Collective Leadership from a Critical Feminist Perspective

The Socio-Political Dynamics of Collective Leadership:
Methodological Challenges from a Critical Feminist Perspective

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Introduction

Leadership has traditionally been widely understood as an individual-level skill. Within this tradition, leadership is conceptualized either as an influence process between the 'leaders' and the 'followers' (e.g., Day, 2000), or as an inner experience of the individual leader and his or her 'leadership identity' (e.g., Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). A different perspective approaches leadership and its development as a relational, socially situated, and socially constructed process that engages different community members (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Kark, 2011). These, more recent organizational and leadership theories, that focus on collective (Ospina & Foldy, 2015), post-heroic (Fletcher, 2004), relational (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and/or distributed leadership, approach leadership as a function that is not held by the individual member, but rather one that is shared among group members. Within such a framework it is suggested that a more dynamic, yet still well-defined, leadership identity emerges. An identity that is constructed by reciprocal claiming and granting of leadership, and a dynamic exchange of leadership and followership is constantly being renegotiated across time and situations. According to this perspective it is argued that: “In such contexts the boundaries between leader and follower identities are permeable; as a result, few identity conflicts and little tension over leadership will emerge” (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 634).”

In the current article, we question these assumptions of non-conflict and non-tensions. Employing a critical feminist perspective, we shift focus from the intra-personal processes and the interpersonal/relational processes of understanding leadership to the wider social-political fabric, asking if and how the ‘collective’ undermines and destabilizes ‘leadership’ as a viable working framework and what are the consequences of this in terms of methodology of study.

Due to their suspicion towards hierarchies and commitment to expose and dismantle power relations, as well as their intersectional point of departure, critical feminist theories, have focused on understanding shared and collective forms of action and leadership, while using a power sensitive lens and socio-political structural analysis (e.g., Debebe, & Reinert, 2014; Ellsworth, 1989, 1997; Holvino, 2012; Hooks, 1990; Kark, Preser & Zion-Waldoks, 2016; Spivak, 1988, 2012). We argue that discussing leadership, even as a ‘collective’ project, is not situated outside structural power relations, and thus, might reinforce existing convictions, which are transferred to the plural instead of the personal.

What we wish to bring forward in the this paper is a perspective that moves beyond the notion of dismantling leadership by pluralizing it, and offer a critique of the concept of ‘collective’ as well as a method for
scholarship which explores efforts for diversifying leadership. By exploring who constitutes the ‘collective’, how does one belong to or considered part of a leading community or group, and what are the effects of a bi-focal
attachment to both leadership on the one hand, and collectivity on the other, we offer a model for interrogating
collective leadership as a contested environment which embeds both inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms. We
draw on critical feminist perspectives in order to further challenge shared/collective leadership, by suggesting that
the attempt to construct structureless, non-hierarchical, and flat forms of shared leadership and power can become a
way of masking power and may even lead to tyranny, what has been termed the 'tyranny of structurelessness'
(Freeman, 1973), allowing specific elite groups to gain hidden power over others, they eligibly share power with.

Reflecting on a unique conference we co-organized1: the 'Gender in the Field Conference' in Israel, we
offer some ontological and epistemological considerations on the ‘collective’. The conference was constructed as a
temporary organization, led by an ad-hoc collective which shared leadership among a large team of women (over
twenty five). These women all held leadership roles in their organizations, representing different social, professional
and geographical locations and backgrounds in the Israeli society (senior and junior academic faculty, graduate
students, employees in the public sector, and civil society). By linking organizational theories of collective
leadership with critical feminist scholarship, we aim to explore and uncover methodological challenges that arise
from the concept of ‘collective leadership’, as well as propose how they may be addressed in field work.

