A Dialectical and Multiplex View of Leadership:

A Response to Plural Leadership Research Challenges

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The popularity of studying collectivist or plural forms of leadership appears to grow by the day (Bolden, 2011; Chreim, 2015; Cullen-Lester and Yammarino, 2016; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2015). Relational and processual views of leadership, embraced by many at these NYU conferences, have a natural affinity towards them because leadership is, by definition, dialectical and plural (Denis et al., 2012; Fairhurst, 2007; in press; Kelly, 2013). Nevertheless, the study of plural forms of leadership is fraught with many intertwining theoretical and methodological issues that lead me to draw two primary conclusions in this paper.

First, we should stop reinforcing the dualisms between hierarchical and plural forms of leadership and embrace the dialectic. Hierarchical and plural leadership forms are inextricably intertwined (Denis et al., 2012), and today’s methodologies (e.g. case studies, ethnographies, discourse analysis, network analysis) allow us to study different configurations of that relationship both in terms of their trajectories and sequentialities.

Second, some have questioned the relevance of leadership as a construct for collaborative decision-making (e.g. see discussions in Denis et al., 2012, Gronn, 2015, and Sergi, Denis, and Langley, 2012). In order to preserve the vitality of leadership for such situations, I argue that as we collect and analyze data, we should be holding multiple definitions of leadership in tension with one another i.e. adopt a multiplex view of leadership. At a minimum, this involves studying leadership not
just as an interaction process, in which one or more individuals may emerge to lead, but also as an object of knowledge (Foucault, 1977), much the way discursive leadership sets forth (Fairhurst, 2007; Kelly, 2013). I demonstrate such a view by reporting on the study of authority when instituting shared leadership in a Danish municipality (Holm and Fairhurst, 2016a; 2016b).

To begin, consider the ambiguous leadership spaces associated with problematizing hierarchical and plural leadership forms.

**Ambiguous Leadership Spaces**

As Denis et al. (2012) acknowledged, plural forms of leadership often present a definitional challenge because they can take different forms (e.g. integrative, shared, distributed, relational, post-heroic, and so on), and many scholars use these terms interchangeably and loosely (p. 213). However, they make four distinctions that I will uphold. *Shared leadership* is a dynamic and interactive process among team members (Pearce and Conger, 2003). *Pooled collective leadership* involves co-leaders working together to coordinate the activities of individuals outside the group (Alvarez and Svejenova, 2005; Hodgson et al., 1965). *Distributed leadership* involves spreading leadership duties across time and hierarchical levels (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Spillane, 2006). Finally, *produced or relational leadership* decenters leadership away from individuals towards its emergence in myriad co-constructed forms in social interaction (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). These are not rigid categories, as Denis et al. ultimately recommend that they combine to study plural leadership more complexly.
However, Denis et al. (2012) also note that in just about any form, plural leadership does not exist independent of hierarchical leadership. For example, the hierarchy can be seen as “gifting” (the opportunity for) shared leadership (Denis et al., 2012); promoting it through fostering cohesion and collective vision (Ensley et al., 2006); or impeding it with directive or aversive leadership (Pearce and Sims, 2002). Work on distributed leadership reinforces these findings with respect to the inhibiting effects of authority in cross-hierarchical relationships (Chreim, 2015; Gronn, 2015). Work on pooled leadership studies pairs of leaders from different hierarchical levels to understand the successful practices of “shared role spaces” (Gronn, 1999; Gronn and Hamilton, 2004), while issues of authority are fluid and co-constructed in any organizational context according to relational leadership (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Following Gronn (2009; 2015) and Chreim (2015), plural leadership forms are ambiguous spaces owing to diffuse sources of authority (e.g. position, expertise, and so on), nebulous roles and responsibilities, and fluid participation in decision making that render authority more uncertain and negotiable (see also Jarzabkowski, Sillince and Shaw, 2010; Weick, 1985). Unfortunately, the literature on plural leadership also has a distinct positivity bias that underplays the realities of practice with respect to power, competition, and conflict (Denis et al., 2012). Studies of pooled leadership, for example, minimize the possibility of internal competition between leaders. Denis et al. also draw from Sveiby (2011) and Currie and Lockett (2011) to argue that even the relational lens underplays the role of formal leadership with respect to informal leaders, the structural conditions that favor
some actors’ contributions over others, and the work involved in creating the
conditions for more plural leadership forms, in short, diluting the role of hierarchy.

