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THE COMPLEXITY OF DISTRIBUTED FORMS OF LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

Distributed leadership is a free-floating concept that is often oversimplified as a mode of leadership and development suitable for twenty-first century organisations, particularly in education. This paper provides an alternative view. It draws on observations of leadership practice to provide a re-conceptualisation to distributed forms of leadership. These forms reveal the complexity of how positional authority and symbolic power co-exist in hybrid configurations to reflect day-to-day practice and provide a deeper sociological frame that can be applied to leadership development.

Introduction: Challenging the status quo

Leadership is a problematic and complex concept. It suffers at times from a romanticism associated with individual heroism (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) and as I will argue in this paper, a tendency to be oversimplified in relation to practice. Leadership theory has predominantly aligned to an individual leader-centric perspective with an increased additional emphasis in recent decades on multiple followers and context. An evolutionary view of leadership theory also reveals that there has been a shift to counterbalance this *concentrated*

perspective with a *distributed perspective* where there can be opportunity to emphasise leadership emergence as a collective property (Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012; Grint, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Hunt & Dodge, 2000). There is also a more recent argument that the leadership field should shift to complementary conceptualisations that draw on seemingly different perspectives of leadership within hybrid configurations (Day & Antonakis, 2012; Gronn, 2011).

The uptake of distributed leadership in the education field has been high, where this is perhaps more to do with its good fit to education reforms rather than enhancing our understanding of leadership. Education organisations have had to do more with less and top-level leaders, such as school principals¹ have experienced an intensification of work (Hodgen & Wylie, 2005). Leadership work has consequently been distributed out to others and distributed leadership has become an inevitable and popularised term (Youngs, 2009). It is a slippery and elastic concept, used loosely in the field of education (Hartley, 2007; Torrance, 2009). Distributing leadership is sometimes viewed as an espoused solution to improving student achievement (Gronn, 2009), rather than a theoretical *distributed perspective* or lens used to better understand leadership practice, as initially intended by two key theorists Peter Gronn (2002) and James Spillane (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). It is as though this theoretical and descriptive approach has been overtaken by a somewhat simplistic desire to hopefully position distributed leadership as a mode of leadership and development suitable for twenty-first century organisations, particularly in education. This paper goes some way to showing how distributed leadership as a unitary concept cannot achieve the clarity required to be a construct of leadership. Rather, a re-theorising to distributed forms of leadership that

¹ Headteachers

exist in hybrid configurations of concentrated and dispersed leadership, viewed through a *distributed perspective* where positional authority and symbolic power co-exist, provides a more realistic understanding of leadership in practice.

The R & D of Distributed Leadership so far

A distributed or shared perspective of leadership is not new (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995), where distributed leadership in the general leadership field is located more as an organisation-wide concept and shared leadership as a group level concept (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006). The roots of both trace back to the works of Mary Parker Follett in the 1920s and 1930s, and loosely to the informal organisation aspect of Chester Barnard's work from both the 1930s and 1960s. However, it has not been until the turn of the millennium that typologies of distributed and shared leadership have regularly emerged alongside associated research studies of practice (Youngs, 2009). A review of distributed leadership typologies associated with the education context reveal that components of the typologies can be clustered into two groups, those related to formal organisational leadership and others related to a more holistic and dispersed view of leadership that reveal informal aspects not limited to formal roles and structures.

The formal organisational cluster includes distributed forms that go by terms such as: authorised (Gunter, 2005); formal distribution (MacBeath, 2005); representational (Harris, 2006); planful alignment (Leithwood et al., 2007); and, classical, where existing organisational structures are used (Thorpe, Gold, & Lawler, 2011). The holistic cluster incorporates such terms as: dispersed and democratic (Gunter, 2005); opportunistic and cultural (MacBeath, 2005); emergent (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris, 2006; Thorpe et al., 2011); spontaneous (Leithwood et al., 2007); and autonomous (Harris, 2009). These two

clusters illustrate the hybridity evident with distributed forms of leadership that cover both formal and informal leadership in an organisation.

