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Imagine There Are No Leaders: Reframing Leadership as Collaborative Agency

A Paper by

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Abstract

Fearing that our over-reliance on an individual, heroic model of leadership will only continue to dampen the energy and creativity of people in our organizations and communities, this essay proposes a practice perspective of leadership based on a collaborative agency mobilized through engaged social interaction. After briefly reviewing the emerging practice tradition in leadership studies, the article turns to the inseparable connection between leadership and agency and discusses how structure may pacify but, under dialogic conditions, release agency. Acknowledging the cultural constraints against collaborative agency, the account affirms its potential realization through interpersonal interaction and sociality. Specific leadership activities associated with collaborative agency and their conditions are illustrated. The paper concludes by showing how the collaborative agentic model might produce a more sustainable future for our world while suggesting avenues for future research of a collective rather than a personal approach to leadership.

Keywords

Leadership, agency, collaboration, collective leadership, shared leadership, leaderful practice, symbolic interactionism, dialogue, critical reflection, reflexivity, meaning making

In this article, I am calling for the reframing of leadership, as we know it. The concept and practice of leadership have been overused and oversold to such an extent that the meaning of leadership is no longer conceptually intact, while its practice has become minimally suspect. There is no consensus, for example, that leadership be singular or plural, that it be a trait or a set of behaviors, or that it be best viewed as a subject or as an object. In terms of practice, it is not clear what leaders do that is unique or consistent across settings; it is not established that leadership has effects (such as on performance) that clearly differentiate it

from other organizational practices such as structuring, teamwork, or rewards; and it is even thought to be differentiated from managing, though the latter is also thought to contain leadership.

Of all the concerns that have been raised about leadership, it is its impact on people that may be most called into question. Does leadership have a discernible impact, but most critically, is the impact of benefit, especially in the long run? If it were to be conveyed by an individual, called the leader, what is the ultimate effect on those who would be called followers? Are they to remain in a followership state; if so, for how long? If they continue as followers, what does it say about their own prospective agency, or are they in a permanent state of dependency or helplessness (Śliwa et al., 2012)? Some commentators (see., e.g., Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Grint, 2010) have suggested that leaders are accorded the privilege of framing followers' reality allaying the latter's existential anxiety in exchange for power and privilege. Meanwhile, what about the leader? Does he or she remain in the state of leadership, and for how long? What is required of this individual to persist in leadership? Do leaders need to know more than their followers? Are they needed to provide continual motivation? In the end, what is their motive?

The issues cited here have been taken up by various pundits and scholars of leadership. There are those who would wish to change leadership to become a more useful practice for society; others see leadership as a stable and enduring psychological property. In the latter camp are those who see leadership as constituting a persevering set of traits that are natural to particular gifted individuals, though some may concede that many of these traits can be learned. Others see leadership, like any other human intervention, as a social construction that is in its property a malleable endeavor. Although we tend to institutionalize the practice so that it take on an aura of permanence - as when we think of it as the occupants of an elected office - if we take the time to look back, we can see that it has a cultural and grammatical history that can be traced to an origin that is humanly constructed (Grint, 2005; Hersted and Gergen, 2013).

If we determine that leadership is in our hands and minds to change, what shall we do with it? Are we happy with it as it currently stands? Is it serving to advance our civilization in a way that is sustainable to ourselves and to our offspring? As we look at history, we might have advocates pointing to its promise as well as to its disappointment. In contemporary civic affairs, we might find ourselves again at a crossroads.

Although there are those who would argue that our world is at a higher state of peaceful coexistence than at any other time in history; others might contend that the human race is closer to the brink of extinction than at any other time, and that our “leadership” has brought us to this point and is seemingly incapable of reversing the inexorable trend. The question is: may we “reframe” leadership? And, so as not to reify leadership into an agency beyond its reach, let us acknowledge that any change in leadership would need to be accompanied by structural and contextual changes (e.g., through the nature and operation of our political institutions) because the conditions in the world are shaped by other properties beyond leadership.

But, how shall we proceed to reframe leadership? In this article, acknowledging that readers of this journal will be well aware of the history of the persistent dissipation of the individualistic paradigm, I will start by skipping to a brief review of some contemporary distributed and practice models. The inseparable connection between leadership and agency will then be taken up by first acknowledging the power of structure to cause the pacification, even the disappearance, of the self in the world. In the subsequent section, the release of agency will be viewed as realizable through its incarnation as a dialogic structure based on interpersonal interactions and sociality. Next, the challenge of engaging in the intersubjective practice of agency, in which conversants transcend their own immediate embeddedness, will be entertained, including the constraints to this level of practice. At this point in the paper, I will be prepared to discuss how leadership may be viewed as a form of collaborative agency. The parties committed to a practice enter an authentic dialogue to reproduce or transform the very practice in which they are engaged. I will also propose some specific activities that people working together might carry out that would constitute collaborative leadership and then explain the conditions for their emergence. Prior to concluding, I will suggest three ways in which a collaborative agency-based form of leadership can produce a sustainable world and will also suggest some avenues for the further research of this form.

Sketch of the Emerging Practice Model of Leadership

Some of the contemporary approaches to leadership have emerged out of a critical tradition that has forewarned against rationalist attempts to capture and universally define it independently from its context.

Indeed, the history of leadership research is known far more for its successive attempts at definition than its coherence. A good place to start in consolidating the critical perspective would be through attribution models that recognized that leadership is based on an implicit model of what leaders are supposed to do (Eden and Leviatan, 1975; Probert and Turnbull James, 2011; Rush et al., 1977). Even if the leader carries out a mundane activity, such as listening, talking, or demonstrating concern, the ideology of managerialism accredits these behaviors as significant or at times even extraordinary (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). Meindl (1990) went as far as to suggest that followers participate in a social inference process that he referred to as the “romance of leadership” perspective in which through their social networks, followers are often complicit with leaders in spreading the mythology of leader invincibility (Bligh et al., 2011; Jackson, 2005). Charisma interconnects with flows of power and networks and is often a function of the ability of the principal to “macro act,” that is, to mobilize or associate himself or herself with the central and sacred routines of authority (Callon and Latour, 1981; Hernes, 2005; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009). Those actors relying on the presence of charisma learn to use media to dramatize issues, to exhibit sincerity, and to attract personal adherents, thereby projecting a larger and more powerful image than mere physical presence would suggest (Bensman and Givant, 1975).

