The pluralities of leadership development in discursive systemic learning: a study of a self-organizing cohousing group

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Overview

This paper contributes an interpretative empirical and theoretical exploration and development of leadership development, focussing on discursively-mediated systemic learning, in the praxis of a cohousing group that operates through consensus decision-making processes. We explore and utilize selected elements of Habermas’ notion of communicative action and Miller’s exploration of systemic learning to develop a framework of discursive systemic learning and its methodological implications. In particular, we examine two key elements of discursive systemic learning in the cohousing group – the common reference points developed and utilised over time by the group; and the unfolding of topics of discourse related to consensus decision-making and related organizational changes over time. These analyses point to a number of features of discursively-mediated systemic learning – its non-linear, incomplete and recursive characteristics, which have implications for understanding leadership development praxis.

The aim of the paper, thus, is to develop an exploratory interpretative understanding of the praxis of learning and action in groups that aspire to egalitarian and deliberative practice which can inform broader conceptualisations of leadership development.

The structure of the paper is as follows. We begin by outlining our basic assumptions about the nature of leadership, of our focus on discursive systemic learning as leadership development and of our functionality-neutral and value-neutral view of learning and leadership. We then outline the theoretical background to discursive systemic learning and develop its methodological implications. We then outline the study, overviewing cohousing, the background to ‘Greenacres’¹ cohousing, and outlining the research methodology, methods and access, data, and forms of analyses. We then present descriptive analyses of the discursive systemic learning in the group, followed by theoretical analyses, and a discussion and conclusion.

Base assumptions

1. Leadership as direction-giving and/or direction-finding

We start from the premise that leadership is to be understood as a term that applies to the many and different ways in which direction can either be given or found, whether intra- or inter-subjective. We also apply the term to instances where this direction does not necessarily fix an endpoint to the direction found or given, but may be in relation to how a process or activity might take place.

2. Focusing on discursive systemic learning as leadership development

Grint (2005) notes that most of the leadership literature tends to be actually about leaders and argues that there is a need to put the ship back into leadership. This is part of a deeper recognition within the wider leadership literature of the need for other perspectives on leadership that are not only, or, sometimes, explicitly not, leader-centric. Various strands of literature have developed

¹ Greenacres is a pseudonym
different ‘interactional’ versions of leadership that view leadership as existing in the interaction between agents rather than being a property of one of them (Denis et. al 2012).

Drawing on wider social and organizational theory some of these interactional versions of leadership also view the media and practices of the interactions between agents as part of the phenomenon of leadership, not merely as part of the context in which it happens. For example systems theories see individual actions and interactions as parts of larger wholes. Some ‘strong’ versions of systems theories place systems in centre stage and place people and things into secondary roles as the carriers or actors of systems (e.g. Luhmann). Strong systems theories therefore look at systems as entities in their own right, with their own evolutionary trajectories.

We take a ‘soft’ systemic theory\(^2\) approach – that is, we view both social agents and social systems as having potential causal powers. The particular ‘systemic practices’ that we are interested in are related to communication practices (how, or in what ways, communication takes place, and by whom) and discourses (the content of what is said). We view both communication practices and discourses as having potential causal power – that is, that they can impact on social agents. We do not, however, view social agents as mere carriers or appliers of communication practices or discourses, rather, we see them as potential adapters, re-contextualisers, extenders or subverters of communication practices and discourses.

Leader-centred leadership development tends to focus on the learning and cognitive capacity of leaders. While this may be important, an interactional or systemic view of leadership focuses on the collective learning of communication practices and discourses – that is, how collective communication practices and discourses evolve, change and adapt over time, and the cognitive capacity of collective agents. For this paper, we focus almost exclusively, therefore, on discursive systemic learning.

3. Learning and leadership are not necessarily functional or desirable

Much of the literature assumes that learning is functional, for example Fiol and Lyles (1985) paper that partly led to the establishment of the organizational learning field defined learning as “The development of insights, knowledge, and associations between past actions, the effectiveness of those actions, and future actions”. Their focus on the knowledge of the effectiveness of past actions as defining learning shows the concern for the instrumental and functional perspective on learning common in much of the literature. But people learn ‘bad habits’, incorrect or misleading interpretations and conceptions of causality. In the following, therefore, we do not presume that learning is instrumental, functional or positive for agents’ survival or prosperity.

For similar reasons, we do not assume that direction-finding or giving is necessarily functional, instrumental or positive. People give, find and take ‘wrong’ directions with sometimes disastrous consequences. This does not mean that there was necessarily a lack of leadership, it may merely mean that it was inappropriate leadership (depending on how the direction or outcomes are evaluated), or perhaps that there was too much leadership (Tourish 2014).

\(^2\) We are not referring to soft systems methodology by the use of these terms.
The theoretical background to discursive systemic learning

The social theorists that point towards thinking through discursive systemic learning are Habermas (a radical type of ‘soft’ systems theorist), and the development of parts of his work via Max Miller.