Hybridity is also evident when combining findings from research studies of distributed leadership to extract overarching themes. A review² of 61 different studies of distributed leadership published in the period 2003-2011, relating particularly to the context of schools, reveal that there is no one way of trying to define what distributed leadership is. Rather, leadership stretches over formal and informal aspects of an organisation and arises in-between or as a result of, the interactions that take place between individuals or groups. The formal leadership associated with organisational roles and teams, means that distributed forms can exist through authority, so are not apolitically separate from existing power relations. This makes distributed leadership in all its guises an inherently political concept and one distinguished by micropolitical activity (Flessa, 2009; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006). Not surprisingly, trust emerges as one of three meta-themes from this research study review. Without trust and the associated collegial relations, the second meta-theme of needing organisational management processes is left in a vacuum. Developing shared purpose through collaborative decision-making incorporates the merging of hierarchical and heterarchical structural arrangements, as well as the socio-cultural-political contexts that exist. This merging opens the opportunity for multiple formal and informal sources of leadership, that at times require steering from upper formal leaders and at other times a hands off approach, so space develops for alternative sources of leadership to emerge. The third meta-theme, the importance of context, raises the question to what extent are findings of the research studies transferable or generalisable? Most patterns of leadership distribution were different

² This in-depth review has yet to be published.

according to historical leadership practice, the histories of individuals, leadership work arrangements and the education policy environment where each study was situated.

Case studies of practice

To complement these typology and research study reviews, I draw on some aspects of in-depth case studies of two Auckland secondary schools, where I carried out fieldwork for nearly two years. The fieldwork consisted mainly of observation, as well as interviews and focus groups as a means to gain some degree of participant validation. A questionnaire was also employed to gather base-line data from staff. An aim was to provide insight into formal and informal distributed forms and capture some of the complexity of leadership and its development in day-to-day practice.

Each school was structured into subject-based departments, with a head of department managing a team of teachers. Across each student year level, one or two deans working with the year level form teachers, were responsible for pastoral care, attendance and some behavioural management processes. The delegated areas of management to other staff in the schools were spread across these two areas, student services (pastoral care) and curriculum (subject-based departments). Both schools aimed to implement school-based mentoring initiatives that sat across these two areas, where students could engage in conversations about their learning and progress across multiple subjects. In School A, year-level Deans and the form teacher structure was used to implement the initiative, whereas in School B, a dozen staff were ‘shoulder-tapped’ and volunteered to act as mentors along with the senior leadership team as the initiative was initially trialled across one year level. In both cases, this went beyond the more traditional trickle down approach of secondary school change through subject departments, where heads of departments and their teams have traditionally been seen

as crucial to implementing change across a secondary school (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000). Parallel to the mentoring initiatives, the subject departments were also implementing the revised *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) over the two year period.

Distributed forms of leadership

The multiplicity and variability of leadership patterns evident in the two schools meant that the nomenclature ‘distributed forms of leadership’ became a satisfactory way of describing leadership practice. The forms include leadership responsibilities being *distributed through* organisational structures often *in parallel* to each other; *stepping up*, either cognitively with organisational-wide thinking, or in behaviour through leading by example; *stepping in* to orchestrate leadership amongst others, while also *stepping back* to allow individual and group leadership to emerge; and *boundary-spanning* leadership within groups. Each form needs to be understood in concert with the others and particularly in relation to the context of each school. In School A, there was a continual espoused discourse of staff being asked to ‘step up’ to meet the needs of the students and improve achievement data. In School B, there was a change in discourse from one year to the next. In the first year there was an emphasis of doing things ‘on the go’, whereas in the second year there was a greater focus on organisational systems and structure. Consequently, patterns of leadership changed over time.

Distributed through in parallel

Leadership was officially distributed through parallel structures with some structural arrangements being perceived by staff as more influential. A purpose of these structures was for the respective senior leader teams to use them as institutionalised conduits where leadership responsibility was *distributed through* them. Where a line of the structure was deemed unsuitable for a school-based initiative, an existing alternative line or a new one was

developed. In School A, the structure was described as “two big lumps”, one built around curriculum, the other built around the Deans and pastoral care.