Undaunted by these skeptical accounts, a veritable cottage industry has since emerged separating leadership from management, with the former occupying the high ground of not just “doing things right,” but “doing the right things.” The leader is visionary and strategic whereas the manager is preoccupied with bureaucratic duties and the fulfillment of contractual obligations (see, e.g., Kotter, 2001; Zaleznik, 1992). More recently, there has been an alternative focus on leadership as a shared or distributed process that can “stretch over” many actors, rather than as the property of a single individual who has the authority or charisma to effectuate the actions of followers (Spillane et al., 2004). Unfortunately, this movement, at its early stages, is disperse and is not focused on any set of conceptual identifiers; rather, it is referred to under a number of frames from shared leadership (Avolio et al., 1996; Pearce and Conger, 2003) to stewardship (Block, 1983), to collective leadership (Bolden et al., 2008a), to distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006), to empowering leadership (Vecchio et al., 2010), to integrative leadership (Crosby and

Bryson, 2005; Ospina and Foldy, 2009), to discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007), and to relational leadership (Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Murrell, 1997).

In contributing to alternative schemas of leadership, I have contended that leadership be a practice, not an affirmation of the traits and heroics of individual actors (Xxxx, 2011a). As a foundation for new knowledge, practice does not often rely upon theory to help participants “learn their way out of trouble.” Rather, entertaining Levi-Strauss’ usage of *bricolage*, people create knowledge as they improvise around the problems they are confronting. Practice thus has a different language from theory. We may recall Kierkegaard’s view that practice is lived forward, whereas theory is lived backwards (Gardiner, 1988). It may probe into spaces where theory may be reluctant to go. There are moments of uncertainty, however, when we have no choice but to probe ahead, relying on our feelings or our instincts from which we may subsequently derive theory *a posteriori*. Our knowing, then, is in sync with the reality we are experiencing as we interact with the environment. Our knowing isn’t separated from any objective reality; in fact, in practice, our access to a theory-independent base of knowledge is often limited. Paraphrasing from Bakhtin (1984), we derive truth not from our heads but from our interactions with others as we search for it. So, instead of representing truth, we use available rules and resources (Giddens, 1984) or our implicit habitus – Bourdieu’s (1990) expression for the set of dispositions that cause people to internalize social structures – to confront our problems. We interact with our peers working on the matter at hand, and in our conversations, we shape what it is we know (Marshak and Grant, 2008).

In conceiving of leadership as a practice, we are primarily concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experiences such that its material and social conditions are thought to constitute leadership rather than to predict it (Carroll et al., 2008). They are not understood as the physical or mental capacity of any one individual because they are embedded within the situation in which they take place (Resnick, 1991). Leadership is more about *where*, *when*, *how*, and *why* leadership work is being done than about who is offering visions for others to understand and perform the work in question (Xxxx, 2003). In distributed leadership, for example, leaders are often cast as preceding collective meaning making by sanctioning followers to offer their agency (Hardy, 1996; Sutherland et al., 2013). On the other hand, the

practice view of leadership does not focus on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers; rather, it looks to the activity of all those who are engaged, to their social interactions, and to their reflections and adjustments to their ongoing work. Ultimately, leadership becomes a consequence of collaborative meaning making in practice; in this way, it is intrinsically tied to a collective rather than to an individual model of leadership (Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Reckwitz, 2002).

The Problematic of Structure

The role of social structure comes into play in leadership when we think of it as a durable but yet reproducible set of patterns in social life that enables but also constrains human freedom (Durkheim, 1964; 1965). As Giddens (1981) scrupulously clarified, structure is both a medium and an outcome of human social action. Although it operates above the head of individual human actors, it would not exist without the willing or unwilling participation of these same actors (Hays, 1994).

The imbuelement of structure as an object-like reality, produced from cultural and historical representations and discourses, is illuminated by postmodernists who suggest that without decentering and deconstruction, ascendant representations can lead to hegemonic dynamics. Its architecture may establish non-witnessable rules (Reed, 2005) or “regimes of practice” (Cleaver, 2007) that confine people to pre-ordained and routinized ways of behaving, such as practicing leadership. Truths initially become subjective based upon people’s attribution of them, resulting in the marketplace for knowledge becoming colonized as some particular depictions are endorsed while other silenced (Beck, 1993; Gephart, 1996). In time, these truths take on an objective quality as the identity of the original authors fades into obscurity.

When these truths become enshrined as a reality, is there room for agency to curb the excesses of an objective structure? I define agency as the realization of social choices within the confines of structure, including its tendency to reproduce itself. This definition addresses the “voluntarist” view that choices do not just habitually re-constitute structure but can under particular circumstances, such as during moments of crisis, have a transformative impact on any given system (Archer, 2012; Chia and Holt, 2006). Using such resources as self-consciousness, deliberation, or norm interpretation and development, agents can deploy a

measure of reflexivity (Archer, 2000; Blumer, 1969; Gherardi, 2000; Giddens, 1984; Herepath, 2014; Rose, 1998). We can overturn the historical contexts and expectations imposed on us; in effect, we can escape the habitus that we inherited (Bourdieu, 1990; Jordan, 2010; Endrissat and von Arx, 2013). Structure itself is dynamic and multi-faceted and thus ever-evolving through dialectical interactions (Sewell, 1992). Giddens (1984) concurs by asserting that we can adapt particular traditions and resources to help us learn our way through the institutional barriers that confront us. For example, physicians may find that professional standards militate against their asking nurse practitioners to perform particular medical procedures, but the shortage of attending physicians may require they do so in order to sustain the care of the patient and to uphold an alternative standard of professional ethics.

As structures are secured through human interaction, it is also the case that individuation may be saved by sociocultural interaction (Mather, 1997). To become human is to presuppose a historical process of cultural transmission invoked by social knowledge in our interactions with others (Schutz, 1962). Sartre, for example, exclaimed that “I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another...” (2007, p. 41). For Sartre, then, a struggle to find the inner self would be pointless without understanding our “being-in-the-world,” a state that can be ignited by acknowledging others and their own search for freedom (Lawler and Ashman, 2012; Sartre, 1992).

As it turns out, the interactive self had been recognized far earlier by Hegel (1807/1977), who postulated that individuation occurs as a result of interaction with another human being, producing the duality of “an I that is we and a we that is I” (sec. 177). Any realization of the self can come about through genuine relationships with others; otherwise, we may descend into an utter existential meaninglessness that produces an ultimate confrontation with our own death and isolation. Buber (2004) likewise distinguished the “I-it” relationship from the “I-thou” relationship. The former is instrumental and based on functional exchange between people; as in: “what can I do for you in exchange for what you can do for me.” The I-thou, on the other hand, is based on an authentic recognition of the self in the other that can arise from genuine dialogue. It is a subject-to-subject relation as in the quality of love that is based on a shared sense of caring, respect, commitment, and mutual responsibility. In the so called “encounter” in the I-thou, both parties may be

transformed by the relation between them and both are encountered in their entirety, not in the sum of their qualities.