Shared/Collective Leadership

Traditional writing in the organizational field was mostly dominated by the perspective that leadership is
held and manifested by a single person (Pearce & Manz, 2005), often referred to as the 'great man' (Reicher,
Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). This perspective led to leadership research that was focused on understanding traits,
personalities, behaviors, and skills of the individual (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Crevani, Lindgren, Packendorff,
2007; Yukl, 2013). According to this perspective there was a vertical top-down influence process between the leader
and his or her followers (Conger & Pearce, 2003). This has been the dominant paradigm in leadership studies for
many years.

However, recently within the field of leadership studies and practice there is a growing interest toward
understating and viewing leadership as a collaboration between two or more individuals. This stream of theories and
practices approach leadership as collective action. According to these theories the modern organizational life is
highly demanding and calls for multiplicity in skills, knowledge, and background. Within this context there is an
advantage to sharing leadership functions (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2007). Furthermore, a single
individual in a formal position, in a complex work setting may not have all the needed knowledge to make decisions
at the necessary fast pace and speed. Under such conditions collective leadership may fare better (Conger & Pearce,
2003).

1 In 2009, 2010 and 2011; organized within the Graduate Gender Studies Program, Bar-Ilan University).
Theories of collective leadership relate to a group of theories, among them dispersed leadership, distributed leadership, shared leadership, post heroic, and others. According to the perspective of Conger and Pearce (2003) shared leadership is defined as “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both (p. 1).” They further suggest that this type of leadership is not centralized in the hands of an individual, but rather is broadly distributed and does not involve the traditionally perceived dynamic of the downward influence of a single appointed leader that holds power (Pearce & Conger, 2003). This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence, and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence. By shifting perspective from viewing leadership as a single-person activity to viewing it as collective construction processes, Cox, Pearce, and Perry (2003) called attention to the temporality inherent in shared leadership, defining it as a “dynamic exchange of lateral influence (p. 48).” Fletcher and Käufer (2003) further elaborated on the informal nature of shared leadership. Seers, Keller, and Wilkinson (2002) and Hiller, Day, and Vance (2006) have emphasized the fact that collective leadership is a property of the group rooted in social exchange-based roles. Hiller and colleagues (2006) assert that “the epicenter of collective leadership is... the interaction of team members to lead the team by sharing in leadership responsibilities (p. 388).” (lq2012)

Similar distinctions between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ leadership are made by researchers within the field of distributed leadership (DL hereafter) (e.g. Bolden et al. 2009; Collinson & Collinson, 2009; Gronn, 2009) and both sets of literature draw attention to the need to recognize informal, emergent, and collective acts of influence as well as those instigated by people in formal positions of authority. The perceived need for different forms of collective leadership (including distributive, shared, etc.) arises in response to a similar set of practical challenges that include the need to face more complex tasks and challenges, as well as the growing appreciation of the importance of ‘informal’ leadership in organizations (Harris, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2009a). However, while the commonalities between the different perspectives are evident, and may add strength to the argument against leader-centric representations, there are some potential dangers of assuming too close a similarity. As Leithwood et al. (2006) suggest, although there is clearly a degree of overlap between concepts of shared, collaborative, democratic, and participative leadership, this does not mean that all forms are equal and/or equivalent, or that everybody is a leader.

In an attempt to dispel myths of collective/distributed leadership, Diamond and Spillane (2007) clarify that this type of leadership is not a blueprint for all leadership and management; that it does not negate the roles of CEOs and formal managers; that from a collective leadership perspective, not everyone is a leader; and that collective leadership is not only fit for contexts of collaborative tasks. Confronting the existing flawed assumptions on collective and distributive leadership can help us understand this phenomenon better.

