial but in the absence of a clearer statement from the education literature we feel the use of the term relational-processual speaks to the way in which the distributed leadership model within the education literature is distinctive. The degree to which this model of distributed leadership reflects a social constructionist approach is likely to be an on-going debate. It is the strong emphasis on the historical-cultural aspects of the situation that constitute leadership

practice that makes this distinction worth making. In addition, Gronn calls explicitly for an understanding of organization in process terms rather than as entities (Gronn 2003, p. 30). Hence use of the term relational-processual is an attempt to capture some of the nuance of this approach.

The focus on the way in which aspects of the situation constitute and are constituted by leadership practice is a distinguishing feature of this approach. Research agendas focus as much on the contexts in which individuals work and on how tools and routines that emerge from practice serve to shape effective outcomes at the level of the organization. A data set, and the design of a means to collect it and process it can constitute a tool, while a regular meeting attended by a range of people from different parts of the organization as an established routine contributes as much to distributed leadership practice as any individual or group of individuals. The emphasis on leadership development is to embed it within a contextualized organizational development. Training consists in the reframing of leadership to provide a lexicon of distributed leadership practice that legitimizes talking about leadership in new ways in organizations.

While the relational-entity, relational-structural and relational-processual perspectives provide a breadth and depth to our understanding of what distributed and shared leadership can be conceived, our analysis suggests that there may be room for a fourth and important perspective to models of shared and distributed leadership - a relational-systemic perspective.

Relational-systemic perspective

A relational-systemic approach allows for the examination of the kind of fine-grained group dynamics that the structural approach of social network analysis taken in some of the empirical papers of the team-based shared leadership literature are less able to provide (Mehra et al 2006, p. 243). In so doing it also provides insight into the environment in which the team operates – acknowledged as an important direction for future research in shared and distributed leadership

(Avolio, Walumbwa and Weber 2009). A relational-systemic perspective pays attention to psychological as well as social processes that link individuals to each other and their contexts. Social scientists working with such psychodynamics 'represent a subset of the broad field of psychology. They study the activity of and the interrelation between various parts of an individual's personality or psyche' (Neumann and Hirschhorn 1999, p. 684). A systemic perspective on relational dynamics considers how the emotional needs of individuals and groups influence the processes, structures and cultures that emerge and are sustained in groups and organizations and how in turn, processes structures and cultures shape the emotional experiences of those groups (Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010).

Fletcher and Kaufer (2003) propose, a 'relational' view of shared leadership in which the individual is seen as a 'self-in-relation'. The 'self in relation' perspective proposed by Fletcher and Kaufer reflects the influence of relational psychoanalytic theory especially British Object Relations (Klein 1946; 1952; 1959) in which selfhood is achieved through connection with others (Gomez 1997). The integration of relational psychoanalytic concepts with the systems thinking of Lewin (1946; 1947; 1950) and the open systems theory of von Bertalanffy (1950) provides a system psychodynamic conceptual framework that links intra-psychic experience of individuals to inter-personal, group, inter-group and organizational phenomena. It also links individuals and groups to task-related aspects of context. The work of Heifetz and Laurie (1997; 1999) suggests that when organizations face adaptive challenges this can cause distress for the people going through it. The role of leadership in such cases is to provide a holding environment in which emotions associated with adaptive learning can be contained. Early papers (for example Neck et al 1996) within the team-based shared leadership literature have referenced seminal works within the system psychodynamic literature - Wells (1985) and Bion (1961) -but have read the nuance of the 'group-as-whole' perspective' through the lens of the entity perspective and missed key points which merit some consideration. Similarly Spillane (2006) has referred to the potential importance of the

'affective dimension' (p. 61) in situations of collaborated distributed leadership but does not address it further. One laboratory study (Solansky 2008) did explore whether teams that had established shared leadership experienced more or less conflict than teams with more traditional hierarchical leadership. The inconclusiveness of this aspect of the study reflects the limits of entity-based exploration of affect in groups of this kind as well as the absence of legitimate adaptive challenges which in a real world setting are much more likely to provoke systemic affect.