The Release of Agency

The aforementioned account preordains the release of agency from structure and from pure individual motive by the reflective process of dialogue (Emirbayer and Mische, 1988). As per the social pragmatism of G.H. Mead (1934), dialogue produces a sociality as actors engage in perspective-taking through language, the primary vehicle of engagement (Laclau and Bhaskar, 1998). We come to know the world not necessarily through theory or through rational critique of text but from a contested interaction among a community of inquirers who mobilize their agency through a critical reflection that is dependent upon not just how one sees oneself, but how one sees others, and how one understands how others see one's self. For Mead (1934), the social process is based on a reflexiveness in which one learns to take the attitude of the other toward oneself. Further, the "other" may not be just one other person but a "generalized" other, namely the perspective of the community of which we are a part.

From the literature on complex adaptive systems and from relational and constitutive communications, we also learn that order may be created out of disorder and self-organized through social interactions (Cooren et al., 2011; Stacey, 2001). People talk to one another around a theme until a turning point occurs as a particular remark gives rise to another theme (Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012; Boden, 1994). In due course, a situation is talked into existence as the basis for collective action (Taylor and Van Every, 2000). We engage with one another not only to listen but to organize our ways of acting together (Hersted and Gergen, 2013). Change in organizational life occurs when people begin to talk differently, whether it be about the content of the conversation or its dynamics. Their talking may bring to light previously unnoticed patterns and allow the parties to fashion a scenic sense of their new circumstances (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003). In the manner of the "ironist," Rorty (1989) claims that cultural change occurs more from people speaking differently rather than arguing well.

Relying on cultural-historical activity theory, we might think of speech acts as a set of cultural tools which mediate our social exchange and by which we shape our collective existence (Stetsenko, 2008). Although early activity theorists, such as Vygotsky (see Vygotsky and Luria, 1994) identified agency's self-reflective component, known as *distanciation* – the ability to detach from ongoing action to reflect upon self and upon the activity, agency also has an *identification* function that calls for actors' human tendency to vicariously identify with the actions and experiences of others (Gillespie (2012). This latter feature of agency calls on individuals to act on the basis of someone else's immediate situation, requiring a subordination of their own impulses and situational demands. It requires seeing oneself from a third person perspective and, thus, is inherently intersubjective (Epley et al., 2004; Gillespie, 2006; Sugarman and Sokol, 2012).

In intersubjectivity, we recognize the emergence of a structure that limits the identity of the individual; in particular, the shared immanent experience between individuals transcends individual experience. The domain of social meaning, however, does not dominate individual subjective experience (Grossberg, 1982). Nor am I suggesting that intersubjective agency is equivalent to group or collective agency in which the group may form autonomous attitudes detached from and yet sovereign over its constituent members, in other words, that it have a mind of its own (Cerulo, 1997; List and Petit, 2011). Rather, intersubjective agency reciprocally constitutes *both* the individual and the social. The individual may retain his or her original meaning while adopting the current and forthcoming meanings of other subjects.

Consequently, the confluence of the self, containing all of our life experiences, and the immediate social experience, containing a full range of socially derived suggestions and enacted forms, constitutes a negotiation that Billett (2008) refers to as a relational interdependence. Since individuals can incorporate or ignore the suggestions of others, individual agency cannot be reducible to social agency. Indeed, the workplace interdependence between parties is often disjointed and inconsistent. Beckett (2013) refers to the give-and-take of the workplace as a “complex manifestation of emergence,” that is neither predictable nor reducible yet ontologically distinctive. It is a form of what Barad (2003) and Shotter (2013) call an “intra-action,” in which the conversation is not between separate, self-contained entities but as a dynamic emerging

relation shaped by the parties in response to each other and to their surroundings. In this albeit uneven and unpredictable way, practices can be transformed and remade (Nicolini, 2012).

Having explored the permutations of intersubjective agency, I can now offer a rationale for my choice of the words, “collaborative agency” as the basis for the emerging practice conception of leadership. The aforementioned expression, “intersubjective agency,” would work well since it incorporates individual choice as well as collective allegiance. However, it does not bring to mind the dynamics between the parties and could be equated with collective agency. Although I find the expression “collective” agency descriptive and useful, especially in its reference to leadership not dependent on any one individual, collective agency in some social psychological circles is considered to be synonymous with conformity to group norms and values that guide or may even dictate personal preferences (Hernandez and Iyengar, 2001; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). However, as noted earlier, agency is both individual and collective and is mobilized as a social interaction as people come together to coordinate their activities. At times, the interactions can be laden with expressions of power but will vary depending upon the socio-cultural context (an evangelical worship or a town meeting) or the role of the parties (a CEO or a rank-and-file worker). To circumvent some of the concerns about the terms “collective” and “intersubjective,” I will turn to the usage of collaboration.

What makes agency collaborative, given that agency requires a social interaction to begin with, is that it be a fair dialogical exchange among those committed to a practice; in particular, that the parties display an interest in listening to one another, in reflecting upon perspectives different from their own, and in entertaining the prospect of being changed by what they learn (Xxxx, 2013). Gronn (2002) in his concept of conjoint agency refers to the emerging relationship among the interacting parties as a synergy based on reciprocal dependence. Through preliminary and ongoing dialogue, the parties look to coordinate with one another to complete their singular and mutual activities. Operating out of the cultural-historical activity theory tradition, Edwards (2005) similarly refers to “relational” agency as the capacity of subjects, working inter-professionally for example, to align their thoughts and actions to those of others to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations. As can be seen, conjoint or relational agency – as in the practice of leadership that I am specifying – is not one-way or monological (Fulop and Mark, 2013; Hosking,

2011; Hosking and Fineman, 1990). It is dialogical. It is characterized by nonjudgmental inquiry and by an advocacy that submits to the views of others. In viewing such a dialogue, we might observe, for example, whether or not people are talking freely, whether they are deeply listening not only to others but to themselves, whether there is diversity of point of view, and whether the taken-for-granted values and structures of the organization are being challenged. As people freely engage, they may at times disrupt the efficient order of things or they may challenge individual security, but it is through the confronting of uncertainty that they recognize the interdependence of themselves and others (Deetz, 2008).