In simplistic and very crude terms, the aspects of Habermas’ oeuvre of work that are relevant for our purposes relate to his focus on humans as creative communicative beings, and the potential for undistorted communication to lead to social and moral learning and emancipation. For Habermas, inherent in human language and practice are the means for people to deliberate in open-ended communication, and for this deliberation to be furthered by people raising questions as to the authenticity of their claims, the normative desirability of their claims, to the practical relevance of claims, and to the truth of claims. Such ‘communicative action’, when it is undistorted by power, enables the development of common agreement, or mutually accepted disagreement, either of which can be the basis for social co-ordination and/or development. The ‘ideal speech situation’, where undistorted communicative action and only the ‘force of the better argument’ hold sway, acts as a normative ideal for Habermas, even though he recognises that it is often not actualised in practice. Undistorted communicative action is a type of process of reflection through which decisions can be reached among individuals or groups with diverse interests. Within this framework, the meaning of agreement changes as the communicative action unfolds and expands to include more and more diverse voices or points of view.

Unlike the broad sociological theory of communicative action specified by Habermas (or the phase theory suggesting that communicative action takes place at the point between stable action), Max Miller focuses on what goes on within a process of communicative action. The overarching argument is that, so long as a process of communicative action is allowed to proceed according to its own logics, and is not pressured by some particular interests, then new ideas can emerge that accommodate difference. This implies understanding a process of communicative action in terms of its outcomes - that is, knowledge, reflection and learning - and conceptualising communicative action as a social process through which such outcomes can be achieved. On this model, social agreement does not necessarily signal a willingness to accept an argument in favour of a proposition, but may appear as the willingness to accept an argument as the best mechanism for recognising differences between positions.

Miller’s concept emerges through his consideration of collective learning processes. Starting with collective learning, and not change or language, involves focusing on a "social reality which cannot be adequately described and explained by tracing it back entirely to cognitive processes in an individual mind." The learning of a collective may involve individuals learning, but collectives learn through different forms of social processes. Miller further specifies social learning: "it is only specific operations of social systems, specific forms of discourse [communicative action], that make learning possible – at least learning of a certain type: the emergence of novel structural knowledge." What Miller has in mind is a conception of undistorted communicative action as a kind of social process or system that allows collectives to learn by forming new propositional knowledge, or arguments as abstract structures consisting of propositions.

Social learning, therefore, takes place within undistorted communicative action where the communicative action focuses on the propositional content of knowledge about an object domain but where learning is driven by an exploration of disagreement and the construction of new
knowledge that enables participants to co-ordinate action based on a mutual understanding of difference. The general model is of three parts: (a) co-subjects interacting in the context of a cultural model, but where (b) changes to this model are driven by a continuing exploration of the situation and (c) an awareness of how the cultural model positions self and other in different ways.

**Methodological implications**

This theoretical framework gives way to a methodology interested in exploring discursive systemic learning – both the practices of communication and the content (discourses/language) of communication. First, this discursive systemic learning framework focuses on the ongoing mechanisms used in communicative action. Focusing on the formation of new knowledge, the discursive systemic learning framework is particularly interested in how communicative action proceeds by identifying relevant propositions, and settling on a form of knowledge that finds a way of navigating between different points of view. The first step for this discursive systemic learning framework is to identify the way in which different points of view are brought into view of a decision-making agent. Whose views are brought to bear? How are these views raised - reported by experts; relayed by representatives, or more directly involved? The methodology then tries to identify the extent to which the discourse is shaped by particular interests. To what extent are the interests of a particular point of view - individual or group - brought in to the debate? Equally, to what extent are specific views adhered to in the process of deliberating decisions. By paying attention to how the debate is dominated by particular voices, we can distinguish between genuine learning processes and learning that has been systematically distorted by interests or ideologies.

Next, this methodology allows us to follow the way the debate proceeds by understanding the discourse as a social system. By following the debate as an example of how discourse proceeds through a process of identification of different points of view, and is stabilised with reference to some reality (appreciating that this reality itself can be variously defined) we can follow how a debate proceeds and how the new knowledge emerges. Finally, the resolution of the discussion can be understood as a navigation of difference, and some forms of agreement as a recognition of disagreement. But the outcome is a form of knowledge that, whether developed through either undistorted or distorted communication, is then put into practice. Here we can consider how the issue re-emerges in later discussion as participants communicate their experience of this norm to the group or decision-making agent. In the end, people may be just as happy to live with norms developed through distorted communication as with norms that genuinely recognise difference.

Focussing in on just some of the methodological implications of this discursive systemic learning framework developed from Miller, we have selected the following issues which are pertinent to our research question as to how direction-finding or giving is developed through discursive systemic learning in a self-organizing group:

- How things are deliberated, and who is involved in the deliberating? What is adhered to?
- Look for types of agency that might be involved in learning (whether individual, group or mechanical) – and for changes in them as potential traces/evidence of the change in structural knowledge
- Look at types of memory/media that store and re-apply structural knowledge — and for changes in them as potential traces/evidence of the change of structural knowledge

- Look at if/how issues re-occur/change over time, and how they are conceived or processed

- Look for both regulative principles (morals or norms that regulate conduct potentially infinitely) and regulative ideas (ends to which actions are oriented, which, in theory, might be achievable and hence finite)

- Look for evidence of ‘mutual knowledge’ — a shared knowledge that is mutually known to be shared, e.g. mutually known ‘common grounds’ — such as ‘physical co-presence, linguistic co-presence, and community membership’, and the establishment/use/invocation of these common grounds in practice, and their acceptance (consent) by others. And any change in these common grounds, or how they are established/used/invoked and consented to.