Various researchers stressed the importance of collective leadership for women and for advancing a different type of leadership- a post-heroic leadership- that enables people to lead in a different manner. Their main assertions were that women’s and minorities’ attempts to lead are many times invisible and are 'disappeare', due to
the perception that relational efforts and backstage acts are not leadership. Although these perspectives acknowledge the possible benefit of collective leadership approaches for women and minorities, their critique of the construct of collective leadership is limited by the notion that women and minorities can all be part of the collective, as long as different modes of leadership and of contribution to the collective are recognized. Drawing on post-colonial and post-modern feminist theories, below we provide a more critical perspective that questions the foundations of collective leadership. **Collective Leadership from a Feminist Critical Perspective**

While current interventions into the concept and practice of leadership put an emphasize on democratizing its values as well as highlighting leadership’s multiple, sharable, post-heroic, and permeable potentiality, these interventions assume the existence of agency (since leadership is fundamentally about Agency, see Ospina & Foldy, 2009) as a resource which is available to anyone wishing to act or lead; be it in the private sector, the public sector or civil society. Moreover, these scholarly debates neglect a more intersectional perspective as to the multiple axes of marginalization a subject might occupy such as: gender, class, race, disability, sexuality, religiosity, access to citizenship, etc. Intersectional perspective is a key feature of feminist analysis and is concerned with ‘decentering’ of the ‘normative subject’ of examination and contemplation. Such decentering discourse has been scaling anti-colonial movements for independence, Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, the Peace movement, student protests, Workers' Movements, the Women's Movement or the Gay and Lesbian Movement. As Brah and Phoenix (2004) assert, “whichever set of hegemonic moves became the focus of contestation in a specific debate--whether it was the plight of subordinated sexualities, class injustices, or other subaltern realities--the concept of a self-referencing, unified subject of modernity now became the subject of overt and explicit political critique” (p. 78).

Hence, interventions informed by the intersectional perspective have been advocating for integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Could such a complex outlook on identity, social position, and participation shape a collective? Our own contribution to this discussion takes the ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform CL and its egalitarian aspirations, and propose instead a critical epistemology and ontology.

While marginalization or differentiation refers to myriad ways in which one might be subjugated or removed from agency, such experiences and histories of oppression differ between groups and also among members of the same (oppressed) group. In order to elaborate on these complexities and avoid universalizing discourses of the ‘Other’, we draw on feminist and postcolonial critique which criticizes attempts to accommodate feminist notions to existing hegemonic structures, institutions, language, and logic. Critical feminist approaches point to the ways such efforts are complicit with precisely the values they contest.

We argue that wedding ‘collective’ to ‘leadership’ does not simply overcome hierarchy, stratification, and exclusions. As communities and organizations are not homogeneous, we use the term Subalternity, coined by Antonio Gramsci and further conceptualized by Gayatry Chacravorty Spivak (1988), in order to point to those who don’t have capacity to speak for themselves (let alone, share leadership) or to be heard -- even when they do attempt to speak (Spivak, 1988). Subalternity is not yet another general term or a synonym of any ‘Other’ marginalized group. Rather, it points to, an ‘Other’ that is to be removed from all lines of social-mobility (Spivak, 2005),
including, having no capacity and legitimacy to ‘speak’ for oneself or to use knowledge (thought, reasoning, and language) that is other than Western or hegemonic, in order to be ‘heard’. While Spivak uses this term in the context of cultural imperialism and colonialism, we argue that asking who may be able to present their concerns and desires within the dominant discourse and who may be part of the collective leadership are fruitful questions for the understanding of the limits embedded in any notion of ‘collective’. In other words, we offer to look at CL from the periphery, contending that location matters when thinking of both the inner-circle of CL (the ones who allegedly share the collective leadership), as well as the outside-circle (the individuals and groups surrounding the 'collective' and affected by it) (Bracke, 2016).

Looking at CL from the periphery is not an easy task, especially since the periphery (or subalternity) cannot be represented adequately by academic knowledge since academic knowledge is a practice that actively produces the periphery, in the very act of presenting it (Beverley, 1999 in Bracke, 2016). Indeed, the study of the subaltern or of the periphery of leadership “pushes the scholar to look for her own involvement in creating and reproducing relations of power and subordination” (Bracke, 2016). Hence, while those excluded from CL are located outside of the sphere of the meaning making and collective making, the scholar is pushed to situate herself within this sphere (Beverley, 1999 in Bracke, 2016).