The implication here is that just as relational leadership scholars have come
to see the concept of leadership as a kind of dialectic for leader-follower relations in
which neither concept operates independent of the other (Collinson, 2005; 2014;
Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2013; Kelly, 2013), so too might a dialectal view be
preferable to independently studying hierarchal and plural forms of leadership. It
would appear that they need and depend upon one another in major and minor
ways, and their interrelationship should always be an object of study in complex
organizations—although not necessarily the only object of study.

**Leadership Configurations?**

To understand how one embraces the dialectic of plural and hierarchical
leadership, Gronn (2009; 2011; 2015: 547) recommends adopting *configuration* as
“a conceptually overarchin
g term to denote a pattern of leadership” (emphasis
added) and, further, the accumulation of detailed case studies documenting
different configurations (see also Thorpe, Gold, & Lawler, 2011). However, Gronn
(2015) argues that scholars must prioritize issues of power and process in studying
leadership configurations. As mentioned, plural leadership scholars have
underplayed issues of power that effectively dilute the role of the hierarchy vis-à-vis
the adoption and operations of plural forms of leadership (Denis et al., 2012).
Arguably, a process view is needed to understand the flow, emergence, and
dynamism of configurations over time, including patterns of expected and
unexpected influence from formal and informal emergent leaders alike (Langley et al., 2013). Only then can we understand how plural leadership takes shape, maintains itself or dies out vis-à-vis hierarchy and other related factors. Yet, Sergi et al. (2012) raise one very important concern. If everyone and anyone can potentially be a leader at any time (which is one of the affordances of a process lens), leadership as a concept stands to lose its meaningfulness if it loses its specificity.

However, a discursive leadership lens (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Kelly, 2013), one of several variants of a relational lens (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012), does have the ability to effectively study leadership configurations vis-à-vis issues of power and process in ways that preserve and maintain leadership as a viable and necessary scientific concept. To understand how, consider an example from a study in which I am currently involved (Holm and Fairhurst, 2016a, b).

**Authoring and Resistance Authoring**

We had an opportunity to study a Danish municipality that was merging two departments, Information Technology (IT) and Human Resources (HR), into one large “Organizational Advancement” department of 80 people (OA). The merger was predicated on a move to shared leadership (Denis et al., 2011; Pearce and Conger, 2003) with the division of the department into teams with team leaders, all of whom reported to a department head whose “vision” for the department would now be realized. We collected interview and archival data, although the primary data for this study involved five and one-half months of meeting interaction, which we
transcribed and coded for a concept that Taylor and Van Every (2013) describe as “authoring.” While authoring derives from authority, it is also our vehicle to access the study of leadership.

Leadership and authority are closely related, in fact, the two terms are often equated in everyday language. However, following (Barnard, 1938) and Heifetz (1994), the exercise of leadership, while not the same, is rooted in authority and, more specifically, in the practices of dominance and deference where deference, over time, results in authorization i.e. the conferral of authority, even without deliberate decision (p. 58).

Such is also the argument of Taylor and Van Every (2011) and others who argue that organizations themselves emerge in and through communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Deetz, 1992; Taylor & Van Every, 2001) as does leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). Communication is, in effect, “performative” (Cooren, 2010; Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Van Every, 2014) of organizing, since organizations comes to exist in discourse through actors speaking on behalf of the organization (Taylor & Cooren, 1997, p. 428). As such, the perceived legitimate right to influence and decide on organizational matters is not determined by hierarchical position or leader titles but by whom is seemingly “authentically translating the purposes of their organization” (Taylor and Van Every, 2014, p. 27). This is what Taylor (2011) calls “authoring” where those who seek to lead, “will have to justify their actions as authentically translating the purposes of their organization” (Taylor and Van Every, 2014, p. 27).
Leadership, in the form of whose ideas or thoughts are accepted as legitimate representations of the organization (Taylor and Van Every, 2014), is thus tied to who successfully authors the organization. Contained within this notion is that an act of authoring may be accepted or resisted, where the “resistance,” in turn, becomes an authored act that may itself be accepted or resisted. Leadership will be located in the struggle over meaning over whose ideas (read, authored acts) are going to prevail. Scaling up, the “shared-ness” of authoring is one indicator of shared leadership, while the lack thereof and a dominance/deferral pattern of formal roles is one indicator of hierarchical leadership.