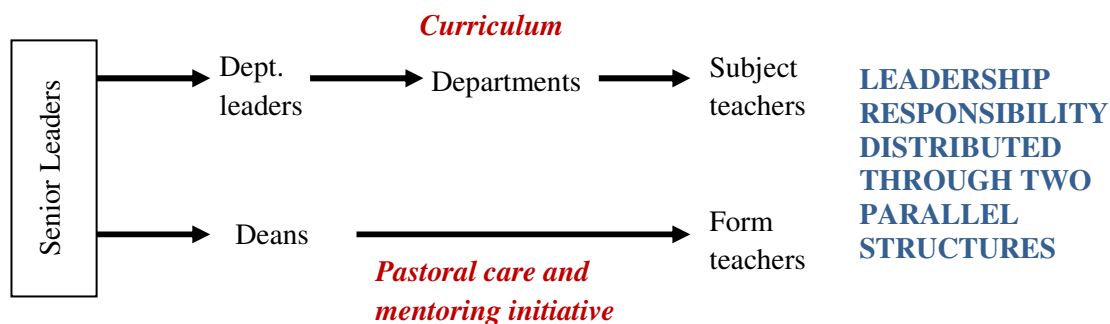


Figure 1 – School A distributed structural forms of leadership responsibility

The existing alternative line of the Deans was selected over the curriculum line for the school based mentoring initiative because the Deans had established sufficient capital in the eyes of others, as the group that “got things done”.

Even though both mentoring initiatives were very similar, School B employed a different approach due to the socio-cultural histories that were different to School A. In School B, the Deans had a lower profile and the curriculum-based departmental leaders were positioned by senior leaders as the “key unit of leadership”. An extra conduit was created to implement the mentoring initiative.

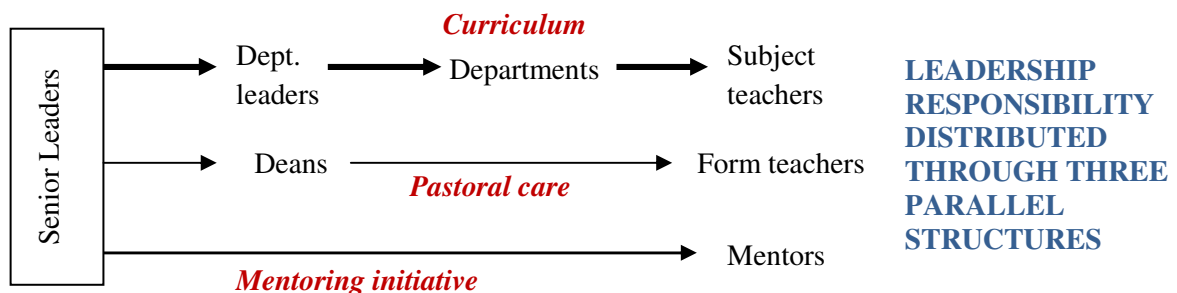


Figure 2 – School B distributed structural forms of leadership responsibility

The staff who stepped into this extra conduit or structure were shoulder-tapped and encouraged to be the mentors for the programme trial across one year level. Each of these mentors had a history of individually taking responsible risks in the school. In relation to a distributed perspective of theorising leadership, the sum of these parallel leadership structures for each school helps illustrate the aggregation or accumulative distribution of leadership (Gronn, 2002).

Stepping up

The historical patterns of practice within each school meant that middle leadership groups experienced the *stepping up* distributed form of leadership differently. In School A, *stepping up* was equated with a broadening of school-wide thinking related to improving student achievement, particularly in relation to thinking beyond subject-based silos. Alternatively, in School B, *stepping up* was interpreted as leading by example and taking “responsible risks”. *Stepping up* in School A, was a cognitive distributed form of leadership, whereas *stepping up* in School B was a distributed form based on concertive or individual action. These required *stepping up* beyond previous ways of thinking and acting. In both schools this was not viewed the senior leadership team as a means of easing their own workloads.

