This paper seeks to begin the work of theorising a form of moral leadership specifically for multi-organisational, collaborative contexts. The purpose of such work is to address a gap in the literature concerning how ethical and moral theory might relate to collaborative leadership as a distinctive area of research and practice, versus theories of leadership rooted in more leader-based, atomistic perspectives. In contributing to this area of theory, we draw on Gramsci’s (2011) positioning of moral leadership as a concept which focuses on maintaining solidarity across a diverse collection of groups and individuals while also recognising the pragmatic need for direction. Specifically, we will focus on the moral dimension (the generation of purpose and processes of ethical sensemaking) across organisational boundaries, implied but not addressed in detail by Gramsci, and those who have followed him, such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. In so doing we hope to sketch a theory of moral collaborative leadership that situates both morality and collaborative leadership as contingent, contested and constructed through discursive positioning and contest – via a process of hegemony (Laclau, 2014).

Following a literature search of 1,003 journal articles and books addressing ethics and leadership, we identified five categories of research into leadership ethics. The first we refer to as studies examining employee perceptions and responses to the perceived ethical characteristics of leaders (e.g. Bacha and Walker, 2013; McCann and Holt, 2013; Zoghbi and Suarez-Acosta, 2014). These studies largely bypass the question of an ethical content or theorising ethics, employing a curious blend of positivism (measuring perceptions) and unacknowledged postmodern relativism (the content of ethics matters less than ‘perception’). The second category of research measures follower ethicality, again drawing on perceptions but also often adopting specific survey tools or measuring responsiveness to training interventions (e.g. Beeri et al, 2013; Steinbauer et al, 2014). The third category of research examines the ethicality of leaders, drawing on specific survey tools (e.g. Petit and Bollaert, 2012; Weaver et al, 2005). In addition to not explicitly linking ethical theory with leadership theory, these studies are focused on perceptions and behaviours within the boundaries of organisations and so do not address the cross-organisational complexities introduced by collaborative leadership. A fourth category of research addresses group ethical identity (e.g. Romani and Szkudiarek, 2014; Rozuel and Ketola, 2012). The fifth category addresses the by now well-worn question of whether ethical behaviour results in improved performance, financial and otherwise...
Although these studies might provide some important insight into the intra-organisational behaviour and perceptions of actors, they do not address the possibility of ethical leadership as something which could be practiced across organisational boundaries. The studies also assume an employer-employee relationship, overlooking the possibility that leading volunteers – or individuals from different organizations - requires a different mindset and practices (see Ganz, 2010). Perhaps more importantly, the studies by and large fail to provide a rich account of what may constitute the ethical, either theoretically, or in terms of how various (tacit or explicit) ethical positions may be contested in practice.

We adopt the phrase ‘collaborative leadership’ as standing for a range of theoretical positions which, broadly speaking, view leadership as a process, rather than a possession, shared between a number of actors and groups (Chrislip and Larson, 1994; Drath, 2007). Within this collection of collaborative forms of leadership, of course, the extent of the shared-ness varies, with distributed leadership, for example, focusing on how responsibilities can be disseminated within a group, to more decentred theories, where leadership is viewed as a collective sense of process and purpose (Bolden, 2011; Edwards, 2011; Grint, 2005). An area acknowledged as requiring further research and theoretical development is how one conceptualises and works with the notion of the ethical within a collaborative leadership framework (Bolden, 2011; Lawton and Páez, 2014).

Some development of ethical theory within a collaborative setting has taken place. For example, Wray-Bliss (2013) has called for an anti-sovereign ethics of organisational leadership, drawing on an ethico-politics of responsibility between actors. Likewise, Knights and O’Leary (2006) posit a form of leadership ethics which elevates a responsibility to the essentially unknowable (Levinasian) Other, an Other which reminds the subject of her/his irreducibility to disembodied theoretical models or management tools. Equally interesting are contributions which explore the identifications of actors within a collaborative relationship to theorise a form of practiced ethics as constructed in talk, relationally (e.g. Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Fyke and Buzzanell, 2013; Koning and Waistell, 2012). This work is valuable as it focuses our attention on leadership ethics as constituted contextually, through relational, contingent identification. There is a tendency in this work, however, to analyse ethical encounters which occur between people who work in close proximity, within a single organisation, and does not grapple with some of the complexities of identification which may be manifest across organisational boundaries.

We argue that Gramsci provides a valuable point from which to develop a theory of ethical collaborative leadership which has the capacity to encapsulate the relational and contingent nature of ethics in practice but also to elevate the cross-organisational ambitions of collaborative leadership theory.