The collaborative nature of agency and its focus on dialogue emphasizes two additional characteristics of a practice form of leadership. First, although the participants may each have intentions regarding their preferred outcomes from the interaction, the practice is usually open-ended such that the parties don't truly know the end-results. If the outcomes are pre-determined, we would not characterize the exchange as a dialogue. There needs to be the give-and-take of open human discourse. As noted by Pickering (1993), both human and material agency are enmeshed in practice by means of a dialectic of resistance and accommodation. Secondly, the result of the engagement may either reproduce or transform the very structure that shapes it. The participants through their discursive activities – giving opinions, establishing facts, interpreting meanings – are serving as agents in the construction of knowledge and actions attending to the practice in question (Ahearn, 2001; Hill and Irvine, 1993).

There is often a pre-reflective awareness (Pacherie, 2006) in which an individual may experience before the fact (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Participants may also experiment initially with new technologies or methods on their own, but ultimately, they bring forth ideas to those with whom they work. Others then tend to react to these initiatives and, often at the same time, offer their own approaches. To distinguish each micro-move in the course of the endeavor as individual agency or influence seems to distort the interactive or relational nature of the effort. The recipient of the communication is seldom passive, as would be expected in most cases of followership. It is, hence, hardly worth the time to differentiate who said what first, second, or beyond. It is an unpredictable process but one that nevertheless ends up with a practice that is changed from what it was or what was purely intended by any one of the participants, including the very first initiator.

This process is thus collaboratively and intersubjectively agentic. The meanings embedded in social action are ineluctably changed and these changes are interactional – suggesting that they cannot be attributed to any one actor (Simpson, 2009).

Collaborative Agency and its Constraints

Intersubjectivity is thus at the core of the construction of collaborative agency. I have attempted to establish that actors assume their identity and self-consciousness when they transcend their own immediate embeddedness and take the perspective of others in mediating their own activity. Yet, when speaking of agency, it appears that the rule is to view it as an individual property. Collaborative agency becomes the exception due to the presence of longstanding institutional barriers, from sources such as professional autonomy. In what follows, I amplify and attempt to overcome four specific constraints, suggested by Caldwell (2011), which militate against a more frequent practice of collaborative agency:

- 1) autonomy: individual agency relies on the autonomy of the individual to establish his/her own agenda and to advance any proposition determined by the individual to be wise or just (Xxxx, 1989). Yet, collaborative agency may ask the individual to forsake a degree of autonomy to acknowledge the interest of the wider community of which he or she may be part. One learns to listen to someone else's point of view not to bolster one's own position but to contest, through what Habermas (1984) refers to as "argumentation," what might be the best alternative to the decision path at hand. But is a free extension of one's personally salvaged autonomy to the community always in the individual's own interest? Might it lead to a concertive form of control that, rather than use authority, might lead to a submission of one's hard-fought rights (Barker, 1993)? In collaborative agency, the contribution to practice is a voluntary effort governed by critical and emancipatory reflection that would mitigate (though unlikely eliminate) social conformity. There would be a vigilance to head off any emergence of hegemony that might stifle open inquiry. In this critical way, collaborative agency would de-emphasize authorship while encouraging open-hearted participation, leading to the collective distribution of knowledge which itself would be viewed as provisional (Bustillos, 2011). Consider the

elements that the consulting firm Kessels & Smit (Roberts and van Rooij, 2011) uses in constructing community in its organization. It attempts to assure for its associates what it calls “personal entrepreneurship” along with “reciprocal appeal.” What this means is that participants should be able to “own” their own development, talent, and capability. Yet, at the same time, work is built on the connections between people who choose to work together in dedication to the common good. So at Kessels & Smit, colleagues (there are no managers) self-organize by working with people they want to work with, co-creating on projects that excite them because they know that they each couldn’t fulfill the endeavor on their own.

- 2) rationality: the tendency is to think that offers of contribution to practice will be rationally derived, but there are times when collaborative activities may need to rely upon emotional or “extra-rational” dialogic activity. At times, the most rational approaches, even the normally dexterous application of double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978) through a cognitive regime orchestrated by an expert trainer, may not break through impasses that are humanly constructed. There are moments, for example, when we may feel “stuck” in liminal space without recourse to a priori knowledge about what to do (Lather, 1998; Meyer and Land, 2005). Perhaps we are facing what Mezirow (1991) called a “disorienting dilemma” and experience an alienation from familiar ways of being-in-the-world (Hodge, 2014). Theory, and even expertly crafted discursive applications, may not be of assistance because in this moment of what the classic Greeks called *apophasis*, we face the unknowable and the limits of our language to explain (Case et al., 2012; Sells, 1994). Yet, in this liminal space, at times we may have a “felt sense” about a particular move (Gendlin, 1964). It may not make rational sense, but as long as we are in a psychologically safe place, someone may be “struck,” leading him/her to propose an idea or a thought to others or to demonstrate a particular approach (Cunliffe, 2002). The idea or activity may not work, but it may spur other team members to also demonstrate or offer their own way out. In due course, as people build upon each other’s moves, a collaborative endeavor ensues that may redirect the practice toward a form of solution, temporary as it may be. Throughout the

process, little may have been rational and even the reflective practice engaged in may not be cognitive or self-referential. Often it is after the fact that a retrospective explanation may be provided.

- 3) expertise: among the attributes often assigned to professionalism, this likely reigns at the top. We rely on the expertise of the professional or master to help us solve messy problems in the differentiated age of modernity. Individual experts seem to have the detached objectivity to make situational discriminations of the complex inter-connected problems found in dynamic systems (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005). Yet, our problems themselves are becoming differentiated to the extent that no singular expertise may suffice; we often need the contributions of an intersubjective cadre of committed and deft practitioners who need to learn how to communicate across disciplines to both find and solve problems. To this end, we rely not so much on scheduled answers as unscheduled inquiry. In some instances, to derive creative solutions, we may require divergent or lateral thinking (De Bono, 1970) through a form of “relational engagement” in which, in order to cross boundaries, we engage in an emancipatory dialogue free from concerns about vulnerability, ignorance, and judgment. Recalling the agency facets of distancing and identification, we discard customary ways and learn to listen to ourselves differently by hearing ourselves speak through others’ understanding. The engagement would be comparable to an open Delphi process. In Delphi decision making, individual experts do not learn the identity of one another for fear that an implicit influence prioritization would sway the proceedings (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963). Collaborative dialogue confronts social influence orderings openly so that transparent argumentation can prevail.
- 4) reflexivity: collective engagement ordinarily relies upon reflexivity – a critical reflection held among those dedicated to the practice. Conversants come to realize themselves and also reach agreement about disputed claims through civil dialogue. Reflexivity proposes to link subject and object by confirming and stabilizing identities in the course of engagement (Barad, 2003; Iedema, 2007). Nevertheless, civil dialogue may also colonize discourse by privileging those who have superior communication skills, who can maintain a dispassionate demeanor rather than reveal raw emotions, who may need to save face or exert control, who can generate profound insights, or who may be

willing to reveal innermost secrets at times within the company of strangers (hooks, 2003; Levine and Nierras, 2007). Reflective dialogue thus has a shadow side that can result in subtle compliance with an organizational ideology, resulting in the adoption of molded or scripted selves that come to be identified with the organization's program or culture (Morgaine, 1994). Reflexivity would thus need to look back at its own processes to ensure that any reflective practices concurrently be challenged as a deconstruction questioning so-called "truths" from the very condition of their production (Derrida, 1992).