However, two important qualifications are necessary. First, this perspective requires the coding of interaction to incorporate issues of time and timing, which Gronn (2015) argues are essential to understand the evolving relationship of shared leadership vis-à-vis the role of the hierarchy. In fact, this was very much the case with our study. During what came to be known as “leader group meetings,” in which the department head met with the team leaders, a very interesting pattern emerged that strikes at the heart Gronn (2015) and Chreim’s (2015) depiction of plural leadership as “ambiguous leadership spaces.”

During the meetings, there was free flowing discussion of numerous topics or what we might term “joint authoring” indicative of shared leadership i.e. a dynamic interaction among team members (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Discussion topics were raised, disputed, and defended by all. However, at the same time, the department leader set the agenda and closed out a topic, upon its resolution. A myriad of discussion topics appeared throughout the meetings, but only in the
instances where the department leader (or someone given decisional prerogatives by him) had a “final say” did the topics achieve durability i.e. changed organizational practices. Hence, only the person with a hierarchically superior position was able to affect the “authoritative text,” which Kuhn (2008; 2012:553) defines as an “abstract representation of the...organization and the connections of its activities, which portrays the relations of authority and criteria of appropriateness that become present in ongoing practice.”

To review thus far, the ranking formal leader envisioned, introduced and promoted shared decision making evidenced by free flowing team discussion, but structurally preserved some hierarchical control through an equivocal agenda setting-authoritative text structure that “bookends” the meeting. This “bookending” by the department head might be completely innocuous if he acts as a kind of procedural leader and recording secretary for the authoritative text. On the other hand, such bookending also has the capacity to close down the struggle over meaning if his agenda setting and authoritative text in any way reduce the possibility of genuine conversation and suppresses conflict. Deetz (1992) refers to this as “discursive closure” where those already in power suppress dissent or, in our terms, resistance authoring. The equivocality of this leadership configuration of shared and hierarchical leadership renders this an ambiguous leadership space. Conveniently, it masks a range of possible power dynamics while giving the formal leader plausible deniability for the hierarchical control he exercises.

In our study, we traced the trajectory of the four discussion topics that traversed several meetings. This produced 20 sub-topics, 19 of which resulted in an
authoritative text produced by the department head (or his proxy) to end the
discussion. The need to interpret this finding leads to a second qualification,
discussed below, which involves treating leadership as an object of knowledge
through a multiplex lens.

A Multiplex Lens

The study of interaction process alone is insufficient to draw conclusions
about the operations of plural versus hierarchical leadership forms, although it may
be sufficient to draw conclusions about patterns of authoring and resistance
authoring. How do we move from authority to leadership based on the study of
authoring? There are two overlapping ways to approach this. First, drawing from
Foucault (1977; 1983), leadership is an object of knowledge and subject to
discourse, around which truth effects form. Discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007;
Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012) takes up this very issue in a two-pronged fashion. It
focuses on leadership as an interactive process by asking the question, how is
leadership brought off (in social interaction)? It focuses on leadership as an object of
knowledge in language and communication by asking, what kind of leadership are we
talking about? As an object of knowledge, leadership gets reflected upon and
interpreted in the discourses of actors and analysts (see also Crevani, Lindgren and
Packendorff, 2010). As such, it allows for multiple attributions of individual or
collective leadership (Calder, 1977).

Second, following Kelly (2013), the concept of leadership has increasingly
become an empty signifier with a negative ontology. By this he means that
leadership’s empirics cannot be fully known because they are buttressed by unacknowledged and often romanticized ideologies (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985) (e.g. hero, servant, network role, and so on). One approach to surfacing these ideological assumptions is to hold multiple definitions (read, discourses) of leadership in tension with one another, so their contrast may inform or challenge one another to produce a stronger evidentiary basis for leadership claims (Fairhurst, in press; Kelly, 2013). Thus, in addition to attributions of leadership, it is important to consider, for example, simple role sharing vis-à-vis decision-making, which is very common in the plural leadership literature writ large (e.g. Chreim, 2015; Denis et al., 2012); influential acts of organizing (Hosking, 1988), where specific practices take on import based on outcomes (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008b; Crevani, et al., 2010); or dialectical tensions or paradoxes where struggle or holding incompatibilities together by leadership actors become salient (Collinson, 2014; Kelly, 2013), among others.