**Limitations**

The main difficulty with this framework is that it posits an ideal (undistorted communicative action as a social-discursive system which, when allowed to proceed, enables the development of new knowledge) and conceives of deviations as examples of distorted communication when such deviations are a normal part of communication. Decision-making bodies may be rigged, debating questions chosen, topics organised to maximise the chances that a favoured outcome will be reached. Nevertheless, the discursive systemic learning framework does a far better job of conceptualising agreement on direction finding or giving than the rather flimsy ideas of leader-centred influence in agreements since it places agreement in a social context. Therefore, it allows agreement on direction to be understood as a social process involving efforts at unfolding a communicative practice that are simultaneously constrained by social realities.

A second difficulty with both Habermas’ and other systems theories is their abstract and macrosociological focus. Developing Miller’s ideas for their methodological implications, however, enables the following analysis and theoretical development to give a more fine-grained sense of the ways in which discursive systemic learning takes place.

**The Study**

Since we are interested in exploring the discursive systemic learning in a self-organizing group, in the following sub-sections we outline, briefly, what cohousing is, a brief history of the group, and how the study and analyses have been organized.

**Cohousing – a brief overview**

Cohousing involves an alternative means for organizing domestic living arrangements (Sargisson, 2010) involving forms of both private and shared property. Characteristically, cohousing communities involve private ownership of individual or family properties clustered around common
and shared spaces and facilities that are collectively owned, maintained and organized. McCamant and Durrett, who coined the phrase ‘cohousing’, identify the following common characteristics:

1. A participatory process – members organize, and participate in, the planning and design process and realisation of the physical neighbourhood,
2. Intentional neighbourhood design – the physical design encourages a sense of community,
3. Extensive common facilities – common spaces and amenities are designed for daily use, to supplement private living areas,
4. Complete resident management – residents manage the development, making decisions of common concern at community meetings (McCamant et al., 1994)
5. A non-hierarchical structure and decision-making - while there are leadership roles or positions, responsibility for decisions is shared by the adult members

While the practice originated in Denmark and Sweden a number of decades ago, it has been adopted, in various forms, across the world, and particularly in Northern Europe, the US and Canada (Vestbro, 2000, Altus, 1997, McCamant et al., 1994). There are at least 12 different national cohousing associations or networks, almost all of which are in ‘developed’ countries. The practice was slow to take hold in the UK, but there are now a number of established cohousing communities and a significant number of ‘emerging’ communities in the UK.

A brief background to Greenacres Cohousing

Initially, a group of five households worked for six months to set up ‘Greenacres Cohousing Ltd’, a private company established to set up a cohousing community, together with various project management structures in 2006. The company and its plans were then publicly advertised. The first public meeting led to the recruitment of five further members, with the group growing between 2006 and 2009 to a fluctuating group size of 15-20 households at any one time. During this period the group reviewed and attempted to acquire a number of sites. In July 2010, partly due to the financial recession’s effect on property prices, the group purchased a 2.5-hectare site on the edge of a river near a village close to the city of Greenacres. The group had a ‘Project Development Team’ and engaged with architects (with whom they had had a relationship since 2007) and a building contractor. The group then held a number of participatory workshops to develop a site layout and detailed plans for different house types and the common house. The group were granted planning permission in 2010, and the development of the site started in late Summer 2011 following delays in sorting out legal issues involving a development loan from a bank, and planning-related issues. By the time the first members moved into the development in August 2012, almost all of the individual properties had been bought. There has also been significant rotation of Director positions since 2010, such that only one of the founding members was a Director in September 2013, and other...

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3 See Vestbro (2000) for a discussion of different definitions of collective housing, and of cohousing – what he refers to as the ‘self-work’ model. This paper is concerned with a group following this self-work model.
4 The collectives, however, generally exercise private ownership over the shared spaces, with the private spaces leased to individuals on a leasehold basis (see Sargisson 2010 for a discussion of these property arrangements).
non-founding Directors that were significantly involved during the construction phase have also been succeeded by other members.

**Research methodology, methods and access, data, and forms of analyses**

In order to research discursive systemic learning in a self-organizing group such as Greenacres cohousing, it was necessary to operationalise the methodological implications of the framework of discursive systemic learning. As developed above, discursive systemic learning is understood as an intersubjective phenomenon (though this does not mean that it is equally shared by everyone – rather it may be differentially shared, and differentially affect members of a group). Discursive systemic learning is manifest in the change of sedimented (patterned) communicative practices and discourses, and associated sociomaterial artefacts, which have the potential to affect the group.

Discursive systemic learning in a group is therefore discernible in the utilisation and development of a variety of different artefacts and practices. In general terms, it is held in the evolving discourses, practices, methods and artefacts utilised by the group over time, not only in what is shared, but also in what is disputed. Discursive systemic learning does not necessarily reside in any one form of phenomenon – rather it is sedimented and actualised in the interaction and practice of different artefacts and activities. A group’s discursive systemic learning is not manifest solely in any of its memory, minutes, rules or procedures, nor in its norms, narratives, metaphors, social interactions and activities, rather it is potentially manifest in the social interactions that draw upon, integrate, utilise, operationalise, revise and/or extend a mixture of these different dimensions of artefacts and activities.

Investigating discursive systemic learning, therefore, requires multiple methods in order to trace the extent to which there is any drawing upon, integration, operationalisation, revision and/or extension of a mixture of the different dimensions of such artefacts and activities as the group’s memory, minutes, rules or procedures, norms, structures, narratives, metaphors, social interactions and practices that are shared and/or disputed.