The cognitive form of *stepping up* was not evident in other reviewed studies of distributed leadership. In School A, the senior leadership team perceived that the department leaders needed to *step up* and out from their department subject based silo to engage with a school-wide view that incorporated the mentoring initiative. The Deans on the other hand were already used to thinking and acting beyond a subject-based silo and so with the historical

stock of deference³ afforded to them by other staff, their collective social identity became what Day et al. (2004) describe as a potent leadership resource. In this case, their ability to step up into a school-wide space meant that they emerged as the leaders of the school-based mentoring initiative.

The historical practices embedded in School B that encouraged responsible risk-taking, especially during the ‘on the go’ season, meant that staff were possibly accustomed to stepping up into a school-wide space. However, as the school grew in size the senior leaders and curriculum middle leaders acknowledged that there needed to be some form of moderation and clarification of roles. Moderation emerged during the ‘systematisation and non-negotiables’ period that followed the ‘on the go’ season. Subsequently, curriculum middle leaders were required to *step up* and report to the senior leadership team in relation to achievement data analysis, team plans and budgets. The focused leadership of the principal and senior leadership team was required to bring about a more aligned distributed form of leadership as argued by Leithwood et al. (2007). Distributed forms of leadership, however, require formal leaders to simultaneously hold on to and let go of responsibility so that innovation and risk-taking can emerge (Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett, 2005; MacBeath, 2005). The principal of each school acknowledged the need to have some structure and alignment. However, they added that too much structure would disable some distributed

³ Goffman (1956) defines deference as “activity which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed *to* a recipient *of* this recipient, or of something of which this recipient is taken as a symbol, extension, or agent” (p.477). Even though an individual may desire or deserve deference, Goffman argues that they are not able to give it to themselves; others can only give it. The use of deference then provides a means to help understand why some people may defer the term leader on others, irrespective of whether they are in a formal organisational role of leadership or not. It provides opportunity to understand emergent and more holistic forms of leadership beyond formal organisational structures and processes.

forms of leadership and package staff into pre-defined roles with little room to move. To what extent senior leaders stepped in and stepped back in differing situations was to them a crucial aspect of day-to-day leadership practice.

Stepping in and stepping back: The managing of emergence

Emergent distributed forms of leadership usually co-existed with orchestrated leadership in what Gronn (2011) describes as hybrid configurations. This co-existence varied over time and context, oscillating towards a tight coupling to initiatives and at other times towards a loose coupling in a manner akin to Leithwood's et al.'s (2007) classification of spontaneous alignment. The orchestration of leadership by those in higher-level authority based roles was premised on the relational trust that had been established over time with other staff and the symbolic capital of individuals and groups recognised and accepted by the majority of staff. The resultant distributed forms of leadership in terms of theorising tended to be intuitive actions (Spillane, 2006), where spontaneous collaboration was both unanticipated and anticipated through prior planning (Gronn, 2002) as long as the resultant forms met the conditions that led to the legitimisation of each form in the school.

In School A, the senior leaders *stepped in* with an expectation that teachers, and particularly the department leaders, would *step up* into school-wide thinking of improving student achievement. If this expectation or condition was met, then senior leaders were more likely to *step back* and allow other leadership to emerge. For the Deans, they had already met this expectation. They had a 'feel for the game' associated with *stepping up*.

The managing of emergence in School B was based on certain historically based social rules espoused by both senior and middle leaders. The *stepping back* of the senior leaders

engendered a culture for some staff where they took their own responsible risks. This was illustrated in the manner that an additional pilot mentoring initiative was set up by a year level Dean and form teachers outside the officially sanctioned mentoring initiative that targeted a different year group. The staff who started this extra pilot understood the general intent of the initiative and given the responsible risk-taking culture in the school, emerged unopposed as leaders in parallel with the initial official group of piloting mentors. Socially, the new group behaved according to the senior leaders' espoused 'rules of the game'.