Returning to the Holm and Fairhurst (2016a; 2016b) case study, these leadership definitions are the very indicators that might be held in tension with one another because of their potential to inform the case. First, consider role sharing where “authoring” was based upon position and expertise as expected (the work on authority makes these two foundations very clear [Barley, 1996]), but also by individuals, regardless of role, who sought to advance the task at hand. Several times these involved struggles over meaning where “resistance authoring” held sway. So, there was clear evidence that team meetings were open and participatory, a sine qua non of shared leadership.
Second, consider leadership attributions by the actors involved during the interviews conducted. Leadership was specifically treated as an object of knowledge in conversation when the competitor for the Department head’s job—head of the former IT department—announced he was leaving for another position. In an interview shortly after, he argued that he was better qualified for the OA job and that the person who got it lacked assertiveness and had a preference for talk over action. Interestingly, at the time that the nearly six-month study ended, the organizational restructure had not progressed as expected. Other team leaders complained about few concrete decisions being made and the cumbersome, grinding nature of team decision-making. For his part, the Department head felt that his team leaders needed coaxing, and he intentionally “sat on his hands” to spur them to take more responsibility.

Third, there were also influential acts of organizing to consider. In particular, the agenda control/authoritative text “bookending” by the department head revealed how shared decision-making and hierarchical control interlaced. More specifically, the fact that 19 out of 20 sub-topics discussed across months of meetings produced an authoritative text only by the department head (or his proxy) could well suggest heavy editing by him and a structurally advantageous way to maintain hierarchical control (Deetz, 1992). Ironically, however, the interview data suggested the department head wasn’t “bookending” enough vis-à-vis setting expectations and producing an authoritative text to adjudicate the seemingly endless rehashing of topics. The department head was waiting for the team to reach consensus to make a final decision, while the team was waiting for some kind of
“final say” from the head for their wide-ranging discussions. It quickly became a vicious cycle (Smith and Lewis, 2011) of too much talk and too little action, fueled by each side believing that the other was at fault.

Finally, consider leadership in this case as a kind of dialectic holding the tensions between hierarchical and shared leadership together. From this perspective, there is successful role sharing vis-à-vis authoring patterns, but weak attributions of leadership because influential acts of organizing like bookending could not be marshaled to manage the dialectic between hierarchical versus shared control.

Considering how these different definitions inform and contrast one another produces a stronger evidentiary basis for claiming that authoring patterns can be “shared,” but “leadership” is called into question when we consider the intertwined, sequentialized configuration of shared and hierarchical authoring over time and the interpretations of such patterns vis-à-vis various definitions of leadership.

**Conclusion**

This example says a lot about our methodological choices with respect to plural forms of leadership. For example, had we used only cross sectional methodologies, we might have concluded that shared leadership was successful. However, using longitudinal data to study issues of time and timing reverses that conclusion and precisely reveals a leadership configuration in which hierarchical and shared leadership inextricably occupies the same space. Then, only by holding multiple definitions of leadership in tension with one another to study leadership as
process and object of knowledge do we begin to appreciate the inherent ambiguity of this space. The department head’s “bookending” is an influential act of organizing (Hosking, 1988) and equivocal structure that flexibly adapts to extreme hierarchical control or its abdication. A multiplex view of leadership revealed how our study was about its abdication.

I argue there is a need to understand more, not fewer ambiguous spaces with respect to hierarchical and plural leadership. The devil is in the details of plural forms of leadership as it cooperates, coopts or collides with hierarchy, and analysts need as much data as possible to decipher these spaces and their many ambiguities over time. For the actors and analysts involved, there is a need to know how influential acts of organizing might be the opportunities to intervene. Specifically targeting the equivocality of such micro-practices by creating reflexivity about their use during the implementation of the shared leadership intervention in this study might have spurred more team leaders to adopt them or reflect on how they were being used (or not) to stymie progress. It might also have encouraged the department head to consider a phase-based approach to their use (e.g. a pronounced and heavy use at the beginning that would decrease over time as other team members assumed greater responsibility) or using them as the platform for setting expectations, which he later faulted himself for not doing enough of.

In short, I am advocating a continuation of processual, multimethod leadership research and adopting a multiplex leadership lens. The view of leadership that is “brought off” in social interaction (e.g. authoring patterns) is not the same as when leadership is treated as an object of knowledge (e.g. attributions
in interviews). Nor is it the same as when leadership is designated by organizational or network role or influential acts of organizing or other popular or useful ways in which to view leadership. A context-relevant multiplex lens restores (rescues?) leadership as a concept and keeps it from “disintegrating” in collaborative settings (Denis et al., 2012) because of its corroborative potential.

**References**