One could argue that recognizing and giving voice to those who are not represented in the collective leadership group may solve this difficulty, as ‘voice’ is often a metonymical expression of agency (Mahmood, 2005 in Bracke, 2016). In other words, being assigned a ‘voice’ might be perceived equivalent to being assigned power to act. However, argues Bracke:

“(G)iving voice’ presents us with a conundrum that has been commentated upon extensively [...] ‘Giving voice’, Spivak (1984) argues, relies on a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, as well as suggests a dependence upon Western intellectuals to ‘speak for’ the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves.” (Bracke, 2016)

So what could be the role of the academic in this respect? What are we to do if we cannot ‘give voice’ to those who do not participate in the collective space which allows leadership and agency? Spivak (1984) argues that it is the role of the academic intellectual, to do the work of making resistance of subalterns, recognizable. Hence, in this paper, we offer a methodological shift in the study of CL, shifting from studying the contours of CL, to studying acts of resistance to and within the attempt to collectivize or share leadership.

The GIF Conference Context

In 2007 The Gender in The Field Track (GIFT) was established within Bar-Ilan University’s Graduate Gender Studies Program. As the first and only program of its kind in Israel, GIFT stands on two main pillars of knowledge: feminist theory and experiential knowledge from feminist activism. The aim of the GIFT program was to nurture feminist leadership that can promote meaningful social change by bringing together feminist activism and the knowledge it produced and feminist theory, while creating a comprehensive training in feminist social change.
GIFT’s flagship conference, was a unique yearly conference that took place between 2008-2010 and was designed according to feminist values and ethics. Established as a temporary organization, the conference’s organizational board served as a meeting place for exchange among students, academics, and activists. The conference was also constructed as a significant opportunity for GIFT students to experience hands-on training and as a learning opportunity for those who chose the conference organization as their second year practicum.2

The first two ‘Gender in The Field Conferences’, conducted in 2009 and 2010, were initiated by the authors of this paper. The first was entitled: “From Practice to Theory and Back to Practice: Gender in the Field and in academia”, and was focused on the exploration of connections and linkages between practice and theory, practitioners, activists, and academics. The following conference was entitled: “Gaps between Practice and Theory: Gender in the Field and in Academia”, and explored the tensions and contestations between feminist practice and theory.

This temporary organizing and organization was structured as a working laboratory, in which we could explore and challenge the structural hierarchy of the academic environment and develop a collective model as an alternative. In other words, we aspired to dismantle power relations by simply sharing leadership among the organizers. The organizing constituency included feminist activists, among them CEOs of NGOs, public sector employees, and junior and senior faculty as well as graduate students. The organizing collective was assembled with inclusivity and diversity in mind. Members represented diverse ethnic, national, sexual, religion observance, and class positions in the Israeli society. They also represented diverse feminist agendas, ideologies, and fields of action, such as: violence, poverty, marital law, etc. The organizing collective defined the conference’s theme, served as the academic committee which issued a call for papers (CFP), selected papers, and designed the program. The attempt to construct a seemingly collective leadership group for the conference, disperse power and share leadership was challenging and resulted in many different tensions and problems which will serve us in order to discuss both the model of collective leadership as well as for developing some methodological guidelines for approaching the study of such efforts.

**Challenges to Collective Leadership in the GIFT Conference**

The first challenge arose with the formation of the collective. There was a need to choose who would compose the collective leadership group leading the conference and who would not be invited. The ones who made the list of participants invited to the group were women from the faculty of the Bar-Ilan University that were the organizers and initiators of the conference. They made the decision what would be the types of organizations and social groups that would be included. Thus, the formation of the temporary organization was based on a pre-determined power structure, that influenced, and in some ways dictated, future dynamics of the work of the collective leadership group. For example, after receiving invitations to join the collective leadership group (see