**Purposes and methods:**
The research methods used included non-participant observations, documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Non-participant observations were conducted and artefacts, primarily documents, were collated and analysed in order to access aspects of the group’s sedimented collective framings and cognitions, social-interactions and practices. Non-participant observations were undertaken of monthly General Meetings (the primary decision-making body of the group, and one of the key occasions when most members of the group were collectively co-located) on a quarterly basis from Autumn 2011, and occasional observations were made of two committees with delegated decision-making powers – the Directors\(^5\) and the ‘Build and Resources’ group – as well as the ‘Process’ group – a group

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\(^5\) The cohousing group is a limited company, and as such has company directors that are elected in the Annual General Meeting.
delegated with focussing on ‘how well the community is working together and accomplishing its goals’.

The non-participant observations produced descriptive accounts of the observed events, as well as accounts of the researcher’s experiences and immediate and initial formulations and queries which were differentiated in the note-taking conventions used. These observations allowed access to enactments of communicative practices and procedures, as well as comparison between different types of deliberating collective agency within the group.

The documents comprised the minutes and agendas for all the formal committees in the group, as well as briefing, discussion and policy documents from the formal start of the group in 2006. The groups’ documents offered a range of type of material – policy documents were formal objectivised accounts of issues problematised and institutionalised by the group – thus containing elements of discourses, narratives and conceptual schema utilised by the group. Minutes and agendas, in contrast, offered formal objectivised accounts of the formal social interactions and decision-making of the group. Versions of documents at different times also provided longitudinal data of the unfolding of problematisations, institutionalisations and normalisations over time. The group also produced a ‘decision log’ which was a record of all the formal decisions made by the group – this provided access to the formalised ‘memory’ of the group. These documents were scanned for relevance to the research topic – looking for changes in the articulation or discussion of rules or procedures related to decision-making, or understandings of expected conduct expressed in relation to topics of discussion or contention.

In order to access how these collective level phenomena interacted with individual-level phenomena, these non-participant observations and documentary analyses were supplemented by a number of in-depth interviews with a sample of the group. The first author conducted interviews with a random selection of members according to a variety of criteria – duration of membership, degree of involvement in the delegated decision-making groups and in formal roles, spread of initial geographical location, spread of planned location in the development, and gender. In total nine adult members were interviewed (of roughly 60 adult members’), and seven of these were re-interviewed between a year and two years from their initial interview. The interviews elicited perspectival accounts and experiences of events and experiences, attitudinal data, narratives and discourses, causal understandings, generalisations, rationalisations and reflections from the informants, on both retrospective and current issues. As such they proffer glimpses of, and objectivised accounts of, the routines, goal-oriented actions, long-term projects and their reflective evaluations as individuals and as members. These interviews afforded access to the extent to which individual cognitions and processes mirrored, reflected, retarded, extended, conflicted with or diverged from group cognitions and practices accessed via the observations and documents.

The data produced from these research methods can be categorised according to the mode of access – data on the period from the genesis of the group up until the start of fieldwork (November 2005 – July 2011) where the data is historical; and the period of the fieldwork, where the data was produced iteratively. The fieldwork period in turn encompasses two sub-periods: (a) the physical construction of the cohousing development (August 2011 – September 2013), and (b) the transition

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6 The remit of the process group has changed over time. This quote from a Process Group document, which is broadly representative of the original and continued core role of the group, is from 2010.

7 The number of members fluctuates.
year of the group as they moved onto the site and developed their living practices (August 2012 – September 2013).

The third author is one of the founding members of the cohousing group as well as being part of the research team undertaking this research. The research design has been a collaborative undertaking. Notes from research meetings, including the third author’s experiences and perceptions of the cohousing group, are used as a further form of data. These discussions were noted, and allowed in-depth access into retrospective and ongoing accounts of the group’s development, such as the elicitation of strategic orientations and evaluations. Having a member of the group under study as part of the research team produced data that would not generally be forthcoming from normal interview methods owing to the recursive and iterative nature of the production of this data throughout data collection and analysis. Such data, however, also poses the risk of influencing the data collection and the analysis. The former issue was dealt with by the first author initially planning the research strategy according to the research aims and objectives, and following amendments were evaluated with regard to these aims and objectives. The later issue will be discussed in more detail in the analysis section.

**Research access**

Research access was gained by formally applying to the cohousing group, stating the research aims and outlining the methods of data collection, the confidential use of the data and publication plans, and completing a research framework document that the group uses to evaluate participation in research. Owing to the potential issue of one of the research team being a member of the group, this was made explicit before and at the end of all interviews, and research informants had the option of designating data as being for the first author only. It has been agreed with the group that the group will have the opportunity to discuss and comment upon preliminary findings with the research team prior to submission for publication and that they (either individual members or the group) will be provided with a ‘right of reply’ to any publications from the research with the group.

**Analysis**

Thematic analyses have been undertaken, coding both manifest and latent content (Boyatzis, 1998) in Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. The themes and codes utilized were developed primarily deductively from the research issues, but also inductively from the collected data. Analyses were initially undertaken by the first author, with subsequent input from the second and third author. Input from the third author was also regarded as a form of data for analysis rather than as necessarily full and complete.