Leadership As Collaborative Agency

If leadership exists as a practice and has salutary value to contribute, what would it look like as a collaborative agentic process? First, we need to consider its configuration. It is normally depicted as linear between leader and follower, although it might also be recursive and bidirectional. It is thought to be an influence relationship between leaders and followers, but there are those who see this relationship as mutual and dialectic (Collinson, 2005; Rost, 1991). To turn leadership on its head, might we consider whether a relationship of leadership may occur *without* influence in either direction? But to view leadership in this last way, we would next need to re-consider its constituents and interactions.

Leadership has been nearly universally associated with a single individual, but as a collaborative agentic practice, we would need to extract it from any single identified purveyor; otherwise, it becomes pre-selected as a rite or endowment available only to particular privileged people. It is possible that such privileged individuals may know what is best for the community, but can they be counted on in this way? Wouldn't we be better off letting those affected within the community decide how to proceed? True, the group may not come up with a consensual view or may come up with one that is inferior to the endowed brilliance of the "wise leader." True, the decision-making process may be protracted compared to the cognitive process of one individual, who may or may not consult with others in deriving the decision. Given the chance for whim or arbitrariness in relying on the single individual, might we not wish to rely on the group, however

protracted or painful the process? By this point in our history, we have at our disposal, deliberative practices based on emancipatory dialogue. Is it not time to trust the process and trust the people?

Conceiving of leadership as a practice allows anyone to participate in leadership as he or she engages in agentic activity. Practice becomes the engine of collaborative agency. Participants (to the activity) constitute but are also constituted by the discursive practices of the groups of which they are members (Davies, 1991). During any activity, leadership might be exhibited as groups decide what to do and how to do it. As Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorf (2010) put it, it is a matter of constructing and reconstructing positions and issues as those engaged determine the boundaries of their own action. In selecting and ordering a sequence of events, there are often a myriad of possibilities for direction; but in leadership-as-practice, an approach is often chosen and initially taken. Plans may proceed flawlessly for awhile, but new disturbances may arise calling for fresh skilled improvisations which may interrupt or subvert the flow of activity (Chia and Holt, 2006). One among the parties may disagree with the prescribed approach because it may conflict with his or her preferences, role identity, or self-concept (Endrissat, 2008). A new round of agentic activity may occur to reframe the roles and issues and decide how to proceed. Therefore, at times, the agenda will appear to move ahead; at others, it may be stymied by lack of agreement. The discourse may also be fair and equitable or it may reflect an advantage to those with a more robust set of resources. Ospina and Saz-Carranza (2010) refer to these conditions as a set of paradoxes between collaboration and confrontation and between unity and diversity. Leadership in this instance refers to explicit efforts to build and maintain the community, which at times may require accommodation to nurture relations or confrontation to bring out disagreements. At other times, leadership may appear as a choice of inaction rather than action.

Relying on a model of complex adaptive systems, Hazy (2011) sees leadership as enabling recursive interaction between what he calls “fine-grained interactions” at the local level among individuals and operating units and “course-grained properties” that both emerge from and yet also constrain the fine-grained behavior. Leadership is thus a meta-capability that encourages movement from day-to-day actions by individuals to core processes and capabilities that subsequently shape individual behavior. Allied with

complex adaptive systems are organizational discourse, innovation, and complex systems leadership theories, from which I have consolidated four specific leadership activities that are not attached to any one individual or authority but are party to the activity and relationality of leadership in complex systems (Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Goldstein et al., 2010; Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2012):

1) scanning – identifying resources, such as information or technology that can contribute to new or existing programs. Scanning may also lead to simplifying a problem or contribute to sensemaking (Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2010).

2) signaling – mobilizing and catalyzing the attention of other actors to a particular program of action or a project. This may require imitating, building on, modifying, ordering, or synthesizing elements of other projects to enable action-in-concert.

3) weaving – creating webs of interaction across existing and new networks to document and mobilize mutual activities building trust and a sense of shared meaning (Xxxx, 2010). Weaving may also create a bridge between individuals and entities or between the meanings attributed to particular views or cognitive frames (Fleming and Waguespack, 2001).

4) stabilizing – offering feedback to the program of action to converge activity and evaluate effectiveness, leading, in turn, to structural and behavioral changes and learning.

Augmenting these capacities are activities from the affective dimension that seek to support and sustain the members of a team or the team as a whole in its efforts. These activities were originally referred to as “maintenance” or “socioemotional” behaviors (see, e.g., Bales, 1950). Among them I have selected two inter-related relational activities and a third from the field of action learning that underlies any system of inquiry (Marquardt, 2005; Marsick, 1990; Pedler, 2011).

5) inviting – making sure that everyone who wishes to has had a chance to contribute to the program of action, no matter their alignment with previous agreements and no matter the ambiguity their contribution may bring.

6) unleashing – encouraging those who have held back to participate through their ideas, their energy, and their humanity without fear of repercussion.

7) reflecting – pondering among self and others the meaning of past, current, and future experience in order to learn how to meet mutual needs and interests more effectively.

We see, then, that the unit of analysis in collaborative agency is the intersubjective interaction among parties to the practice rather than the individuals who are presumably mobilizing the practice. This lens is different from the stance of “hybridity” offered by Gronn (2009) or “blended” leadership by Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling (2008b) and Collinson and Collinson (2008). These authors, who have boldly included “dyadic, team and other multi-party formations” (Gronn, 2009: 389) within the leadership configuration, nevertheless cling to leadership as a role-driven influence relationship. Hybridity, for example, leads Gronn to suggest that senior leaders can be the embodiment of the mission of the organization even to the point of protecting its values. Although I will treat the ethics of collaborative agency in the next section on sustainability, its intersubjective nature focuses far more on the consensual processes that encourage ongoing shared commitments among members of a community than on superimposed standards.