2 The graduate program second year’s seminar, entitled ‘Gender in the Field: Translating Feminist Theory into Social Action’, was taught by the authors of this paper. The seminar’s participants are required to engage intensively in social change projects (i.e. a practicum in which they invest approximately 4-6 hours-weekly throughout the year (for discussion of the pedagogy and critical intervention that informed this seminar see Kark, Preser, & Zion-Waldoks, 2016)
invitation letter attached), many organizations and individuals wanted to join the conference team. However, some of them could not attend the first meeting. Would they still be able to be part of the team? Will they be part of the collective? Some came to the first meeting, but could not join proceeding meetings. This raised the question of the boundaries of the collective group and of the representation of the members on the invitations and the conference program and brochures. Thus, power was not equally located in the collective leadership group. The team from Bar-Ilan University, who initiated the conference decided the dates of the meetings, as well as who will be invited and what will be the criteria for inclusion in the official brochure of the conference.

Furthermore, on all formal issues, the leading team from the university were seen by the university officials as the ones responsible for the conference. Thus, in all formal matters they were the ones approached by the university. Moreover, in the first meeting, activists who were CEOs of feminist NGOs in Israel were surprised the organizing team had invited to the collective leadership group women from the public sector who were the Heads of Women's Status and Promotion in the government and within the municipalities. The big NGO organizations of Witzo and Naamat, were also invited to join. In the eyes of racial feminist activists these organizations did not hold a feminist perspective and they were surprised to find them within the same collective leadership group, and suggested they should be omitted from the collective leadership of the feminist conference (see Martin, for a discussion of who can qualify as a feminist organization, Martin, 1990; Acker, 1995, and Hooks, 2003, for who can qualify as a feminist).

This dynamic resonates with the work of Freeman (1993). Her influential essay on her experiences in the American Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s', critiqued the attempt of radical feminist groups to structure a collective in which power is shared. She contends that this seemingly structureless collective often disguised an unacknowledged, unaccountable, and informal leadership that was all the more pernicious and influential because its very existence was denied. This unacknowledged power structure gave rise to elite groups, which she defined as “a small group of people who have power over a larger group of which they are apart, usually without direct responsibility to that larger group, and often without their knowledge or consent” (p. ). Women gain informal elite status based on networks and friendships in the group, as well as on their valued background characteristics (e.g., being middle class, married, young or middle aged, having college education, holding radical opinions, etc.), that are likely to have different types of impact, depending on the group. An important observation of Freeman (1993) is that external constituencies, such as the press, media, politicians, other organizations and their management, look for the leaders within the group to represent the group. Thus, in these cases the 'star' system (Freeman, 1993) develops, allowing certain women that have more visibility and enjoy informal elite status to become “stars” of the group. These women are then called by extremal groups to represent the collective, without the consent and responsibility of the “star” women or the group. These dynamics, in which power is masked, but still takes central stage, interact with the dynamics of the hegemonic and subalternity described above, and inevitably undermines the 'collective'. This dynamic was evident in the organizing of the conference.

The collective leadership was fragile in other respects as well. Some members of the leadership team held on to more power than others. This created an inner circle which de-facto had more power and was engaged with the
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details more than others. The issue of power relations was emphasized also in the negotiations between the academics and the practitioners, negotiations which took place within an academic context. This led to a situation in which the academics, who were more familiar with the system, more informed and had more responsibility towards the “system” and the academic institution, whether towards academia and its values in general or toward the specific university in which the conference was held, held on to more power. The cooperation of faculty including in the collective leadership group the head of the GIFT program and the program’s students, was yet another challenge.

Graduate students from the GIFT program were included in the conference leadership group as representatives of the full cohort of the GIFT program. The conference was initiated with the aim to provide a space for the students to experience feminist activism in the field, with its related multiplicity of dilemmas and paradoxes (Kark, Preser, & Zion-Waldoks, 2016). One of the conference goals was that the specific cohort of GIFT that would graduate every year would have ownership over the conference and that it would be their blue print and mark. Thus, every year 3-5 graduate students were included within the collective leadership of the conference. Although these were the original goals, the attempt to share power and facilitate the students participation, including on-going discussions with the students encouraging them to step-up, lean-in, speak-up and take on a role, in many ways collapsed.

