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Paper Title: Illuminating the Way: Towards An Emergent Theory of Place-Based Leadership Development

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Illuminating the Way: Towards An Emergent Theory of Place-Based Leadership Development

Abstract

A more localised and differentiated approach to delivering services to the public and tackling intransigent social problems has led to the development of initiatives focusing on improving the collaborative capability of local leaders. However, there is little theoretical understanding of the process by which collective leadership development evolves within a localised context. Therefore, this paper gives a brief overview of an exploratory study, which draws on the extant literature, and uses semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis and pre-interview questionnaires to study the experiences of participants on three place-based development initiatives. The subsequent analysis is then used to help build an emergent theory of place-based leadership development.

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Introduction

Government policy and academic reviews of the impact of public service leadership development, and facing unprecedented challenges within a more complex and uncertain strategic context has encouraged a number of localities to find new ways of working together (PIU, 2006, Cabinet Office, 2009, Goss, 2010 and Hartley and Tranfield, 2011). Such initiatives, involving cross sector groups of senior or emerging leaders, offer more diverse models for sharing knowledge, developing relationships and building leadership capability for a county local authority area or a wider sub-region (LGID, 2011a, 2011b). They have two common elements: firstly, building knowledge and a deep understanding of the problems and issues faced by a place balancing the use of data and evidence with engagement. And secondly, identifying the type of leadership needed to build relationships and create effective collaboration to address the issues that have been identified (Office for Public Management, 2009). The means to building this capability is known as place based leadership development.

Research Aims and Focus

However, there is little theoretical understanding of the process by which collective leadership development evolves in this context (LGID, 2011a). This paper briefly outlines an exploratory study into how our theoretical understanding of the process of place based leadership development can be informed by what happens in practice, drawing on the experience of participants, facilitators and programme managers. The three different initiatives, facing similar challenges, but each within its own unique local, political, social and economic context, are explored. From the development of an initial conceptual model for understanding these interventions, the researcher aims to build theory from practice. What follows is a brief overview of (i) perspectives from the extant literature on the key concepts (ii) key elements of the conceptual model; (iii) methodology and research methods; (iv) brief outline of case studies; (v) initial findings and analysis (vi) initial conclusions.

Perspectives from the Literature

To develop a deeper understanding of the concepts that make up place-based leadership development each theme is briefly explored below.

Defining place

Whilst there is no overarching theory of place and limited empirical research, the concept is strongly linked to human geography; political geography, environmental psychology and economic and social development. Place has a range of meanings dependent on context (Cresswell, 2004), but according to Agnew (2011), it is the geographical mean of place that has assumed the greatest importance. In human geography, in particular, it highlights the bonds which form between human beings and geographical locations (Collinge and Mabey, 2010). In political geography, Agnew (2004), states that there are three broad senses of place, which may exist simultaneously, and are needed to give space meaning, viz., location, locale and sense of place. Location answers the question “*where ?*” in relation to what is everywhere else. Locale refers to the actual shape of the space, defined by, for example, the walls in a room or parks and streets in a city, and it is usually associated with everyday activities (such as work or recreation). It is the third aspect, sense of place (the personal and emotional attachment people have to a place, sometimes expressed as rootedness or place identity (Agnew, 2004; Elmes, 2012; Tuan 1974)), which has come to dominate discussions in the literature. From the environmental psychology literature, the meaning of place is discussed in terms of person: sense of self, identity and socialisation processes; place: physical and geographical aspects; and process: how group and individuals relate to place. From an economic and social development perspective, there has been a shift in thinking from the traditional view that geographic localities need to be managed to a more progressive view that they can be re-shaped through managerial, community and political leadership (Collinge & Mabey, 2010; Hambleton, 2009 & 2011; Lyons, 2007). It should also be noted that another term used is “communities of place”, however, defining community is difficult as it means different things to different people and remains “fluid and chaotic” (Niven, 2013: online).

Leadership and Leadership Development

The increasing complexity of the environment in which public services are delivered, with increasing diversity of needs and expectations, reduced resources and intransigent social problems faced by localities (Campbell *et al.*, 2009), has led to the call for more collaborative models of leadership and service delivery (Wooldridge and Worrall, 2010, Worrall 2009a, 2009b & 2010). This has led to a move from a focus on the individual and the development of intrapersonal skills through leader development towards a focus on the relationship between people, the development of interpersonal skills through leadership development (Day, 2000; Day 2011, Day and Harrison, 2014, Day *et al.*, 2014). The emphasis shifts from identifying traits, characteristics and behaviours that need to be modelled to one where leadership is relational, where it is shared, distributed and collective (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Thus, leader development is focused on developing human capital, the leadership development is seen as a social and relational construct, which aims to develop social capital (Day, 2000). This supports the notion of an underlying social process that gives rise to improved leadership (Bolden, 2005) and *“leadership is conceptualised as an effect rather than a cause (.....) leadership development from this perspective consists of using social (i.e. relational systems to help build commitments among members of a community of practice”* (Day, 2000, p. 583). It should be noted that, unlike Campbell *et al.* (2003), Day does not dismiss the relevance of leadership development programmes focused solely on the development of leaders as inappropriate, but rather argues the importance of developing both sets of competencies and of linking leader development with leadership development.