In a similar vein, discursive leadership, while detaching leadership from individual action and psychology and focusing on leadership-as-it-happens through the sequential flow of social interaction, often establishes the occupants of the leadership role in advance (Fairhurst, 2007, 2009; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Tourish, 2014). We need to remember the warning from Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) that the sheer act of naming someone a leader may convert his or her mundane acts to be significant and remarkable in his or her own eyes, in those of subordinates and of other stakeholders, and in the reports of observers and analysts. In the case of subordinates, they too, once identified as followers, may constitute themselves differently, for example as highly responsive subjects. What is intriguing but also problematic is that the mere naming of someone as leader or follower can change the discourse, be it in the moment or retrospective to the activity in question.

Leadership is thus immanent, in other words, emerging from the immediate situation within a particular context and by those attending to the practice regardless (but also inclusive) of their prior role designation (Kempster and Parry, 2011). It is embedded in the context but also shapes the context which then affects subsequent practice (Denis et al., 2005; von Arx and Endrissat, 2012). It entails dynamic interplay between individuals, social structures, and different forms of materiality such as protocols, reports, technologies, and

other artefacts (Nicolini, 2011; Oborn et al., 2013; Orlikowski, 2007; Sergi, 2013). It is also multi-level and multi-temporal in the pragmatic interactionist tradition and inclusive of a range of dynamics, such as emotions, power, and habit (Elkjaer and Simpson, 2011). The resultant practices are likely to lead to multiple and conflicting constructed realities.

In the process of engagement, at times leadership will rely on particular individuals, usually upon those closely tied to the event, who are paying particular attention, and who can make meaning from what the group is doing as it is performing its work. At times, as Pye (1993) points out, the group will need someone to extract or provide crucial cues to minimize the range of choices available. The grammar of meaning in the organization can be broken down into markers or what Holland (1995) calls “tags,” or what Dawkins (1989) refers to as “menes,” serving to guide behavioral patterns and transmit cultural norms. These tags help to coordinate activity by various agents throughout the organization and its networks thereby helping to limit the myriad of choices to be made across projects and conversations. Those in managerial roles may be best positioned to propose these tags, but anyone else can be responsible for their transmission, such as those with long tenure, who might be more familiar with the derivation of particular cultural preferences, or those with particular awareness of the perspectives, reasoning patterns, and narratives of others (Jordan et al., 2013). Leadership thus occurs as meaning makers draw on the organization’s memory, attempt to achieve a level of cognitive consensus, and facilitate the sharing of knowledge: knowledge about the organization’s history, about issues currently confronting the organization, and about forthcoming problems and possible futures (Boal and Schultz, 2007).

In time as the people working together develop a sense of mastery that they can work effectively, they may develop a collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Goddard, 2001). In comparison to individual efficacy, in collective efficacy, the emphasis is on perceptions of group or community accomplishment, not the sum of individuals’ abilities. When groups develop a collective sense of their agency, they are likely to engage in further creative activity as they confront and surmount subsequent challenges and disruptions. At times, new stakeholders are invited to contribute to the work and other spontaneous collaborations occur to augment the work (Gronn, 2002). But the effort is seldom orderly; it is irregular and provisional. The activity chain

may shift, may be broken, or may even end in an unresolved conflict as new structures, data, and relations become salient. However, activity may resume as participants decide whether or not to negotiate a new set of understandings to continue the effort (Chia and Holt, 2006). A collective sensemaking may ensue and is often typified by concurrent reflection on each new round of activity to help integrate new ways and creative thinking into the emerging culture (Bate et al., 2000). In the development of the idea of leadership as a practice, therefore, there is a need for collaborative agency in deciding on the course of action. This action may be temporary but it is dynamic and creates a direction for each moment of activity, in the same way that jazz musicians decide how to orient their playing (Hatch, 1999: 85):

The directions [the tune] will be taken are only decided in the moment of playing and will be redetermined each time the tune is played.

Sustainability of the Practice Form

Having been critical of standard individual leadership, it is natural to question whether the aforementioned agentic account can produce a better world for our future. Is the collaborative agentic model based on practice sustainable? I would avow its benefit along three ethical dimensions:

- 1) It is consistent with democratic practices and outcomes because of its encouragement of the equal contribution and access of all engaged actors within the public forum. It is not democracy in its representative sense but in its endorsement of public engagement of all those affected by the activity and decision at hand. It promotes discovery through free expression and shared engagement (Woods, 2004) unreliant on any one single individual – qua leader – to mobilize action and make decisions on behalf of others – qua followers. It is democracy by direct participation by involved parties through their own exploratory, creative, and communal discourses (Starratt, 2001), contesting a range of issues including identity, social order, knowledge, or policy (Deetz, 1995). Leadership in this sense is an extension of commitment to the dignity of each involved person; no decision can be made without considering each such person and one comes to realize that one's contribution is indeed dependent upon others. There are no grand narratives and superimposed truths that govern each activity; rather,

we find ourselves as beings-in-relation-to-others (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), who, in our moral interdependence, are committed to an argumentation about each other's values and commitments. We seek to understand one another and become astutely aware of others' and our own constructions of reality. Together we seek to create an enterprise that is bigger than what any one of us could have created on our own.

On the other hand, we might acknowledge the dubiousness to which prior scholars have attributed the practice of democratic leadership, perhaps starting with Michels' (1958) "iron law of oligarchy," which stipulated that hierarchical leadership was both a necessary and inevitable practice in modern society characterized by large institutions requiring elite governance. Hierarchy is not only more efficient but it is a natural structure given the apathy of most constituents, especially public citizens, not to mention their technical incompetence when it comes to complex matters involving policymaking.

Apologists of the democratic approach of public engagement would respond that the "inner logic" of bureaucratic organizing is not inescapable nor is apathy on matters of public interest intrinsic to human nature; indeed, it is something likely conditioned by living in an over-bureaucratic paternalistic culture (Rizvi, 1989). Dependence on leadership figures may also ensue from the seductive pacifying capacity of mass media which creates a hyperreality no longer connected to any reality of the subject (Baudrillard, 1990). As for the efficiency argument, it has not been proven that bureaucracy is more efficient under a range of circumstances (see, e.g., Rothschild, 1984; Miller and Monge, 1986) and that even if it were called for, it would pale from being set against the loss of promoting cooperative relations among people and of providing corporate staff and public citizens with the opportunity to control their own lives and fulfill their human capacity for making discriminative choices and judgments (Norman, 1987).

There is also the possibility for a transfer effect between democratic leadership practices at the firm level and those at the societal level. Fort and Schipani (2004) and Spreitzer (2007) have pointed out, for example, that corporate democratic systems may contribute to a favorable environment for

peace because they foster the necessary social controls and egalitarian decision-making processes that reduce the potential for coercive power. As employees are given the opportunity for voice in their organizational setting, their attraction to democratic practices could spill over to civic life, nourishing the democratic tendency toward citizen involvement.