Although the faculty made a conscious effort to structure a psychologically safe work environment and the students were reassured that they will be in a non-evaluative environment within the conference leadership, the students had a different experience. As two of them noted in their end of the year seminar, they were hesitant about raising concerns and being critical since at the end of the day, their work was also course work for a seminar on which they were credited and marked by their fellow ‘leaders’. Hence, they felt they were either to pay a price for keeping silence or for speaking up, emphasizing the problematics of ‘giving voice’ in the context of power relations. As they noted: “Our practice was different from that of other women in the program. Since our practice work was within the program and the women we worked with were not “external”. They were involved in the whole process of organizing the conference. At that time we only saw the prices we would pay for speaking up, we did not see the prices of silence.”

While many of the decisions on the CFP, the structure of the conference, and the acceptance of papers were reached in a collective process, they felt that they were the 'administrators' in the 'collective leadership' group and that they had to do all the 'dirty work' and could not take a meaningful role in decision making processes related to the structure and the content of the conference. Furthermore, they painfully acknowledged that although this was a seemingly collective leadership group in which they could have power, there was a reality extremal to the temporary organization formed within the conference leadership. One in which their peers in the leadership group were their instructors, lecturers, and the heads of the graduate program. This external reality invaded the collective leadership group dynamic and could not be left aside and overlooked at any stage, limiting their ability to join in the invitation to “share” power.
Another more radical example of the dismantling of the collective leadership was evident with regards to the national composition of the group. It was early in the process of forming the organizing committee that the first tensions emerged. The period of forming the organizing committee occurred during the IDF’s Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which began on December 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2008 and ended on January 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2009. The military control of Israel on the occupied territories has been a crux causing heated disputes among Israeli feminists for decades, especially during major military operations. Hence, the question of the committee’s position in regards to Cast Lead Operation hovered over the newly forming committee in the very first meeting. This question was presented by Palestinian participants and backed by a few of the Jewish participants as a crucial matter and a central concern for feminists.

Since the conference leadership group was constructed based on a principle of wide representation of activism in Israeli society, the collective leadership group included Palestinian activists, a high ranked IDF officer who was in charge of gender equity and women’s rights within the army women, an officer in the Israeli police who had a similar role, and women who were Settlers in the West Bank. During the first meeting, one of the Palestinian participants expressed her difficulty sharing space and discussing women’s rights with a military officer who was also present at the committee’s meeting. Other Jewish participants, among them the officer rejected the issue altogether and the officer declared that she cannot and will not challenge the organization she belongs to (i.e. the IDF).

This is not the first time in the history of Israeli feminism that feminist collectives are divided along this trajectory, between the demand to critically address questions of security, militarism, and colonialism as a feminist concern on the one hand, and a rejection of these issues in order to maintain cohesion on the other, which is to say, to include women who identify with nationalistic values and sentiments while practically, excluding Palestinian feminists. As Sasson-Levi and Misgav (Forthcoming) maintain, the Israeli neocolonialism, namely the long military control on the occupied territories, shapes both gendered and collective identities and agendas. Moreover, it affects social intervention made by women, blocks cooperation between Jewish and Palestinian organizations and mainly, sustains gender inequality and hinders accomplishments in feminist struggle. A few examples are due here in order to emphasize the (new) colonialist context in which the conference’s ‘collective leadership’ was formed and acted:

The first example concerns a feminist conference entitled “A Decade to Israeli Feminism” which took place in 1980 in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{3} A fierce dispute abruptly and prematurely ended the conference, and was followed by a press release that described the circumstances: apparently a group of participants issued a motion for the agenda that stresses the futility of feminist social change intervention which is divorced from the political context of occupation. This motion offered to issue a declaration of solidarity with Palestinian women under Israeli occupation. Another group of women issued a motion that rejected any discussion on this issue altogether. The motion for rejection was rejected by the plenary which eventually led to the withdrawal of this group and practically blew the conference to smithereens.