Substantively, the analysis began with the identification and selection of data that was germane to the topic of discursive systemic learning, focusing on the collectively-evident communicative practices, discourses, organisational structures, narratives, rules and norms. In order to focus the analysis, a broad topic was initially chosen that corresponded to a core feature of group organizing in general, and to the cohousing group in particular – what was considered a ‘right’ or ‘proper’ way for it to operate. This is a broad issue encompassing organizational propriety, structures, rules and procedures, interpersonal norms, morals and ethics of behaviour. Within this broad topic, a number of more specific themes became of particular interest during the analyses.
Two inter-related aspects of the evolution of the group were pertinent to understanding the direction-giving/finding through modes of discursive systemic learning in the group. These relate to the establishment and evolution of common ‘grounds’ or reference points (e.g. the group’s ‘vision’ and ‘values’); and a very particular ‘common ground’: the communicative practice and discourse of consensus decision-making and related structural and organisational changes within the group over time.

In the following sections we present, firstly, descriptive analyses of these themes, followed by theoretical analyses.

Common grounds
A number of different common grounds were evident from the analyses – although they were not necessarily evenly common throughout the group. The obvious common grounds included the group’s vision; and the group’s consensus decision-making process and mechanisms for conflict resolution. Each of these went through various stages of development and evolution. The second of these common grounds – the group’s evolving consensus decision-making process and mechanisms for conflict resolution also overlaps with the group’s evolving organizational structure and processes and is described separately.

The vision and values
A formal ‘vision’ was adopted early on in the establishment of the group. It was used as a means by which the founders developed and agreed upon a common goal, and as a way of representing the group publicly and to prospective members:

Our vision
We plan to create an intergenerational cohousing community … that will encourage social interaction and will be built on ecological values. It will include … homes with community facilities and workshop/office space. We will seek to enable sustainable travel … so that residents have easy access to amenities …

The community will be built on ecological values with new buildings meeting … [standards] … and designed to facilitate spontaneous socialisation supporting a full neighbourly community. The development will comprise properties that will be of interest to a range of household sizes and incomes. The cost of social space and eco-build will be balanced against affordability constraints.

The project will be a cutting edge example of sustainable design and living. It will act as a catalyst and inspiration for significant improvements in the sustainability of new development, and will have close links to [the surrounding area] and the wider community.

This vision was supplemented by a discussion document titled ‘a community built on ecological values’ which articulated the dual focus of neighbourly community and ecological sustainability, and
also incorporated the cohousing principle of private homes, with the only restriction on individual living choices being those that affected the ecological design and practice of the neighbourhood.

In turn these two documents – the vision and the discussion document ‘a community built on ecological values’ – were incorporated within, and supplemented by, a ‘resident handbook’ which expanded over time as the group developed and adopted specific policies and plans.

Although the institutionalised formal vision of the group was mostly static throughout the pre-build, build and transition stages (the only alteration was the changing of the physical localities referred to when the group bought its site), the intersubjective ‘vision’ of the group was not static. There were a number of ‘visioning’ and ‘aspiration-sharing’ exercises conducted throughout the pre-build, build and transition stages. For example they had a project review workshop on ‘highlights and lowlights’ and an associated ‘community building workshop’ on their ‘dreams, values and challenges’ in January 2011. Discussions about their hopes and dreams also took place in relation to specific aspects of the project during their meetings. For example, discussions of the use of the common house, and the organization of community meals at different meetings were both observed to involve explicit small group discussions on their individual hopes and desires which led onto facilitated group discussions of these topics in order to inform their planning and discussion of these features. Over time, the group formally adopted such ‘information-gathering’ sessions as part of their formal process for the development of proposals that might be brought to their general meetings.

Having noted the explicitly objectivised values of the group in the formal vision and the processes by which people were engaged in sharing and developing their aspirations and hopes, it is also worth noting the matching between the explicit vision and the reported values of the interview informants. Interestingly, the majority of interview informants (five) tended to put more emphasis on the community/ neighbourly value than the ecological living value even if they mentioned the importance of them both (the others put equal emphasis upon them or did not differentiate between them). In summary, the desire for community variously involved a desire for enjoyable, spontaneous, shared, effortless, beneficial and meaningful interactions with proximal neighbours, e.g.:

I see it more of a personal, family-based thing. That we want to live with others and be in a wider network of people that we are friends with and can share things with. (Member, Male)

And in a way community was a sort of sharing thing as well, partly social and partly that thing of being able to share things and having people around who, you know, won’t mind if you ask them to do something because you’ll do the same for them, which is a bit different to asking your next door neighbour to feed the cat when you don’t really know them, but they will do it, you know, it’s sort of you wouldn’t feel so beholden because everyone’s hopefully joining in. So yeah, it was sort of that thing of ‘I’ll be living on my own but there will be people around’, which also was quite attractive. (Member, Female)

The last quote also indicates another common feature in the informants’ accounts of their rationales for joining the group, which was that the desire for community was moderated by a desire for a level
of privacy. While all the informants wanted to be involved in communal activities, they did not want their lives to be fully communal. One informant put it in the following manner:

It’s partly that flexibility between private, individual space and, cooperating with your neighbours ... People are choosing to live in the same sort of 2 or 3 streets as opposed to the same house or the same property. ... I can see the real advantages of, being able to vary your level of communal involvement over time (Member, Male)

Yet, despite this desire for a neighbourly community being more prominent than the ecological desire in the informant accounts, a number of these informants also indicated that they felt that the project had on occasion veered more towards the ecological goals than the neighbourly community goal, and one Director commented that he felt that a lot of people in the group put more of an emphasis on the ecological focus than on the communal one. It was explicitly argued by informants that there were tensions between these two focuses:

I think possibly you could argue that some people have joined who are more interested in the ecological living, than the community living, and then the fallout from that is they’re not actually interested in the community stuff, yeah? So they might not necessarily be so keen on getting involved, making friendships, doing the work, they’re treating it as a, treating us as service providers really, so I guess, I think that’s probably the key stumbling block from that, balancing, ... So there is a tension there, but I think broadly speaking, we’ve managed to balance it. There are enough people who [are] interested in community, to balance the people who are showing interest in the ecological. There’s enough people who are interested in both sides, that it works. (Member, Male)

Thus, while there were tensions between neighbourly community and ecology, it was felt by most informants that there was generally enough sharing of these values that the tensions did not splinter the group. Other aspects of the vision were also observed to be invoked at various stages, for example a number of members of the group wanted the group to have a wider catalytic effect on society – as one member both declared and joked at a meeting ‘I joined because I wanted to change the world’.

There were also, however, a number of regrets voiced about some of the characteristics of the group that developed through its formation, which were articulated as diverging from the formal vision, namely that it is not significantly composed of people from different classes, ages or ethnic groups (there is a majority of middle-class, White British and Forty-upwards households). The aim of being intergenerational was explicitly stated in the vision of the group, and while there is a degree of intergenerationality, it is not even. While these issues were regretted, they also appeared to have been psychologically accepted by the majority of the members in that they were not live issues for discussion or debate even though they were occasionally mentioned.

A number of the conflicts directly observed during the research period, however, involved disagreements about the priority attached to ecological facilities/practices and/or community facilities/practices and the financial costs associated with them. For example, one ongoing conflict during the research period related to the development and implementation of the group’s ‘travel plan’ which entailed a limit on the number of car parking spaces and associated charges. Some members argued vigorously during meetings that these costs and restrictions impacted upon their
ability to commute and were financially punitive, whereas others argued that the group had signed up to reducing its carbon emissions and that these measures were part of this aim.

There were a number of such conflicts during the research period, and the formal vision and associated documents were variously invoked in these discussions, by those with opposing views. At a number of general meetings, it was questioned whether the formal vision was outdated as it had been developed by the founders, and was not, thus, a representative product of the full community (some members, in contrast, spoke about ‘honouring the vision’). There were a number of times when members requested that the group formally revisit its vision, and by the end of the research period there appeared to be a general agreement within the group that that would be a useful exercise, although it was not formulated as a formal proposal by the end of the research period.

The consensus decision-making process and related organizational structuring
The development of consensus decision-making procedures and practice within the group went through a number of changes over time. The adoption of a consensus decision-making process was included as the formal mode of authoritative decision-making in the group’s Management Committee and then its General Meetings (its formal decision-making forum) from the group’s outset. The founding members all had previous experience of consensus decision-making processes from direct action and/or anarchist groups. A number of rationales were retrospectively reported for their choice of consensus decision-making processes: partly, they were considered as inclusive and egalitarian in comparison to hierarchical decision-making processes; partly, the founding members thought that by adopting consensus decision-making the key needs and wants of each of the founding members would be secured, thus stimulating their continued active involvement, which was an early identified potential risk. Guidelines on running consensus decision-making processes were adopted from a training co-operative for grassroots activists.

In concert with the inclusion of consensus decision-making as the formal mode of decision-making in the group’s General Meetings, however, company directors are formally elected at Annual General Meetings (Greenacres is limited company), and if consensus is not achieved in two General Meetings, there is a formal recourse to voting. The earliest formal statement of consensus decision-making is in a pre-incorporation ‘notes’ document:

The MC [Management Committee] will endeavour to make decisions by consensus. If a consensus decision is not achieved in 2 meetings it will be voted on. If a majority thinks it’s urgent it will be voted on in the first meeting. (Greenacres ‘Notes’ Feb 2006)

In the earliest stages the Management Committee was the decision-making body, and it was composed by a member of each household of members (in effect, the five founding members). There appears to be some slippage between this co-operative form and a standard company form, as the first general meeting of the company in March 2006 involved the ‘election’ of Directors (that is, the founding members). The Management Committee meetings were renamed general meetings in December 2006, and it was noted that they would be the main decision making forum. The previously elected Directors did not meet as a separate body, and they were members of the Professional Development Team (PDT). The PDT was active from June 2006. Interestingly, the decision to rename the Management Committee meetings was noted at a PDT meeting.
From 2006-2010 the facilitation of General Meetings was generally undertaken by the Directors. During this period there were two decision-making bodies – the General Meetings, and the PDT, which had delegated decision-making power. Over the period of 2009-10, there is evidence in the documents that this process was under question, and the interview respondents retrospectively reported these processes and structures as being perceived to be ‘breaking down’ during this period.

The apparent ‘breakdown’ in the group was retrospectively perceived by different members to be due to a number of different factors. Some noted that in the early stages the PDT were not only involved in the development activities, but also ran and facilitated the general meetings – and that this had led to conflict on some occasions when proposals from the PDT were questioned or opposed at the general meetings. Related to this, other members perceived the people from the PDT that were organizing the general meetings and forwarding proposals to be under a lot of pressure to get things right: “I think there was one particular meeting where, a fairly, I don’t even remember what we were talking about, what the proposal was at the time, but somebody disagreed and I think they disagreed in a manner that upset those who brought the proposal, and that did have an impact because those two people sort of, essentially resigned as Directors at that stage. ... it was the straw that broke the camel’s back type issue, and I think that was to do with the workload, expectation, how we were handling the GMs and running them”.