Perhaps Alvin Gouldner (1955) said it best when challenging those who called for the inevitability of hierarchical bureaucracy:

Instead of explaining how democratic patterns may, to some extent, be fortified and extended, they warn us that democracy cannot be perfect. ...Instead of assuming responsibilities as realistic clinicians, striving to further democratic potentialities whenever they can, many social scientists have become morticians, all too eager to bury men's [*sic*] hopes (p. 507).

- 2) It is mobilized through emancipatory dialogue in which participants become “suspenseful” about the contributions of others (Isaacs, 1999). Suspense in this sense means that listeners place themselves in a temporary state of ignorance so as to bring full focus of attention on the speaker. The dialogue is emancipatory because it seeks to confront the defensive routines in any group that maintain hierarchical hegemony and close off inquiry. Participants become willing to face their own vulnerability that they may lose control, that their initial suppositions may turn out wrong, or that no solution may be found. By suspending any preconceptions, conversants can reduce the dreaded condition of fear in the group that someone's ideas might be ridiculed or rejected without open-hearted consideration. People would acknowledge their positions and expressions of power such that no one dominant individual would come to manipulate or dampen the expression of others (Baxter, 2004). People would be invited to advance their ideas uncompromisingly but be open to the critical inquiry of others. They would point out and contest claims arrived at through false reasoning, through hidden assumptions, or through suppression of overlooked or hidden voices (Heath, 2007). In finding their own voice, they would also “speak up” in ways not merely sanctioned by privileged social authorities but also because of their self-identified interests and commitment to their community. The

resulting dialogue would be characterized as a creative interaction among multiple and contradictory voices that would come to terms with adversarial differences (Lyotard, 1984).

The hope, of course, is that emancipatory dialogue of this nature can potentially transform human consciousness from conditions of alienation and oppression in the direction of freedom (Codd, 1989). Unfortunately, there are those, especially within corporate organizations, who are not consulted on vital decisions and who themselves may not be able to find their voice in rational dialogue, especially one that is often decontextualized and depoliticized (Ellsworth, 1989). The content of such dialogue may skirt around issues of racism, sexism, patriarchy, and exploitation, in which case the discourse may unwittingly maintain the very social order that it seeks to displace (Bierma and Cseh, 2003; Fenwick, 2004). Feminist and post-feminist writers further point out that depoliticized dialogues may conceal extrapolations of masculine values that may legitimize a dominantly androcentric culture that fails to acknowledge the dynamics of subordination (Lather, 1992; McNay, 1992; Ford, 2006).

Dialogue, then, in neo-Marxist tradition, in its attempt to domesticate the required struggle against exploitation, can lead to further disillusionment and cynicism by what and who it leaves out in the conversation (Holst, 2002). In emancipatory dialogue, however, workers would be given an opportunity to find their own voice, develop their own identity, and discover their human dignity as part of their search for livelihood and meaning (Xxxx, 2012). In his interpretation of the existentialist tradition of the authentic self, with particular insights into Heidegger's "potentiality-for-being" as humans, Guignon (2004; 2008) points to authenticity as a social virtue that can save the self from diffusion and colonization. What is needed is the conviction to express one's stance in the public arena through a historically informed and socially responsible dialogue.

Creating the conditions for a democratic order as discussed here does not require classic "leaders," or what Gramsci (1971) referred to as "orators," those who can lead the charge for liberation by momentarily capturing feelings and passions. Rather, as noted earlier, we need meaning makers, who can actively participate in the affairs of the community and can be called upon

to offer meaning to the community, especially when it may face contested terrain or periods of uncertainty or insecurity. These meaning makers are not interested in leadership as a means of ego fulfillment, nor, consistent with especially Eastern philosophical traditions such as Taoism and Buddhism, are they seeking to push to make things happen in the world. Rather, they allow a process to unfold (Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2002). In Starhawk's words from the indigenous tradition, they maintain a "power-with" rather than a "power-over" others (Starhawk, 1987). They see themselves as providing a service to their community, speaking modestly mainly to shed light and create harmony, valuing discernment over impulsion, and looking for synergy among those engaged (Mair, 1990; Vaill, 1989). Often in the sheer act of framing the reality that is observed, the meaning maker consolidates the prevailing wisdom of the collective community. In collective wisdom, there would be deep exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas, recognition of insights based upon alternative frames of time and space, empathic awareness based on public and concurrent reflection in practice, and appreciation for the need to either make choices or transcend them in the deliberative decision-making process.

- 3) The dialogue in a collaborative agentic leadership not only considers its democratic and emancipatory processes but the effects of the practice under consideration so as to preserve a sustainable future. This is likely to occur because the outcome of any dialogue is often a new or unique way that had never been conceived prior to the collaborative engagement. As something new, it may be subject to more scrutiny than those positions or consequences already endorsed by members of the group. At the same time, it will face longstanding institutional pressures, especially from power elites who may try to manipulate the discourse. Nevertheless, by joining together in community, participants in social critique tend to have a better chance to resist oppression and other forms of inequitable social conditions than attempting to intervene on their own to alter extant social arrangements.
- Acknowledging our penchant for self-discipline and conformity or our less than satisfactory record in controlling our own collective fate, we may together generate strategies of resistance as a means of

identity formation and as an expression of human solidarity (Foucault, 1977; Haber, 1994; Poster, 1995).

Discourse in a collective leadership practice would be governed by a critical reflection that recognizes the connection between individual problems and the social context within which they are embedded. Once participants to dialogue make this connection, they acquire intellectual humility, empathy, and courage to challenge standard ways of operating. They learn to consider data beyond their personal taken-for-granted assumptions and begin to explore the historical and social processes that mold our world. Sustainable outcomes are also shaped by sustainable practices characterized by mindfulness and holistic thinking. Participants, especially managers at all levels, develop an ecological understanding to appreciate the underlying balance between nature and human civilization (Waddock, 2007). Guided by such criteria as authenticity and fairness, they warrant that their participatory efforts have a real potential to make a difference, that any dominant discourse will be challenged, and that the practice will be inclusive by incorporating stakeholders from all affected institutions and from diverse backgrounds and points of view (Xxxx, 2012).

Future Research

Given the fascination with individual personality especially in the Anglo-American cultures, an open reception to critical views of leadership such as collaborative agency is unlikely to occur soon. It will certainly help to raise consciousness about possibilities – that our outcomes from leadership, as suggested above, might be far more sustainable when leadership is viewed as a plural phenomenon (Denis et al., 2012). It would also help to promote more process-oriented forms of leadership research that would provide a reprieve from the social psychological accounts that nearly uniformly characterize leadership as an exercise of individual agency.