Gramsci (2011) refers to ‘moral’ rather than ‘ethical’ leadership. Although many studies and philosophical texts choose to regard the two concepts as interchangeable, we believe this distinction retains explanatory importance. Morality refers to a (frequently transcendental and universal) set of substantive principles which should inform conduct and decision-making, whereas ethics (or ‘ethical life’ to use Hegel’s phrase) refers to context-dependent norms, evaluations and rules which may be drawn upon and debated to guide and judge conduct or purpose (Habermas, 1990, 1993; Hegel, 1991; Honneth, 1995). With reference to Gramsci’s use of ‘leadership’, reading the (more popular) selected prison diaries (2007), one encounters an illuminating discussion by the editors and translators, Quntin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, concerning the thinking of translators of
Gramsci (including them) for deploying the term ‘leadership’ in the first place. The translated term is in fact the Italian ‘dirigere’, meaning to ‘direct, lead, rule’. In and of itself, such a translation implies something quite conservative, the provision of direction. Interestingly, however, when Gramsci uses the word ‘dirigere’, he does so in contrast with ‘dominare’ (to dominate) (Gramsci, 2007: 55). Moral leadership, for Gramsci, can thus be thought of as direction without domination, or direction open to challenge.

The core task of theorising from a collaborative-moral leadership perspective therefore emerges as how one provides direction but also how one provides space for contest and debate, between groups and individuals. One may of course fall back on a degree of positional authority (some groups are more powerful than others) but positional authority seems less secure than within the employer-employee relationship or other internal hierarchy (Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

Track back further still to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, and one begins to see that moral leadership is something the author views as constructed between groups, albeit with a certain constituency providing the impetus, the ‘dirigere’. Hegemony, for Gramsci, was a means of describing the interconnected and interdependent nature of power. Power was not something solely possessed by a ruling group (the government). For Gramsci this was why the Bolshevik revolution had succeeded whereas the European revolutions failed: because the ‘war of manœuvre’ adopted by the Bolsheviks was a direct assault upon the single power source of Russia: the state. In Europe, however, because the state was just one of many power bases in civil society, only a ‘war of position’ rooted in the building of a coalition could hope to undermine western states. Thus, because power was exercised through the gradual adoption by a ruling class of some of the ideological and issue positions of other groups, usually from civil society, power is viewed as more fluid and flexible than within more traditional Marxism, where power blocs and the discursive emphasis shifted over time, as those in power adapt. Hence a passive revolution is change over time, as groups with inferior resources - but a more emotively appealing moral vision - are able to adapt, attract new allies and eventually take power, or at least fulfil core objectives (see Levy and Egan, 2003, for a contemporary Gramscian analysis of the shifting power structures relating to the issue of climate change).

Gramscian hegemony is a theoretical approach which has thrived within political studies in recent years, as subsequent scholars have focused on the discourse-contested notion of hegemonic positioning. So for Laclau and Mouffe (1985) hegemony is a means of describing both the (relatively stable) exercise of power through a particular discursive formation but also a way of thinking about hegemony as a temporary and contingent constellation of discourses. While a core signifier, such as ‘democracy’, may remain embedded in the public consciousness, the other signifiers we attribute to it in a chain of signification might shift in relation to one another and in meaning over time – we might conceive of ‘freedom’ differently, for example (Laclau, 1990, 2007 and 2014), and so, over time, our notion of what it might mean to practice democracy might gradually shift. Hence a contingent space is opened through virtue of discourses and collections of discourses being incomplete and inadequate to our identifications and aspirations. The law, the symbolic order, can never be a fully totalising structure (Lacan, 2008), there will always be a gap between what is and what we feel could be (Laclau, 2014). This gap, these cracks in the discursive edifice, is what constitutes the space for ethical discourse and contestation, a beyond the symbolic law to our affective notions of what is right and wrong (Laclau, 2014). Indeed, one could argue that one of the effects of neo-liberalism in displacing the sovereignty of the state and replacing it with the ‘sovereignty’ of the individual consumer, has been to increase this gap to the point where regulations stand in for ethics (Verhaeghe, 2014).
Collaborative leadership, from this perspective may be seen as a more deliberate attempt to piece together discursive positions in a hegemonic constellation. Of course this piecing together of relationships across groups, at the various levels of interaction entailed by collaborative leadership, has long been recognised as a fragile process involving a series of couplings and relationships (see Denis et al, 2001). Gaps, contradictions, clashes of opinion may be viewed as ethical opportunities, however, as they indicate fractures in our identifications with the symbols which constitute our ethical life, providing an opportunity for us to make sense of these limitations together.