Boundary-spanning group leadership

Another emergent form of leadership evident at a group level was *boundary spanning* as described in some research studies (Goldstein, 2004; Timperley, 2005). *Boundary spanning* leadership appeared to be dependent on an individual's ability to step up into school-wide thinking and engage beyond his or her own area of responsibility. In School A, as an example, Craig was a curriculum leader who provided a 'stepping up' perspective not bounded to his department. He acted as a 'boundary-spanner', often connecting one colleague's point with another, even though he was not leading a meeting.

Craig's broad distribution of verbally connecting with others is illustrated in an *in situ* sociogram, where connections involving a senior leader are highlighted in red (see *Figure 3*). The thickness of each line is representative of the number of times each participant followed each other in conversation. In this instance, Craig emerged as one of the few participants who demonstrated boundary-spanning leadership across a group, through his wide distribution of participation. He consistently followed on from nearly everyone else in the meeting, rather than regularly following on from the same one or two in the group. In this example, he regularly sought to bring connection amongst sometimes disparate views.

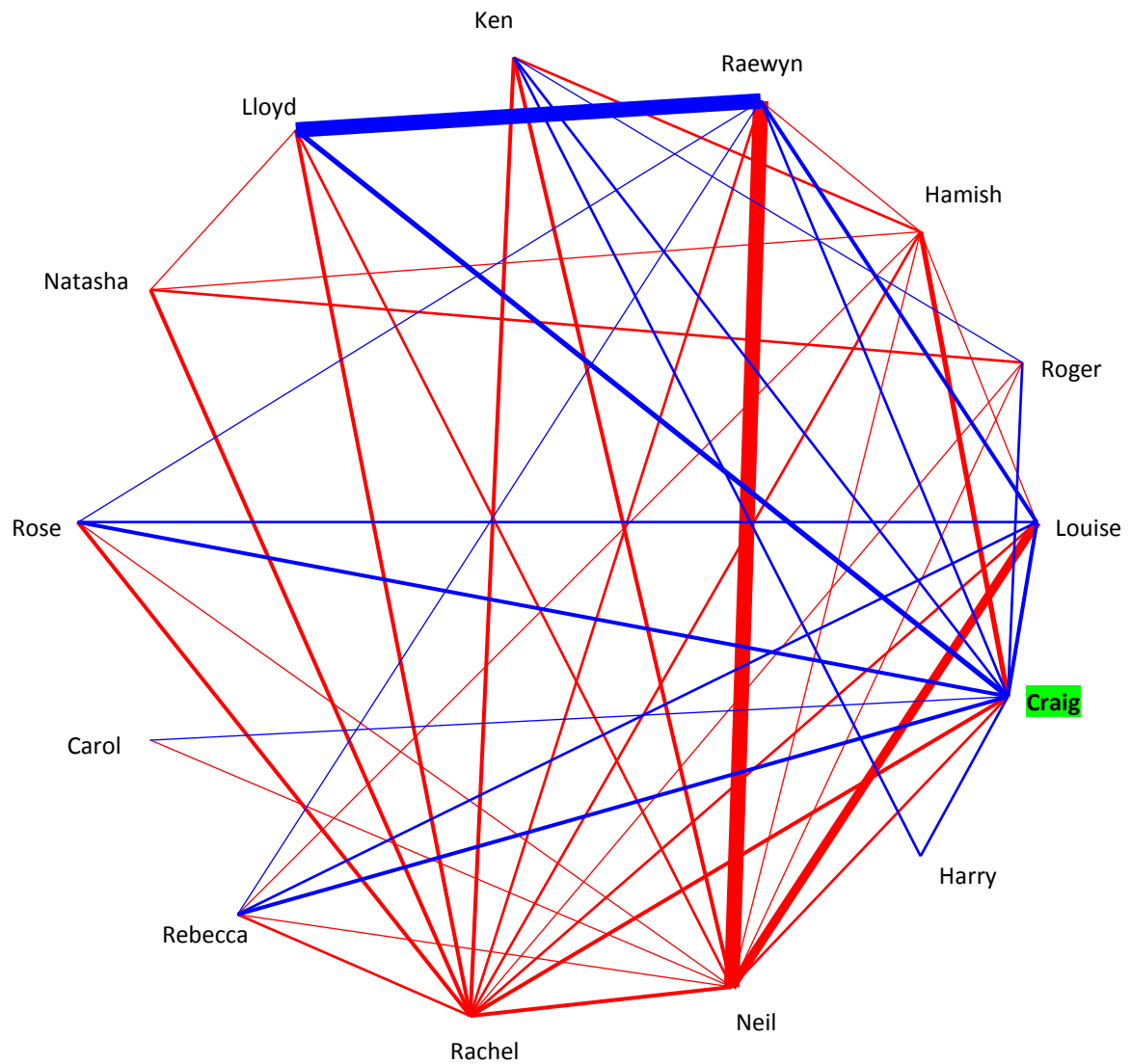


Figure 3 – School A in situ sociogram of curriculum leaders meeting with senior leaders

In the groups across each school, leadership practice tended to be stretched across individuals and embedded in their interactions as described by Spillane et al. (2003). *Boundary spanning* leadership was more evident in the groups responsible for implementing each school-based mentoring initiative where multiple group members drew on their expertise to engage in collaborative problem solving. The wider distribution of emergent leadership activity observed in each of the mentoring initiative groups was confirmed with their lower co-

efficient of variation⁴ (V) scores and suggests the wider leadership distribution across a team could, for these two groups, be linked to effective team relations and fluid agendas. V scores were higher and leadership distribution was less dispersed in more structured meetings. Associating a wider distribution of leadership with effective teams is not always evident in other research (e.g. Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006) where a key factor appears to be coordination rather than the degree of distribution. In both of the initiative implementation groups, the co-ordinator positioned themselves as an equal to the others in the group. This suggests that the wider distribution of leadership across a group could contribute to effective teamwork provided there is some degree of co-ordination where those with positional authority choose to position themselves in a role similar to others in the group.