Another example for rejecting issues concerning Israeli military control of Palestinians is well manifested in the establishment of the Women Wage Peace movement during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge. This

movement declares itself to be ‘non-political’ according to their mission statement. The movement seeks to be inclusive to all women in Israeli society, regardless of their political position. As Shoshana London-Sappir (2015) described a year later, when joining a communal fast on the anniversary of the Operation Protective Edge, the organizers repeatedly emphasized that the movement was “not leftist” (adopting a rhetoric that has fueled a campaign of de-legitimation of leftist activists): “Their line of thinking, they explained to me, was that we can find common ground with other women in the desire for peace even if we do not agree on the details” (London-Sappir, 2015).

The dispute among Jewish feminist activists in Israel has occurred time and time again, a trend that was identified by a few scholars and has been continually engaging both Palestinian and Jewish feminists in Israeli society. Marsha Friedman, a veteran feminist and lesbian activist, reflects in her memoir on the line drawn by feminists in Israel, demarcating issues concerning women’s oppression and issues concerning the oppression of Palestinians during the 70’s in Israel.

Back to the GIFT conference -- it is important to note that many of the committee’s members represented a wide array of political beliefs and position within Israeli society. Furthermore, many of them were representing organizations that held hegemonic beliefs and norms, among them Bar-Ilan University, in which the conference took place, which is identified as religious and conservative institute.

The refusal of the collective leadership team, or some members in the team, to recognize the ongoing war and to frame it as colonization and as a major feminist concern, and the refusal of the collective to dismiss the military and police officers from the committee, led to a situation in which most of the Palestinian women disengaged from the organizing committee, which became rather homogenous in terms of nationality. It is worthy to note that the conference call for papers and the brochure of the program were published and distributed in Hebrew and English, a non common practice within Israeli Academia, in which academic materials are customary published in English and Hebrew. Furthermore, the Palestinian members that were invited to the leading committee, as well as other Palestinian women continued to collaborate with the conference and helped to reach out to Arab women who submitted papers and came to present their academic and activists work in the conference, as well as came to attend the conference. However, most of the Palestinian women in the committee asked to omit their names from the formal collective leadership team, as a protest. Thus, although 'collective leadership' was a major ideological aspiration and dedication within the context of the GIFT conference, it was an ongoing struggle to hold on to it as an

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'impossible' project, demanding much resources (e.g., in time), involving an emotional toll and leading to multiple ruptures, splits and cleavages.

Discussion

The effort to create collective leadership and establish a forum which voices multiplicity and strives for diversity has collapsed in many points in time. The challenges we described above were just a few among other many other. And although the organizational model we sought managed to make some difference, namely, to expand the breath of voices, ideas and positions, and share some power, many forms of leadership were still maintained mainly by a small group of women, failing to give voice to the colonized.

As those observing and contemplating this failure from the periphery, as Bracke suggested and inspired by Spivak’s assertion that the role of the academic intellectual is to make resistance of subalterns recognizable, we propose a few methodological possibilities for the study of collective leadership, shifting from portraying, describing, and analyzing it, to critically engaging with it by studying acts of resistance. In other words, we propose to look at the failure embedded in the notion of a ‘collective’. By shifting to a feminist critical and postcolonial epistemology, we propose to learn something new about collectivity and leadership.

Such epistemology looks at the moments and events when the concept cannot perform what it announces, namely, cannot adhere to its aspiration to collectivity. Also coined as a methodology of damage (Preser, 2016), we suggest that the study of CL should look at that which cannot be voiced or represented in a collective and cannot ‘lead’. Moreover, it suggests that our work as researchers should not aim to solve this misrepresentation by producing new strategies for collectivity in a social context which is stratified by multiple oppressions and power relations. In other words, we contend that if the social context is not collective in leadership and access to resources, then leadership reflects this social fabric and may serve as an experimental space for understanding the hindrances for creating a collective.