The process of hegemony thus opens the possibility for a form of moral leadership which is contested but purposeful, providing direction without domination. Moral collaborative leadership can be thought of then as the task of leading a process of continuous struggle for moral meaning. Such a contingent reading of moral leadership stands in contradistinction to a reading of absolute moral truth, whereby the task of leadership would be to dispense with ‘irrational’ identification and move towards a moral truth, through ‘rational’ communication, or even domination. Leading a process of linear communication devoid of contested identification is of course the stuff of most leadership studies, which assume something of a universal point of identification – with a universally appealing ‘authentic’ or ‘transformational’ leader, for example.

So how might leading a contingent and contested process of collaborative-moral leadership differ?

To begin, we might need to develop the notion of a series of constitutive relational leadership moments. Relational leadership has largely been thought of in the context of organisations, specifically as something practiced between salaried employees. Collaborative leadership ethics must look beyond the confines of an organisation to consider how different groups, working with a range of intersecting identifications (Bystydzienski and Schacht, 2001; Yuval-Davis 2011) might collectively grapple with their moral purpose, their moral direction.

Here we might look to contemporary theories of radical democracy (Benhabib, 1996; hooks, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe 2009 and 2013). Radical democracy is a theory which aims to expand our understanding of how democracy can work in practice. By insisting on consensus, both liberal democratic models (see Benhabib, 1996) and deliberative democratic models (see Habermas, 1998) tend to underplay the depth and diversity of identifications held by participants, thus making power relations more difficult to challenge (Mouffe, 2013). Rather than focusing on consent, radical democracy theorists underline dissent as the driving force for healthy democratic practice, a perpetuum mobile of the political (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe 2009). Radical democracy acknowledges that we are living in a ‘pluriverse’ of identifications rather than a universe of fixed identities, and that clashes between opinions, classes, genders, races, and other identifications are inevitable, ‘a multiplicity of justices...and then the justice of multiplicity’ (Lyotard and Thébaud, 1985, p.100):

> Conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict...What is important is that conflict does not take the form of an ‘antagonism’ (struggle between enemies) but the form of ‘agonism’ (struggle between adversaries) (Mouffe, 2013: 7).

Radical democratic practice holds promise for developing a theory of moral collaborative leadership, in that it privileges the role of conflict within moral collaborative leadership. The fact that conflicts arise in collaboration is by now well established (see Vangen and Winchester, 2014, and Vangen and Huxham, 2003). Both Grint (2005b) and Heifetz (1994) have both sought to draw a theory of
collaborative leadership rooted in the basic idea that engineering controlled conflict in leadership practice can generate helpful conversations and creative thinking. A theory of moral collaborative leadership might take this insight a step further through providing a rigorous discursive framework, whereby the point of conflict can be identified as the very limit of people’s symbolic constructions and identifications. We might therefore theorise the role of leading morally as supporting and assisting the transition of people to the point of symbolic ‘agonism’ and creating forums through which such discussions might take place. How can people come together to both shape and debate moral direction, drawing on democratic practice to do so?

We may also consider the fact that people’s engagement with groups and organisations is now less experienced as a series of face-to-face encounters and more experienced online (see Castells, 2012). Online generation of leadership has been linked to the capacity of online experiences to generate social capital in a way that more traditional face-to-face encounters may miss (Carroll and Simpson, 2012).

In conclusion, it may be possible to draw on the above discussion to sketch a series of tasks which seem important for developing a hegemonic account of moral collaborative leadership. Such tasks might act as points of focus for researchers wishing to explore further moral collaborative leadership in practice:

- Identifying particular opportunities, or fractures in the dominant symbolic-hegemonic structure. Where might the purpose of our leadership fit? What is the symbolic structure missing that might be (partially) addressed by our moral leadership?
- Identifying potential partners that might share a (perhaps loose) affinity with the broad moral positioning in play.
- The provision of strong moral direction: the articulation of purpose in a convincing manner, yet also in a way which acknowledges the contingent, open nature of any discursive formation.
- Establishing forums in which a variety of identifications and power-positionings may be brought to bear (direction-less-than-domination), as a means of questioning and refining the moral purpose of the collaborative endeavour. Such a task may be thought of in terms of establishing relational norms of conduct, or the establishment of vibrant online communities where direction can be open to challenge.

References