Understanding the complexity of distributed forms of leadership

The distributed forms illustrate how organisational and emergent forms of leadership co-exist. The distributed form, *leading through in parallel*, was largely defined by the division of labour, team roles, and the formal reporting lines that connected teams to each other and school goals. Individuals within the teams had differing degrees of authority associated with their management roles that anchored the role system of each school to its goals and operational systems (Gronn, 2000). This organisational form of leadership can be arranged differently from school to school, but are common in that they reveal the vertical formal distribution of authority based roles and the lateral team structures that are used to aggregate these roles around common purposes, subjects and student year levels. Though easily

⁴ Using the coefficient of variation ($V = \text{std.dev} / \text{mean}$) meant that the degree of participation as well as the distribution of participation could be analysed together. For each participant a mean score and standard deviation was generated by dividing their total number of follow on occurrences by the total number of other participants in the meeting. The combination of these for each participant meant that an overall V score could be calculated for each meeting. The lower the V score, the higher the degree of collective distributed input amongst group members.

identifiable, these organisational accounts of distributed forms do not reveal the “rich understanding of how the organisation’s work is *actually* done” (Spillane & Coldren, 2011, p.75). Both cases illustrated that other distributed forms of leadership existed.

The emergent forms, *stepping up*, *stepping in and stepping back*, and *boundary spanning*, only became apparent as distributed patterns of leadership after a year of fieldwork. The emergent distributed forms of leadership are not mutually exclusive to formal organisational forms. The individuals or groups associated with emergent forms of leadership did not decouple themselves from their authority-based roles and often sought to align their behaviour to the general intent of school goals and values, which informed ‘how the game was played’. Participants in both schools explained that emergent and distributed forms of leadership required some proactive intervention, strengthening the point that emergent and organisational forms of leadership were inextricably linked in day-to-day practice and required individual leaders to know when to manage distributed forms or not. This resultant mix reveals that hybrid configurations of leadership are evident and thus align with the hybridity evident in the review of distributed leadership typologies and research studies discussed earlier.