What are some of the questions that might intrigue prospective researchers of practice forms of leadership? First, it would be valuable to identify the settings in which collective leadership is mobilized. Collaborative agency is likely to thrive in more complex relational settings, such as in social networks or

within communities that require coordination across a range of diverse social actors. This is because collectively oriented organizational cultures activate collective identities, and collective identities, in turn, tend to focus participants on others or on contexts (Kuhnen et al., 2001; Lord et al., 2011). In these settings characterized by a plurality of agencies and authorities, there will also be a corresponding diversity of purposes and methods. Though these settings are capable of reproducing inequality and marginalization, they are also often subject to collaborative agency in renegotiating norms and social relationships (Cornwall, 2004; Coser, 1975; Ostrom, 2005).

Some individuals seem to be more predisposed to collaborative agency, willing to forego their own ego gratification for the benefit of the group. Some managers, for example, might encourage the dispersion of control through a commitment to a participant-directed praxis (Akrivou, 2009; Xxxx, 2011b). In doing so, they would likely need to counter established assumptions among their staffs regarding expectations about the need for managers to demonstrate “strong” leadership (Turnbull James et al., 2007). Although besieged in this article because of their over-use, personality dimensions may nevertheless feature in a predisposition to collaborative agency; in particular, individual and collective self-efficacy specifically focused on accomplishing work through collective practice. Some individuals may be merely better positioned to shape collective decision making, though we need to know why some actors choose to pursue autonomous actions while others choose a more collaborative method of exercising agency in the social world.

The situations receptive to collective leadership may also interact with personal variables to produce a more collaborative deliberative attitude. For example, an individual may have found it frustrating to push for a cause, such as gay or civil rights, by resorting to the usual legislative channels. Being a persistent individual imbued with a passion for social justice, this same individual may find it both more effective and more comforting to join or even organize a social movement as part of a collaborative effort to advance this same cause.

There is a popular view that given that most organizations structure themselves hierarchically, executive managers have to be counted on to make the important decisions. These senior managers are thought to engage in more complex tasks and to have longer time horizons than junior managers (Jaques, 1989; Kraut et

al., 1989). Yet, these characteristics do not address how those in authority should interact with those within their immediate reach. Further, managers at all levels need to exhibit flexibility, trust, and adaptability in the face of dynamic environments. It seems less useful in our knowledge era for those at lower managerial levels carrying out the orders of those above.

Moving from personal and situational variables to structural parameters, work is now being reorganized for a networked economy characterized by newer forms of so-called “post-bureaucracy” (Heckscher, 1994). Team- and project-based structures guided by flexible peer decision making processes and influence have emerged to transfer knowledge often across a wide value chain of stakeholders (Swan et al., 2010). Mutual adjustment, in the form of shared sensemaking or collective learning, substitutes for asymmetrical influence processes associated with bureaucratic organization (Mintzberg, 1979). Work has become increasingly less routinized, more discretionary, and self-organizing. Leadership and control in the post-bureaucratic organization are being referred to as “post-heroic,” in which control is no longer linear as it is widely distributed. Call it mutual control, it devolves to those actors or sectional units that have a direct vested interest in the decision at hand (Bradford and Cohen, 1998; Crevani et al., 2008).

In these settings, characterized by knowledge intensity, management is unlikely to possess conventional managerial authority that relies upon command-and-control leadership. On the other hand, authority in the post-bureaucracy may recentralize because of its focus on visibility, predictability and accountability as operationalized through adherence to sophisticated methods of unobtrusive appraisal through such means as electronic surveillance and monitoring (Heydebrand, 1989; Hodgson, 2004). Consequently, we need to know more about whether changes in bureaucracy, such as the adoption of more organic, horizontal, boundaryless, sociocratic, and holacratic configurations, might lead to more collective form of practice or whether post-bureaucracy will continue to operate under a conventional mindset of individual responsibility and vertical accountability (Ashkenas et al., 1998; Endenburg, 1998; Hales, 2002; Holacracy.org, 2014; Ostroff, 1999).

From an activity and learning perspective, we need to know more about how collective action is legitimized and how actors pre-determine their “room to maneuver.” To what extent, for instance, does

Bourdieu's habitus shape agency and to what extent do hegemonic elites shape habitus (Bourdieu, 1977).

We know that participatory spaces are imbued with power relations that in some cases cause either conscious or unconscious self-muting among disenfranchised people (Cleaver, 2007; Kesby, 2005). Those already in power, as Forester (1982) argues, may use a variety of resources, such as incentives, sanctions, exclusion, stigma, and so on, to remove particular claims from criticism and, in so doing, discourage critical discourse. McNay (2000) also points out that the positioning of agents can be dynamic and even contradictory, thus explaining the diversity in the way groups struggle over, appropriate, and transform cultural meaning.

I would submit that collaborative agency may require a unique perspective of learning that is participant-directed or what Knowles (1980) referred to as "andragogical." In andragogical practice, agents would model such behaviors as tolerance of ambiguity, openness and frankness, patience and suspension of judgment, empathy and unconditional positive regard, and commitment to learning. Learners themselves would "learn through" their own problems, while the change agent would offer resource suggestions, alternative framings, as well as reflections on "learning how to learn." More attention needs to be paid to learning formats that encourage learners to momentarily think out of their context or frame of reference in order to challenge existing assumptions and beliefs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been not to kill off leadership but to unhook it from its insistence as an individual property dependent upon "those who know" or even upon "those who can" to direct those who don't or can't. Fearing that our reliance on this individual model will only continue to dampen the energy and creativity of those potentially involved, I offered a practice perspective of leadership based on a collaborative agency mobilized through engaged social interaction. I suggested ways to release agency from the powerful throes of structural uniformity, acknowledging the daunting cultural constraints against collaborative agency. I also attempted to show how this collaborative agentic model might produce a more sustainable future for our world while suggesting avenues for future research of a collective rather than a personal approach to leadership.

While acknowledging the popularity of individual forms of agency, this account has attempted to bring the “other” back in by taking a distinctively collaborative account that recalls the pragmatic tradition of symbolic interactionism and that looks to a condition that is purely collective rather than a summation of individual acts. By focusing on collective leadership rather than on individual leaders, this account does not deny the individual but it does purport that the self is as much a product of interactions with others as it is a self-defined unit. In viewing leadership as a practice, it has attempted to free it from its longstanding stimulus-response paradigm toward a more dynamic account that sees leadership as evolving from partners at work and in other community settings creating their own useful and sustainable reality.

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