Place-based leadership development

Whilst definitions of place are varied, it is clear that that we need to be conscious of how people can have an emotional attachment to and their identity can be woven into place or places they are familiar with. Such factors can potentially add further complications to collaborative endeavours, which are, by their very nature ‘sites of struggle’ (Madden, 2010: 183). Indeed, the prevalence of tensions within inter-organizational initiatives has been evidenced in the literature for a number of years (Bingham *et al.*, 2006; Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011; Vangen, 2012; Vangen and Huxham, 2003 & 2003b; Vangen and Huxham, 2011, Vangen and Winchester, 2011) The link between place and leadership is clearly rooted in the more progressive concept of place shaping (as opposed to place making)

where there is a shared responsibility to improve outcomes for the greater good. This inter-linkage can trace its roots back to research on civic and place based collaborative leadership which developed in United States particularly since the mid-1990s (Chrislip & Larson, 1994 & 2002) and Public Integrative Leadership (Crosby & Bryson, 2005, 2010a, 2010b) . However, as the concept of leadership of place is still in its infancy, and can be used by different organisations to mean slightly different things (OPM, 2009; Local Government Leadership Centre, 2011) a broader based definition such as *“all leadership activity that serves a public purpose in a given locality”* is probably more useful (Hambleton, 2007:6). Hambleton goes on to argue that *“we can distinguish leadership that is ‘place-based’ from other kinds of leadership that are ‘place-less’”*. Place-based leadership development, therefore, are activities that aim to support the development of collective leadership capabilities within a given locality.

Conceptual Model

The development of the conceptual model, drew on an extensive literature review of existing theory and research on collaboration, place and place based leadership development, inter-organizational research and leadership theory. It assumes a starting point of there being a clear distinction between leader and leadership development with the latter focused on place (wider system) supporting the role of leading across place to achieve outcomes. The framework assumed that participants’ experience of place based leadership development process will involve a number of interlinked stages, which are briefly described in Table 1 (below).

Table 1: Main Elements in Conceptual Model

Stage	Description	Manifestation
Understanding others’ perspectives	Being open to seeing more than one world view, a more globally-oriented perspective when considering what the causes of particular issues are, and how they should respond.	A movement away from perceived assumptions about people and organisations and a movement towards a different perspective, and appreciation of a different way of seeing things

Mindset	A collective awareness of the need for leadership to be construed and enacted in a different way and being comfortable with having values and assumptions challenged. .	Positive collective response to a disturbance in the system
Common (social) purpose	A coming together, a common agreement of what the social purpose of the collaborative actually is and what it is seeking to achieve beyond furthering the common good and by what means.	Clear individual statements on common purpose.
Sense making	Seeing the main social issues from different perspectives and creating a shared understanding of what the problem is and potential approaches to resolve it.	The telling of similar stories/descriptions from shared experiences.
Collaborative space	This is about the potential use of the initiative as a thinking laboratory. The flow of ideas could lead to the incubation of new initiatives and potential spin off activities which would not have happened otherwise.	The reporting of of new activities which happened because of connections made within the collaborative
Creating social capital	The move from common agreement to common action which has led to increased shared capability to address issues.	There may have been significant benefits and/or added value from working together. This collaboration may have also had an influence on the development of other social initiatives.
Creating a narrative of collective leadership	This is about the development of a common understanding of how leadership is construed, what its objectives should be and how it manifests itself.	Development of a common language in terms of how leadership is described potentially with shared metaphors or illustrative examples

Methodology and Research Methods

A social constructivist and interpretivist methodology was adopted for this study. Using an under exploited qualitative approach (Klenke, 2008; Van Maanen, 1979), building on previous work on qualitative methods (Miles and Huberman, 1983; Yin 1981; & Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and drawing on the eight step framework (Eisenhardt, 1989) and the structured case approach (Caroll & Swatmann, 2000), three geographically and politically

distinct place-based leadership development initiatives were used to inductively build theory grounded in the interpretation of the experience of those involved. The use of a multi-case format, whilst more challenging than a single case enabled the researcher to develop a broader understanding of place based leadership development and the similarities founds between the cases strengthens the trustworthiness of the findings (Cresswell & Piano Clark, 2007). The use of a multi-case study as a way to develop theory through multiple sites or subjects is also supported by the work of Bogdan and Bilken (1998). This is a mixed methods aspect to the research (Moon and Moon, 2004; Tashakorri and Teddlie, 1998). Seventy five semi-structured interviews have been carried out, each one lasting on average 35-40 minutes across the three case studies (see Table 3 below) combined with a quantitative approach of asking each interviewee being asked to complete a Pre-Interview Questionnaire. In addition, relevant background documents have also been analysed thus enabling triangulation for consistency and completeness (Adami & Kiger, 2005).