Re-theorising with authority and symbolic power

The two clusters of organisational structure and emergent distributed forms of leadership draw on differing types of capital, so that they are respectively experienced as authority or symbolic power, or a mixture of both. Here capital is defined as the “resources that are acquired, accumulate, and are of value in certain situations” (Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003, p.3). It can exist in the form of:

- human capital - expertise, skills and knowledge (Day et al., 2004; Spillane, Hallett, et al., 2003);
- cultural capital – disposition towards cultural practices, ways of being (Bourdieu, 2004; Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003; Spillane, Hallett, et al., 2003);
- social capital – networked relations, relations of trust, membership in a group, collective social identity (Bourdieu, 2004; Day et al., 2004; Spillane, Hallett, et al., 2003); and,
- authoritative capital – jurisdiction embodied in a role and the expectations that are associated with this.

Authority and symbolic power are rarely mutually exclusive domains in day-to-day practice. Symbolic power is generated through deference (Hallett, 2007), whereas authority is generated through the jurisdiction that is embedded within a role. Therefore, distributed forms of leadership often illustrate a mix of the two classifications, organisational forms and emergent forms because of the co-existence of symbolic power with authority. Authoritative capital is distributed and arranged through individual roles and teams across an organisation, known also as the division of labour or jurisdiction. In a school hierarchy, the role of the principal has the largest individual deposit of authoritative capital. On the other hand, emergent distributed forms of leadership draw on human, cultural and social types of capital acquired by groups and individuals in the form of deference.

Rather than identify a multitude of distributed forms of leadership, *Figure 4* peels back the lid on what is observable in an attempt to understand why distributed forms of leadership co-exist in organisations structured upon roles and teams based on authority. Two overlapping

classifications of distributed forms are required to explain this co-existence, organisational forms and emergent forms.

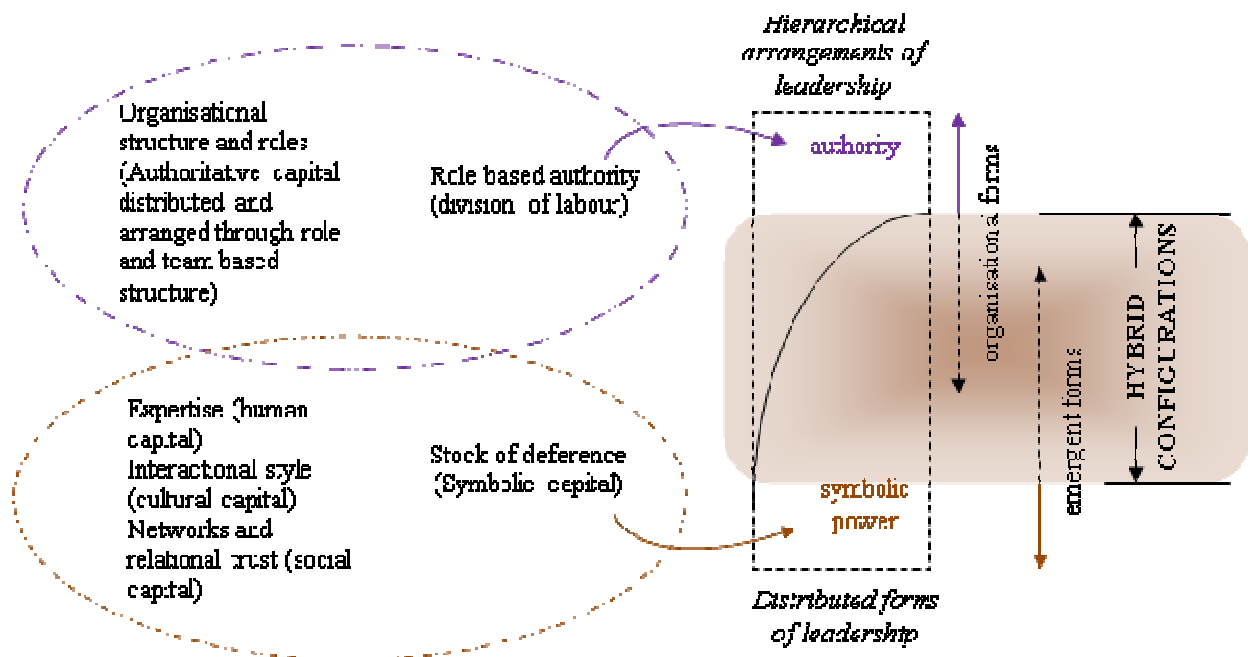


Figure 4 – Theorising distributed forms of leadership with authority and symbolic power

Organisational forms are based on people accessing authoritative capital, whereas emergent forms are based on people accessing human, cultural or social capital or any combination of these. Irrespective of what type or types of capital have been accessed, the resultant authority, symbolic power or a mixture of both, is then experienced by others as influence, where influence is defined as “the ability to affect another’s judgement and decision-making, by word or action” (Ball, 1987, p.131). If those who experience influence expect and accept it, then they are likely to label this influence as ‘leadership’ in a collective sense and a person as a ‘leader’ in an individual sense. This mix is where Gronn’s (2011) recent argument for the field to consider hybrid configurations, comes into play, where organisational and emergent distributed forms of leadership co-exist.

Concluding remarks and implications for future leadership R & D

The consequent re-conceptualisation of these distributed forms has implications for the research of leadership in organisations, leaders starting in a new organisation, leadership development programmes and organisational development. Unless the complexity of present and historical distributed forms of leadership are integrated into development processes through a sociological understanding of practice, then most attempts at research and development will be over-simplified and result in issues that could have been avoided.

In relation to research, the four-level analytical framework used for the two case studies discussed in this paper can provide a way to understand the complexities associated with distributed forms of leadership. The first two levels reveal how hybrid configurations of leadership practice exist, where the first level focuses on organisational forms of leadership and the second level focuses on emergent forms of leadership. The two remaining levels draw on sociological and critical analysis to explain the complexity that sits behind the distributed forms. Both focus on the professional (e.g. education, health, business, sport, not-for-profit), social, cultural and political (in terms of government policy and organisation-level micropolitics) contexts. The third level focuses on the present, whereas the fourth level focuses on the past. The analytical framework assumes that patterns of practice influenced by historical contexts and associated with distributed forms of leadership, shift over time. Capturing these shifts and understanding the past are important components that help identify why distributed forms of leadership can exist in organisations in different ways.

The case studies as well as a number of other research studies reveal the problems of transferring leadership experiences experienced in a past organisation to a new one. This has implications for leader induction and leadership development programmes, particularly if

organisationally based cultural and political knowledge is lost through redundancies, role attrition and restructuring. The issue for organisations and leaders is that on the one hand they may see the need for change in roles and personnel. On the other hand this needs to be managed in such a way so that an organisation does not become decoupled from the forms of capital that have taken years to accumulate, for good or for bad.

It is important for us to consider the following questions.

Possible key discussion questions

1. To what extent should we be heeding Peter Gronn's argument that it is time to move on from distributed leadership to hybrid configurations of leadership?
2. The quest has never been to distribute more leadership, as it already exists in places beyond the obvious ones, and can come to the fore irrespective of role. These paraphrased words are not recent. They were written by Mary Parker Follett in her paper titled "The essentials of leadership" back in 1933 (cited in, Graham, 1995). What are the obvious places where we look and how can leadership exist in places beyond these obvious ones in organisations? What could we be missing?
3. Given the emphasis in this paper on merging authority with symbolic power, what are the implications for leader induction and leadership development in and across organisations?
4. In relation to the three questions listed above, how can we guard against, what Hunt and Dodge (2000) argue are organisations wanting quick fixes to issues and leadership researchers seeking quick publications?

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