Others retrospectively perceived the issue to be a conflict between ‘the build’ and ‘the community’ – that is, that there was a discontent by some on the focus on the development and building of the group’s site to the detriment of other issues, and some viewed this as underlying a number of interpersonal stresses and conflicts that took place.

Items from minutes during this period add a further layer of complexity to these perspectives, in that they indicate that there were at least two different topics that were related to consensus – governance, and the procedures for consensus decision-making.

Governance
From the PDT minutes in September 2008 the PDT listed ‘Risks of top down management’ in its list of future work activities ‘post site’ [i.e. after a site was bought]. GM minutes from May 2009 record a question of ‘the governance of the PDT’ as being raised, and it was also suggested that the group might consider having an external person or body review its governance. A new member of the PDT was then tasked with reviewing the governance of the PDT and considering this suggestion. In the PDT minutes from the following months there are then passing references related to this issue, and after the May 2009 meeting the term ‘(governance)’ was added to the ‘risks of top down management’ in its list of future work activities ‘post site’.

In November 2009, GM minutes record an email contribution from a member raising transparency as an issue. At this same GM a proposal that all new members should attend at least one PDT meeting and one GM before being accepted was accepted as a way of ‘building trust’.

The GM minutes of March 2010 record an item discussing and deciding on whether the group should use external governance mechanisms. The PDT member tasked with reviewing this item circulated a document of the options prior to the meeting and proposed that they should not pursue external governance because of the time and cost implication and as he felt “comfortable with the
transparency within the group and the systems in the group” – which it was recorded that two other members confirmed. The proposal was accepted by the group.

The topic of governance was later included in the development of a proposed structure of, and allocation of responsibilities within, the group after they had moved in – what they referred to as their ‘management structure’. It also became a topic for discussion as part of a workshop with an outside facilitator in early 2013.

Consensus decision-making procedures
In August 2009 the PDT added the topics of ‘consensus decision-making’ and ‘community building’ to the agenda of an upcoming GM. In the following September GM the minutes record a discussion of their consensus decision-making process, and a number of shortcomings of their practice at a recent workshop and issues to consider are recorded (e.g. that they did not have enough time, that the process was not fully inclusive, that they resorted to straw-polling rather than discussion, and to consider that they needed a process to deal with important issues that came up, and how to include resourcing as a consideration).

Following this, the January 2010 GM minutes mention a ‘GM support workteam’, and the June 2010 GM minutes record the adoption of consensus process as outlined in a book ‘heads, hands and hearts’, with a comment from a Director that the group should not simply follow the process as outlined in the book, but ‘make it ours’.

During a ‘value engineering’ exercise in 2010 to agree on design issues of the construction, a process was adopted of reviewing proposals if stand-asides were expressed by more than 20% of members present, partly as it was assumed that design decisions would not necessarily be unanimous, but that only a limited degree of disagreement was acceptable. It was also agreed to review the consensus process (and in particular the acceptance of 20% stand-asides) in the future.

In early 2012, the process group reviewed past decisions of the group and the group’s rules around decision-making. As part of this by June 2012 they developed a document summarizing how they understood consensus being practiced within the group at that time:

Our consensus process is an evolving process, and we learn as we go along, understand it better and learn to trust it. This is a working document summarising what we (aim to) do now (June 2012), whether formally agreed or evolved through practice. We need to keep it under review.

In the following General Meeting, however, a number of members raised reservations about the discussion of this document – which they feared was replacing the review of the practice of accepting 20% stand-asides. As a result of this the wider group began an informal review of the consensus decision-making process (facilitated by the process group), and this involved an opinion-gathering and discussion session in the GM, followed by an online collation of views on consensus from members, the circulation of various documents related to consensus decision-making recommended by different members, and a small working group discussing potential proposals. This led to a formal decision in the October 2012 General Meeting to set up a consensus review subgroup. This review group had had a number of meetings by September 2013, was also involved in
bringing in an outside facilitator for consensus training in May 2013, and had an associated reading/study group on the topic of consensus.

Just after the research period the process group was restructured into a ‘process network’ with a number of independent but linked groups.

**Theoretical analyses**

*Discursive systemic learning in and of the common grounds of the group*

The development and totemic role of the vision, both as a symbol of the community and as a source of contestation, is an example of how some discursive elements can become relatively institutionalised and act back upon the deliberations and actions of members. For the founding members the vision document encapsulated a necessary synthesis of potentially divergent regulative principles. For joining members the vision acted as part of the attraction of the group, matching elements of their own aspirations. As the group developed, the formal vision was supplemented by ‘visioning’ and deliberating sessions which were aimed at fostering a collective consciousness. Neither the formal vision, nor these visioning exercises, however, foreclosed differing interpretations of the group’s principles, and the formal vision then became discursively invoked both by members seeking to implement particular policies, and those seeking to resist these same policies.