Case Study Overview

A brief overview of each of the case studies is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 – Case Study Outlines

Case Study A	Case Study B	Case Study C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly Rural shire county (small city and towns) • Two tier local government system • Participants from public, private and third sectors • Senior leaders (incl, politicians) • High levels of prosperity/ Pockets of deprivation • Independent facilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural county/Unitary city (large city and towns) • Two tier (but unitary city) • Mainly public sector (limited third sector) • Emerging Leaders • No politicians • Delivered by a Higher Education Institution • Two Tier • Medium Prosperity/Significant areas of deprivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural and urban county (large town) • Two tier • Public and not for profit • Senior Leaders • No politicians • Independent facilitation • High levels of prosperity • Pockets of deprivation

Initial Findings and Analysis

An analysis and draft write up of Case Study A has been completed as well as an initial identification of key themes for Case Study B. The initial findings have identified that the process of development is more complex than the researcher had initially envisaged. The flow of the participants' movement through the phases set out in the conceptual model is complicated by participants experiencing a series of tensions within self, between self and others, between self and organization vis-à-vis participants' relationship to and purpose of the wider collaborative. These tensions, are not necessarily all barriers, and could be seen as a rite of passage which leads to the collaborative becoming a core part of what people do or to their withdrawal potentially due to a lack of perceived benefit to self. Given limited space, the researcher will only briefly describe a limited number of tensions here.

Focus of Development

This tension is concerned with the extent to which the collaborative is focused in delivering improved outcomes for the citizens and communities within the county or whether it is simply serving the self-interests of participants. Whilst these are not mutually exclusive, there is a question as to whether the right balance has been struck or whether the former is little more than an aspiration and the latter closer to the reality of the work, type of interaction and within and types of outcomes achieved by the collaborative. There also seems to be a strong link between depth of individual engagement and the extent to which there is a real mind-set shift from self/organization towards what can be achieved collectively.

On the other hand, for most people there has to be a sense that participation is helping them do their day job but experience has shown that one needs to take a longer term, more qualitative perspective. This is difficult for participants from smaller organizations such as district councils where concerns are more operational and day to day than strategic, and with tight resources, there is concern for an immediate return on investment. A lack of action to deliver tangible outputs can lead to frustration and ultimately withdrawal from initiative.

Connected to and validated by the elite

Being selected to join the collaborative for some members brings a sense of validation in so far as it implies recognition as being an important leader within place. However, for some people the experience can be intimidating and isolating, or they feel that they need to earn their ticket for approval. There is a sense that other people's contributions are worth more than others i.e. that the private sector is seen as more valuable in terms of job creation potential than the third sector. There is also an unwritten assumption that business people are seen as more significant leaders by the public sector, which for some people has created an informal hierarchy. There is seen to be an over dominance of the public and business sectors whose views are given more credence than the third and voluntary sectors. Ironically third sector participants have reported being treated with suspicion by colleagues who are not members of the collaborative.

Thinking versus Doing

The collaborative (Case Study A) was set up as "think tank" and not to be an implementer of initiatives. Nonetheless there is a considerable degree of tension because people are used to responding to issues that arise by agreeing and implementing a series of actions. However, others report having to really grapple with learning that it is not always about providing an immediate response, but that it is a more discursive, reflective, learning and sharing of perspectives is needed. People also find not having a task list of actions uncomfortable because there is a perceived need to have something tangible to justify time spent on the collaborative and to give oneself permission to talk to colleagues from other sectors.

Conclusions

The initial analysis suggests that facilitating the surfacing, exploring and coming to term with tensions is an inherent part of place based leadership development. The extent to which individuals can individually and collectively come to terms with such tensions will have a considerable impact on how they experience such an initiative. This could ultimately have an impact on whether it is perceived to be a successful endeavour both from an individual and collective perspective. As pointed out above number of scholars have

started to explore tensions and paradoxes within collaboration to help develop theories (for example see Vangen and Winchester, 2013; Sydow *et al*, 2011; Saz-Carranz & Ospina, 2010). Subject to what emerges from the rest of the analysis, seeing place based leadership development initiatives as “sites of struggle” (Madden, 2010: 183), and drawing out the theoretical and practical implications of the emergent tensions could provide an innovative contribution to the field.

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