Thus, collective leadership should always be studied consistently acknowledging it as an ongoing aspired goal, but as one that is never truly accomplished. It should also be studied while acknowledging the social-political structure it is embedded in. Researchers need to adopt a research method that enables them to pay close attention to different levels of the political contexts the process of collective leadership is embedded within: the teams’ context, the organizational context, as well as the wider social-national-political context. Many times research strives for generality and strips the research context of its particular local and global characteristics. For the study of collective leadership there is a need to systematically analyze the particular context and the multiple levels the project of structuring and employing collective leadership is immersed in. By systematically examining the particular social-political context, researchers will be able to expose the power relations, subordination, hegemonic structures, and exclusion. This will allow a better understanding of the elusive ways collective leadership may unfold. We also call for better use of paradoxical thinking and the paradox meta-theory. The use of such theories and research methods
can allow for a more complex exploration of simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion, of power dispersion and power enhancement that may take place in collective leadership groups.

Furthermore, while striving for collective leadership may be seen as a democratic and progressive form of leadership, it holds the danger of masking other less favorable dynamics that may be prone to exploitation and abuse in the guise of collectivity and sharedness. The tyranny of structurelessness (Freeman, 1973) may also apply to the tyranny of the sharedness of structure. This implies that researchers need a methodology that enables a careful analysis that can expose unseen, hidden, and at times, unconscious dynamics. Researchers are also advised to listen to multiple voices within the collective project that may bring up the resistance to the notion of collectivity.

In the GIF conference brochures we used the image of Medusa. Apart from the image the wordings on the brochure noted: “The Medusa – Is a monster, a Gorgon, from Greek mythology – her hair is made of snakes and her gaze turns living creature to stone. The hero Perseus was sent to behead her. Feminist appropriated her story as a symbol for knowledge, voice, women power, sexuality and opposition against patriarchy that is threatened by women that hold pow

er and knowledge and aim to change the gendered power relations in the public and private sphere.” In many ways this gaze of the Medusa comes to inform the research methods of collective leadership, raising many critical challenges to the fundamental construct of ‘collective leadership’, as well as to the challenges that await scholars who aim to study it. We believe that by holding on to this critical and unsettling gaze, is likely to contribute to more informed research that focuses on the dynamics of ruptures, harm and resistance to collective leadership along with researchers' open eye for understanding on-going struggles to find ways to dissolve or reduce power relations and change the leadership structures that are currently in place.

References


APPENDIX 1

The 1st Annual Conference on Gender in Practice and Theory
Bar-Ilan University – 'Gender in the Field' Graduate Program

May 20, 2009
Call for Papers

The purpose of the conference is to explore interface and interaction between scholarship and activism in the field of gender.

Deadline for submission: 10.2.09
Possible themes are:

a) The production of theory by activists and field/social change work
b) The activism applied through theorization and academic work
c) Establishing a new discipline that bridges academia with activism in the field of gender
d) Feminist pedagogy
e) The role of feminist scholarship in the feminist movement(s) and vice versa
f) The position of the clients/target group members in the production of knowledge and design of research
g) The absence of the 'political' (as opposed to the obvious presence of the 'social') in gender scholarship and activism
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h) Feminism of the 'everyday' – the feminist talk, work and theorization among those who are not immersed in feminist theories and language, and what happens when feminist agencies/researchers enter communities
i) The complexities and conflicts between organizations, between practice and academia, between other kinds of "them" and "us"
j) How is success defined? which tools are at our disposal for evaluating practice and theory

For Further details please see http://www.barilan-migdar.com/images/CFP_Hebrew_and_Arabic.pdf
For further information please contact: