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Next Generation of Leadership-as-Practice: Reconceptualizing Change

Introductory Article for Special Issue of

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Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice*

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Abstract

This special issue features some new studies that are referred to by the editorial team as "second generation" research in the field of leadership-as-practice (L-A-P). Consistent with this journal's title, *Journal of Change Management: Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice*, this issue focuses on those sociomaterial practical accomplishments and turning points that change trajectories within the flow of practice thus producing leadership. In this second generation of L-A-P studies, writers would begin to establish the boundary conditions that explicitly define the field's interpretation of leadership, especially its concentration on collective change agency. This essay as well as the accompanying four papers through the exploration of un- and under-explored areas thus intend to contribute to further L-A-P theoretical development and application. In particular, the special issue begins to resolve where and when leadership within the flow of practice actually occurs, how it integrates with but also differentiates from other plural leadership traditions, which kinds of applied practices can enhance applications in organizational learning and development, and lastly how agency can be mobilized through the interconnection between current and dispersed chains of activity over time and across space.

MAD Statement

This article serves to introduce the accompanying Special Issue intending to Make A Difference (MAD) in launching a second generation of L-A-P research that further contributes to help scholars and practitioners make the transition from leadership as an individual property to leadership as a practice. In so doing, it positions leadership as no longer dependent upon individuals but as a process of collective change agency. Thus, social change would not be contingent on receiving marching orders from others; it would be mobilized from the contested sociomaterial interactions among the voices involved.

Background

The field of leadership-as-practice, or L-A-P, has produced a first generation of research with widespread coverage in journal articles, numerous presentations at professional conferences, several workshop series, many past and current dissertation theses, and an edited book featuring a range of thematic elements characterizing the field (Raelin, 2016). Although at times ambivalent about the use of theory, the field is moving to greater specificity as long as it continues to consolidate its theoretical and applied contributions in a range of related research.

Leadership-as-practice is thus at a critical juncture in its theory development and practice as it seeks to define its conceptualization of leadership, including its focus on collective change agency. At the same time, the *Journal of Change Management: Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice* has recently in its very title brought to the fore the importance of

reframing how we understand and practice leadership in particular in relation to processes of change. At its core, L-A-P is about change and can be distinguished from other in-practice movements, such as strategy-as practice, because it defines leadership as turning points leading to a change in trajectories within the flow of practice.

It is with this background that the *JCM* chose to support and enhance the field of leadership-as-practice with this Special Issue to launch the next generation of L-A-P studies along these very lines of changes in practice.

Definition

L-A-P is derived from practice theory, which, per Bourdieu (1977), proposes that we study practice as the fundamental social phenomenon. A practice is considered an embodied collective set of practical accomplishments among people and their material artifacts (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). Practice tends to be historically developed and encompasses everyday tacit problem-solving and coping skills as well as emerging dynamics within a sharing community (Raelin, 2016). As pointed out earlier, L-A-P is about change, which occurs in practice as people engage with and are molded by others and their surroundings. These changes in practice do not reside outside of leadership and are ascribed collective meaning based on ongoing socio-political interactions among the involved people, objects, and systems.   In this sense, leadership may be thought of as socially constructed and thus accomplished within the company of others; accordingly, leadership-as-practice is woven into a social process of shared know-how and entwinement within the respective community (Sandberg & Dall'Allba, 2009). Its sensemaking arises from everyday social actions, interactions, and shared assumptions rather than from pre-established direction. In this way, especially through the use of collective reflection, if people are not satisfied with their leadership, they can reconstruct it in light of their reflections and on behalf of their mutual interests. In summary, in a L-A-P world, to find and change leadership, we must look to the practice within which it is occurring.

The Challenge of Undertaking L-A-P Research

There is a wealth of opportunity for new and established scholars to undertake studies in the field of leadership-as-practice because so much has yet to be explored. It is important to remember that we are studying leadership when immersed in practices, themselves embedded within sociomaterial relations. It is also important to stress that we are studying leadership AS a practice as well as the changes occurring in the flow of such practice. It is not sufficient to zone in on key leader behaviors since, as defined earlier, we are interested in practical accomplishments and interactions among people and their artifacts and the extent to which these collective processes result in a change of trajectory in the flow of a given practice or set of practices all across multiple levels. So, for example, we might ask why a powerpoint presentation can advance our leadership in one setting but not in another. Or why and how

our team hums along like a single instrument and accomplishes leadership in one time but breaks apart in another. Or how providing waste-free aisles in groceries might diffuse into full zero-waste stores through their alignment with the zero-waste movement.

The ontological emphasis, as can be seen here, is on the processes of socio-spatial interaction not on the entities involved in such interaction (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017). L-A-P studies need to focus on what changes the flow of practice, heretofore in a steady state to one that is adaptive - in other words, what sayings and doings create and shape leadership (Jarzabkowski, 2004). Accordingly, interpretative forms of inquiry applying ethnographic as well as narrative and aesthetic methodologies are needed to capture the dialogical and practice activity concurrently in process (Alvehus & Crevani, 2022).

Opportunities for Research and Application

There has been substantial foundational work in developing the L-A-P concept, in particular, writers have focused on mapping its boundaries compared to other aligned disciplines in plural leadership; on tracing its philosophical and ethical roots; on differentiating its key conceptual themes, in particular, materiality, identity, power, dialogue, context, social change, and agency; on outlining the most promising approaches for methodological exploration; and on its developmental opportunities. In the first instance, L-A-P needs to explore both its integration with and differentiation from other plural leadership traditions. For example, in the article in this issue by von Knorring and Svensson, it is pointed out that L-A-P can enhance the otherwise normative contribution of distributed leadership in healthcare by its focus on such down-to-earth practical issues as how the negotiation between people, things, and context are interwoven and how power is produced and reproduced in healthcare practice.

Opportunities also exist to address under-theorized aspects of L-A-P theory and application, especially in the domains of change, power, and culture, and their intersections (Vilas-Boas, Davel, and de Sousa Bispo, 2018). For example, although L-A-P discourse has resulted in defining leadership as a moment of change in the flow of practice, its contribution to social change has so far been limited, although it has been outspoken in prodding the conversation away from the single out-in-front actor to collective actions. Leadership-as-practice challenges the idea that agency appears separate from and outside of the social activity itself. Through legitimate social action, grassroots organizers can develop the capacity to harness the power to resist colonizing discourses and find their voice in leadership (Rhoads, 2009).

Yet, L-A-P recognizes that not all agency is intentional nor need it rest with the individual. It can be recognized as a temporal trajectory in which current and dispersed activities interconnect with other events giving them meaning and, ultimately, the attainment of agency (Hernes, 2014). In fact, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) prefer the word "agencement" over agency to emphasize the processual nature of how agency occurs as the forming of an assemblage in its becoming not as a fixed state of things assembled. Thus, leadership itself can be seen as a conjoint act of change and thus requires, as Murphy in this issue has attested, a close and

careful tracking of ongoing patterns of interaction – in her case using applied linguistic analysis – since the practices creating leadership are often in flux.

Nevertheless, there is much work to be done to develop a L-A-P theory, acknowledging that there are metaphysical limitations that might obstruct the provision of any kind of general theory. For example, the embodied routines experienced by actors are often opaque to their possessors leading to a lack of recognition of any normative regularity with which to isolate consistent experience (Schmidt, 2018). Further, contexts inevitably shift in their histories, their participants, and their material accompaniments. Even in the same context, the popular maxim in scientific inquiry, that of reliability, is compromised because of variation in time, changes in the action, unexpected circumstances, mood, and point of view of the participants. However, by capturing even temporary activity, the practice view, though reserved in offering prescriptions, can explain situational dynamics which, it could be argued, is essential if we are to assist in effecting change in them and in related patterns of social activity.

Consequently, L-A-P researchers seek to identify particular regularities of practice emergence and recursiveness in specific situations and the nature of any changes disrupting such regularities and their source (Raelin & Robinson, 2022). In the applied domain, progress has already been made in the emerging sub-field of leadership-as-practice development or LaPD (Denyer and Turnbull James, 2016). The focus in this case is the improvement of practices not only for future application but as part of an existing intervention. Composition in applied practices becomes especially timely once there has been sufficient scholarship of practices in particular contexts such that practitioners can bring fresh perspectives to leadership and organization development. Two papers in this issue, the first by Morrow, Barnhart, Wefald, and Smith and the second by Chung and Norvell, exemplify this process explicitly by introducing two experiential practices – improvisational theatre and narrative reflexivity. Each of these, upon their applications within psychologically safe learning environments, can be subsequently brought out in everyday leadership contexts. Improvisational theatre or improv, once mastered, can be an excellent tool to spur adaptiveness and change in leadership when groups are faced with durable routines that are resistant to change because of power disparities or merely because of institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012). Narrative reflexivity can similarly induce change in leadership as stories introduce doubt, curiosity, and even tension in collective practices.

The Papers in this Issue

Accordingly, this special issue delves into some of the un- or under-explored areas of L-A-P that we hope will contribute to its further conceptual development and applied praxis. The four papers to follow accomplish our goal of reconceptualizing change through leadership, as noted in the prior section. In what follows, each article is summarized to demonstrate its contribution to L-A-P theoretical development and application.

Our first paper delves into the unexplored zone of connections between L-A-P and other collective leadership traditions, in this case, that of distributed leadership. The authors, Mia von Knorring and Ingrid Svensson, focusing on the healthcare sector, investigate how the organization of leadership tasks and accountability under the auspices of the distributed leadership construct – an emergent trend in the healthcare sector – serves to obscure the intrinsically distributed nature of leadership rather than to illuminate it. They argue that by categorizing leadership as distributed – and focusing attention on how it is enacted by collectives of so-called leaders – the literature misses the opportunity to investigate leadership as naturally distributed. The resultant research thus ignores those (leadership) practices that are not related to formal leadership positions. At the same time, the authors see benefits for both sides in connecting the two approaches: for distributed leadership, there is the advantage of a strong theoretical regrounding of the analytical aspects of the original construct, whilst for L-A-P, it offers a much-needed foray into its practical application in a perspicuous empirical setting. The result is a series of arguments that offer more nuance to the normative aspects of distributed leadership. Moreover, the paper enhances our understanding of who is enacting leadership in healthcare, where and when such leadership occurs, and how its enactment is influenced by the power dynamics within healthcare organizations.

Our next two papers address specific developmental applications in the L-A-P field. In the article by Morrow, Barnhart, Wefald, and Smith under the main heading, "In Situ – Leadership as Practice Development and Improvisational Theatre," the authors take up a challenge posed in the applied domain known as LaPD or "leadership-as-practice development." The challenge arises from the question of how to teach leadership when it is not seen as an individualistic property (Ashford & DeRue, 2012). In the instance of L-A-P, if the practice lens gives rise to a leadership that is emergent and collective, then should not leadership development also be emergent and collective? In short, the tools and methods for developing leadership need to change when we change the assumptions that underpin the construct of leadership (Robinson & Riddell, 2022). The Morrow et al. article addresses this challenge arising from practice being the central unit of analysis by offering teams the device of self-scripted improvisations around issues of change. Through scripts focused on relevant change experiences, it is possible through improvisation to try out enacting turning points before having to engage in an actual intervention in the work setting. Even the most subtle of interventions when mobilized in the company of trusted colleagues can cascade into worthy and sustainable changes. As the authors attest, improvisation can provide opportunities for collective re-enactment, collective re-imagining, and collective reflection thereby providing a powerful vehicle for a leadership-as-practice development.

The next applied paper views leadership practice through the lens of narrative reflexivity. The authors, Helen Chung and Nahrie Norvell, use this lens to interrogate the stories we tell to ourselves and to each other about leadership in order to develop a sense of ethical relationality, whereby individuals seek to engage in conscious and responsible practices. As per the authors, narrative reflexivity offers a means of deepening our understanding of the emergent phenomenon of leadership that we experience in organizational life. Further, it encourages

both the story tellers and the stories themselves to operate in leaderful ways. The article suggests that the potential benefits of framing and examining the emergent aspects of leadership reflexively include the enlistment of democratic values, the inclusion of more voices, and the enabling of alternative ways of framing leadership. This is achieved through questioning assumptions, beliefs, and values in relation to the subject at hand and to and from each other. By engaging with narratives as a collective phenomenon, narrative reflexivity through the introduction of doubt, curiosity, pause, and co-creative tension raises awareness of hegemonic stories and those they serve to marginalize. The paper effectively utilises scholarly literature to illustrate how narrative reflexivity can emerge and operate at three levels of activity: individual, group, and organization. Finally, the authors propose narrative reflexivity as an approach for opening up the propensity to evaluate our stories, understand others' stories, and co-produce new stories for collective acting – an endeavour that aligns well with the purposes of L-A-P scholarship and application.

Our fourth paper paves new territory in methodological inquiry and in so doing stretches the boundaries of existing leadership-as-practice knowledge. Anne Murphy in her article entitled, "Linguistics in L-A-P Research: An Analysis of Authority and Agency Dynamics in Leadership as it Happens," offers a unique design deploying applied linguistics. The article explores micro-processes featuring turns of practice that unevenly enable collective agency. Relying on naturally occurring data from an actual corporate strategy session, the paper shows how individual linguistic choices interweave through the processual flow of the unfolding conversation. Processual accounts of leadership relying on linguistic choices have historically escaped L-A-P analysis. Murphy's approach suggests that patterns of interaction such as levelling, co-orienting, (dis)affiliating, and nudging shape leadership processes as the conversation courses around the involved actors. Through her conversation analysis, Murphy produces some unique findings critical to the field; in particular that changes in trajectories arise from a series of utterances rather than from a single conversational move and what individual actors do and do <u>not</u> do are equally important in understanding how leadership emerges in normal settings. This study's unique linguistic approach and its focus on language provides tools and methods for identifying patterns of flow-like "trans-actions" that may emerge from within collaborative practices.

Outlook for Future Inquiry

The hope of this Special Issue was to help launch the next generation of L-A-P research and application primarily by illustrating avenues for L-A-P studies through the publication of articles exploring the field from new directions. While we hope to have spurred future inquiry through this effort, needless to say, there are many other avenues for L-A-P exploration that in this final section, we would encourage concerted attention.

We start with an appeal to empirical researchers to continue to demonstrate the particular ways in which L-A-P inquiry needs to be conducted. Let it be acknowledged that L-A-P

methodology would more likely than standard positivist data analysis begin its inquiries from within the specified domain of observation than from outside the activity. It would also take advantage of a range of modalities, applying narrative, ethnographic, discursive, and aesthetic approaches that can capture the material-discursive practices concurrently in the process of becoming (Bencherki et al., 2024). The research of leadership under a praxis-oriented lens, therefore, would take advantage of interpretive forms of inquiry, using thick description and diverse modes that attempt to capture the dialogical and practice activity concurrently in process in all its complexity and ambiguity (Parry et al., 2014). The role of the researcher would not so much be to inquire from outside the activity but to provide tools to encourage the observed to become inquirers themselves (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008).

In their inquiries, L-A-P writers need to continue to supplement and link horizontally with other change modalities, such as with other compatible leadership approaches, as von Knorring and Svensson have done in this issue with distributed leadership; with other developmental applications, as per Raelin's (2022b) complement to organization development; or with some of the other "as-practice" movements, as accounted for in the review by Crevani and Endrissat (2016) incorporating the field of strategy-as-practice (SAP). Nevertheless, L-A-P researchers need to tread a fine line between the field's links with critical studies as well as with traditions purporting posthumanistic viewpoints in which the individual human is not thought to precede the practice. Researchers need to keep in mind that in L-A-P, ethical agency emanates from contested sociomaterial interactions among multiple and contradictory voices. Although some actors within a practice might attempt to exploit their power through subtle or direct domestication and domination, the hope is that participants would be given an opportunity to find their own voice, develop their own identity, and consolidate their human dignity (Raelin, 2022a). Subscribing to a genealogical tradition, ethical inquiry in L-A-P is thus perspectival and emerges from contemporaneous processes. Thus, as per Mensch and Barge (2019: 4), "…multiple, changing, and even conflicting perspectives and meanings related to leadership are co-constructed and negotiated in dynamic organizational relationships."

Have we established where we can most likely find the presence of leadership within the course of practice? First, can we affirm that L-A-P belongs solely in the social or might that approach lead to an abandonment of the study of individuals and their role in leadership? If it were to be the former, then we would not be interested in the "practices" of particular autocratic managers and executives because the responses of their underlings would be obligations or conscriptions, not practices in the theoretical-practice sense. On the other hand, the responses of subjugated subordinates may become practices if and when they determine together how to implement an order or, as is sometimes the case, attempt to carry out how to sabotage it. We may also wish to probe those conditions when a leadership-as-practice may tend to flourish, such as under what we might call a participant-directed praxis where the manager in charge encourages the dispersion of control. Further, since objects and events are considered equivocal in L-A-P research unless understood in their contexts, how are we able to advise on patterns or suggest improvements in alternate settings?

Lastly, if we can determine *where* L-A-P is likely to occur, we need to also resolve *when* it actually occurs, that is when turning points reach sufficient magnitude to change a trajectory within the flow of practice. Parola et al. (2022) found that proactive reflective micro-practices were most likely to enable transcendence into new trajectories. Trajectory change was originally defined in the leadership context by Ramsey (2016) as a break in a pattern or an improvisation on the contributions of others moving practices towards pervasive conclusions or differences. Research from the field of communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) found that communication from power struggles both inside and outside the organization can produce authoritative texts that in establishing "particular conceptions of structure and responsibility… represent, mediate, direct attention to, discipline, and link people and practices" (Kuhn, 2008: 1236). These texts have the grounding to articulate, solidify, and change trajectories and thus simultaneously elucidate the emergence of leadership. It should also be noted that these texts constitute non-human elements, such as white papers, working models, and agreements to allow for continuity and persistence. Nevertheless, at times texts can grind to a halt and produce disengagement; at other times, they can turn into a movement and extend their currency beyond the current context. Namely, past and future turning points can become integrated in shaping a trajectory and become interconnected not necessarily as an orderly sequence but in what Deleuze (1991) referred to as a "labyrinth of continuity" (p. 231). These power-driven leadership effects all deserve far more empirical inquiry than has been accorded them thus far.

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