However, while little within the literature of shared and distributed leadership addresses the issue of adaptive challenges - for which shared and distributed leadership are proposed as an apposite response - some writers have explored the emotional costs of transitions to shared and distributed leadership (Huffington, James and Armstrong 2004; Turnbull James, Mann and Creasy 2007). Firstly, anxieties that can be mobilized in the face of adaptive challenges are not individual but systemic in nature. That is, emotions experienced are not simply a function of individual psychologies but are best understood as group and therefore systemic phenomena (Turnbull James et al 2007). Secondly, a shift from a more traditional vertical top down leadership to a more distributed or shared model can upset existing power and authority relations demanding careful responses from the formal leader (Huffington et al 2004). These responses should take account of unconscious group processes generated in response to the distress associated with adaptive learning. These processes may include the need for a 'heroic' leader to provide containment (Hirschhorn 1990) which may be counter to the desired change. A systems psychodynamic perspective theorizes individuals not as entities, but in ways akin to Fletcher's (2004) 'self-in relation'. From this perspective individuals are linked to one another 'into an interdependent, symbolic, tacit, unconscious, and collusive nexus in which their interactions and shared fantasies and phantasies create and represent as one the group-as-a-whole' (Wells 1985, p. 114). Thus we suggest that a 'relational-systemic' perspective to shared and distributed leadership may offer a useful supplement to the other three perspectives of the team-based shared and distributed leadership. The notion of

the self-in-relation applies as much to researchers as to group or organizational members suggesting that action research or ethnographic research methodologies be employed (Miller 1993).

Conclusion

The issues highlighted by this paper are timely, relevant and perhaps even urgent. Our intended contribution is twofold - to highlight gaps in the literature and to challenge and clarify existing theory. Firstly, the review reveals 'incompleteness' (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997) in the field by highlighting "either lack of studies or shortage in the delivery of conclusive results" (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011, p. 40). We have confirmed that the list of potential research areas in the nascent field of shared and distributed leadership is wide-ranging – for example, the moderating influence of cultural values, task complexity, task interdependencies and competence; the influence of team size, team diversity, maturity and life cycle; and the factors which influence the emergence of shared and distributed leadership as well as those that may affect whether it can be sustained. Secondly, our review attempts to go beyond "gap spotting" by "challenging the assumptions which underlie existing theory" (Sandberg and Alvesson, 40). Adopting a 'problematization' strategy (Locke and Golden Biddle, 1997) we have questioned "minor assumptions underlying existing theory" as well as the "assumptions that may underlie an entire theoretical field" (Sandberg and Alvesson, 40). This review problematizes shared and distributed leadership by revealing and examining the unarticulated ontological and epistemological assumptions that if unacknowledged could fragment the field unnecessarily.

Notions of leadership as shared or distributed are central to one of the most fundamental and potentially controversial debates within the leadership literature - whether leadership is best understood as a specialized role or a shared influence process (Yukl 2006). The literature on shared and distributed leadership has the potential to expand our understanding of leadership by highlighting some of the limitations of traditional ontological and epistemological perspectives

within leadership studies. However, it is not clear whether these new possibilities will be realized. This is because while ‘team-based’ shared and distributed leadership scholars embrace the notion central to the post-heroic agenda that sources of leadership can include any and all members of a team or organization, they continue to adhere to an ontological framework which may obscure rather than illuminate important features of shared and distributed leadership.

While defining shared leadership as a ‘simultaneous, on-going, mutual influence process within a team’ (Ensley et al 2006, p. 218), that it represents a ‘condition of mutual influence embedded in the interactions among team members’ (Carson et al 2007, p. 1218) or that it emerges through an ‘unfolding series of fluid, situationally appropriate exchanges of lateral influence (Cox et al 2003), these scholars usually theorize the individual as a discrete isolate. The distributed leadership literature balances this with an emphasis on practice and context but both literatures fail to take adequate account the systemic emotional dynamics at play both in the face of adaptive challenges and the disturbance to established role relations that shifts to shared and distributed leadership entail.