The common reference point of the vision, therefore, operated in a number of ways – firstly, it did operate to some degree as intended, that is, as a unifying collective discursive symbolization of some values; secondly, to the extent that it was disputed, contested or seen as not being fully realised, it unified members to the extent that they disagreed about its representativeness; thirdly, in that the question of the vision’s representativeness appeared to be accepted towards the end of the research period, the group had come to a rational disagreement about what was not shared, and appeared to have a collective view about how to approach this disagreement (i.e. develop a new or revised vision). In other words, there did not appear to be any questioning of the desirability of a ‘vision’, and so it appeared as if the group shared an aspiration to have a new or revised vision.

This indicates that in relation to this issue the group displayed discursive systemic learning in that the group developed new structural knowledge as it moved from rational agreement (the development of the vision) to rational disagreement (disagreement about the representativeness of the vision as the group grew and evolved) and rational agreement about how to approach this disagreement (renewing or revising the vision).

*Discursive systemic learning in, of, and through, consensus decision-making*

The development and change of the consensus decision-making procedures and practice over time indicate a number of features of discursive systemic learning. Interestingly, although consensus decision-making was part of the group’s procedures and practices from the beginning, it also displayed elements of voting, which continued throughout the group in the formal election of Directors at AGMs. There are two striking features in the discursive systemic learning of the group.

Firstly, the non-linearity and interaction between different practices and discursive elements is apparent – questions around the governance of the group interacted with questions around the procedures for consensus decision-making and their practice, questions around the organization of
GMs, questions around the resolution of conflict, questions around the perceived overemphasis on the project build (by some), and questions around the ‘group process’ of the group. These questions re-occurred in different forms during the development of the group, sometimes articulated by those in the central agencies of the group (the Directors and the PDT), sometimes in other emergent agencies (what became the process group evolved independently of the Director and PDT group), and in the collective agency of the group (the GMs). This dynamic interplay of topics and agencies evidenced both centrifugal and centripetal forces between the central agencies and the general membership of the group. Sometimes the conflict led to rational disagreement and synthesis or accommodation (for example a review of consensus procedures and practices and a process for working at its evolution was agreed), at other times it led to feelings of marginalisation (some interviewees reported feeling marginalised in relation to particular topics or how they were dealt with) or exit (for example, the member who raised the issue of transparency later left the group).

Secondly, the non-linearity and interaction between different practices and discursive elements also interacted with structural and procedural elements of the group. The morphing of the original Management Committee into the General Meetings appeared to be the result of the expansion of the group beyond the original members, the splitting of the PDT into a formal Directors group and a ‘Build and Resource’ group, and the parallel development of a process group; and later, the development of a consensus review group and the morphing of the process group into a process network all indicate an evolution and distribution of the cognitive processing capacities and procedures within the group.

Discussion and conclusion

A number of themes are apparent from these analyses. The interplay between different topics that were raised or questioned and the shifting and evolving forms of collective organizational agency in the group is quite stark. Nor did these changes appear to be merely adaptations, rather, they were based on the development of new structural knowledge – that their previous organizational structures were not coping as well as they would like, and the new organizational structures were designed around the knowledge of some of the deficiencies of the previous structures and hypotheses about what might work better.

Beyond these representations of past deficiencies and hypotheses over future organizational and procedural forms, however, there are relatively few elements of what might be termed ‘novel structural knowledge’ in Miller’s terms, that is, explicit articulations of new conceptualisations of means-end relationships. Perhaps this is because Miller’s conceptualisation of discursive systemic learning as being cognitive focuses too strongly on explicit instrumental and epistemological knowledge. Reconsidering Habermas’ types of knowledge interest, however, implies that novel structural knowledge can also include new views on appropriate behaviour, on authenticity, and that new practical knowledge can be focused on individual and sub-group lifeworlds rather than just the institutional system.

Consensus decision-making procedures and practices in this cohousing group, therefore, can be seen to have enabled the development of different deliberating agencies during the evolution of the group and these interlocking agencies can be seen to have significantly elaborated the collective
cognitive capacities of the group. The consensus decision-making processes, however, could not alleviate the external and practical constraints which resulted in a central core – general membership dialectic during the build. It did, however, recognise this dialectic, and although it did not obviate it, it appeared to have enabled a degree of synthesis and accommodation and to have helped generate the governance mechanisms for after the build which did not involve external or practical constraints related to a regulative end.

The study also indicates the high degree of other types of learning that also take place through discursive systemic learning – not just ‘novel structural knowledge’ but also what might be termed ‘muddling through’ learning (adopting limited adaptations and revisions on a provisional basis) and ‘mitigational’ learning (minimizing, negating or ignoring issues that take place).

These observations can usefully be used to ‘operationalise’ and hone Habermas’ and Miller’s abstract theory for developing our understanding of empirical processes. They imply that rather than seeing empirical processes of communicative action as always falling short of the ideal of unfettered and continuous argumentation and deliberation, the fettering and stopping of argumentation and deliberation can also be rationally agreed; and that the processes of muddling through and mitigational learning can be equally as important as the learning of novel structural knowledge.

Focusing on discursive systemic learning as a particular form of leadership development also has implications. Firstly, it implies that rather than looking at individual capacities, that leadership development is best served by developing and facilitating collective capacities. Secondly, it implies that deliberating agencies can only develop and facilitate discursive systemic learning to the extent that they recursively reflect and evolve their own institutional structures and can productively interact with independently-developing agencies. Thirdly, it indicates that leadership development is closely bound to the establishment, contestation, invocation and evolution of, and consent or resistance to, common reference points.