Given that many authors within the shared and distributed leadership literatures claim that these new forms of leadership are emerging in response to adaptive challenges, more attention must be paid to systemic emotional dynamics that such learning entails. Because of the potential of transitions to shared and distributed leadership to unsettle existing role and authority relations, such transitions may prove more challenging than first thought. Our synthesis suggests that rather than the elaborations of emotional intelligence that accompanies entity-based theories of leadership a viable route for future research is systemic: emotionality rather than emotion.

Ontological debates currently of interest in the leadership literature cannot be reduced to heroic versus post-heroic or entity versus non-entity perspectives. There are important nuances within the

literature that require a more refined articulation. We propose four perspectives which capture these nuances. This review also highlights the dangers of speaking of shared and distributed leadership as if they are interchangeable terms - they are philosophically diverse.

Exploring the fine-grained dynamics of relationships within teams will produce very different research agendas depending on whether the leadership is theorized as something held by entity, a pattern of nodes embedded in a system of relations, a process or as a self-in-relation. These issues, while clearly significant and requiring articulation within the shared and distributed leadership literatures, are no less important for broader issues related to how we think about leadership in terms of research and practice.

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Table 1. The key characteristics of shared and distributed leadership

Shared Leadership	Distributed Leadership
Leadership often emanates from the designated leader plus other group members who share leadership roles (e.g. Strongman, Transactor, Visionary hero and Super-leader)	Leadership is not only held by those with designated, formal leadership roles but is enacted by multiple individuals in the organisation
Leadership involves several individuals leading themselves and allowing others to lead them through a reciprocal influence process	Leadership practice is constituted and shaped by the interactions between leaders and followers and the organisational context
Cognition is shared by members of the group	Cognition is 'stretched over' both human actors and aspects of the context they are in
Advantage is offered through the aggregate of attributed influence in a group (collective influence)	Advantage is offered by developing a capacity to act by means of 'concertive action, 'co-performance' or 'conjoint agency'

Table 2: Alternative approaches for studying shared and distributed leadership

	Relational-entity	Relational-structural	Relational-processual	Relational-systemic
The nature of leadership	Leadership is shared/distributed between discrete minds / entities (leaders) who perceive, evaluate and make decisions including how and when to act in pursuit of goals.	Leadership is shared/distributed in a system or pattern of relations. These networks are cognitive structures in the minds of nodes / egos (leaders) and opportunity structures that facilitate and constrain action.	Leadership is a practice constantly being constituted within the flow of a set of social processes that take place in particular cultural, historical, and political contexts.	Leadership is a function of a collective and involves conscious and unconscious psycho-social processes that are systemic in nature and particular to a specific context. Thus leadership is always shared or distributed.
The nature of relationship	Relationships are inter-personal and formed and acted upon by knowing subjects for instrumental purposes.	Relationships are real and can be measured	Relationships are formed by concertive units (pairs, teams, cross-departmental groups) within on-going social processes.	Patterns of relating often reflect systemic and unconscious strategies for managing the collective anxieties associated with adaptive learning
The role of context	Little emphasis since shared / distributed leadership is dependent on the skills, attributes and behaviours of individual leaders aggregated to the group level that can be applied in multiple settings.	Context is important in that effective shared or distributed leadership is dependent on accurately perceiving and leveraging the structure of social ties in the organisation	Strong emphasis on context since in contrast to contingency theories, elements of the situation are considered constitutive of shared / distributed leadership practice.	Strong emphasis since no statement about leadership from this perspective is possible without reference to how group level phenomena link individuals and groups to their contexts
How leadership is studied	Variance methods are often employed to seek explanations of leadership, with independent variables	Social network methods are often employed to study the individual's position in the larger	Eclectic designs are used to identify or reconstruct the process through which leadership	Action research and ethnographic designs are employed to explore systemic emotional dynamics

	acting upon and causing changes in dependent variables.	networks within which the individual is located.	emerges and changes over time.	and unconscious group processes and how these unfold within a particular task context.
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