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

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This paper contributes an interpretative empirical and theoretical exploration of leadership development, understood as discursively-mediated systemic learning, in the praxis of a cohousing group that operates through consensus decision-making processes. In particular, we examine the practices and experiences of consensus decision-making as it developed through the progression of the group, the generation and retention of problems and the associated learning and other effects, and the observed centrifugal and centripetal tendencies.

Conceptual context and overview

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. There are thus a variety of strands of literature that develop broader analytical purviews than the leader, for example, leadership as leader-member exchange (e.g. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), practice (e.g. Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008), everyday influence (e.g. Larsson & Lundholm, 2010), process (e.g. Karp, 2013) or relation (e.g. Crevani, 2011; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Denis et. al (2012) label these different types of approaches as ‘interactional’ versions of ‘leadership in the plural’, which they contrast with more mainstream versions of leadership in the plural which focus on how leadership is shared by top management teams or distributed over time or between units.

If, from the interactional lens, leadership is about some sort of group or intersubjective phenomenon, then it follows that leadership development, is also, necessarily, a group or intersubjective phenomenon', whereas most leadership development literature appears to focus on leader development (that is, it focuses on individuals that might be ‘developed’ to take on or enact leadership). One strand of literature that has connected a concern with a more expansive conceptualization of leadership, with the question of how to develop expansive leadership, is Raelin’s (2011; 2001, 2008; 2012; 2013) combination of ‘leadership-as-practice’ with his concerns for developing ‘leaderful’ groups. Raelin regards such leaderful groups as being predicated on a type of organization development based on democratic and participatory principles and practices. Raelin explicitly sees this as being made possible through practices of critical reflection, action learning, participation, dialogue and deliberation – drawing on ideas from Jurgen Habermas’ critical theory about communicative action.

A different aspect of Habermas’ work that has been taken up in social theory, but less so in leadership and organizational theory, is his concern with learning. Miller (2002), in particular, has taken forward the development of a discursive theory of systemic learning – which focuses on supra-individual learning of novel structural knowledge, which he argues is the central component of problem-solving behaviour (p.8).

In this paper we combine these concerns (with critical reflection and dialogue on the one hand, and with systemic learning through discourse on the other), which thus entails positing leadership development as a discursively constituted process of learning, reflection and action around
problems. In order to help think through this postulate and its attendant conceptual ramifications we reflect upon an empirical study of a UK cohousing group as it progressed from being an intended community (or project), to becoming an actual co-located community. The case study is germane to these theoretical questions as the cohousing group adopted egalitarian consensus decision-making processes as its formal mode of making decisions from the outset, and while the group did not self-consciously run itself as an action inquiry or mode of deliberative organisation development, implicit practices and principles used by the group matched many of the concerns with critical reflection and deliberative dialogue. The group also displayed different versions of what Denis et al (2012) term ‘leadership in the plural’ – that is, they displayed not only modes of interactional leadership, but also the sharing or distributing of some specific leadership responsibilities between and across specified sub-groups and/or individuals over time.

To be clear, the aim of the paper is neither to critique the group’s practice using theory as a counterfactual ideal, nor to critique theory using the group’s practice as a factual corrective, rather it is to develop an exploratory interpretative understanding of the praxis of learning about and managing problems in groups that aspire to egalitarian and deliberative practice which can inform broader conceptualisations of leadership development.

Structure
In the first substantive section we develop a broader interrogation of the literature that utilises ideas from Habermas as a starting point: Raelin’s ideas on developing participatory and deliberative organization development and Miller’s ideas on systemic learning, as well as critiques of Habermas’ ideas. These are also discussed in the light of Denis et al’s analytical classification of different modes of leadership in the plural and other studies of leadership processes in social movement (Sutherland, Land, & Böhm, 2013) and community level (Purdue, 2005) organizing. This section ends with a synthesis of key conceptual and analytical issues. This is followed by a methodology section which details the multi-method qualitative and longitudinal case study approach taken. This is followed by a brief history of the cohousing group to contextualise the analysis. The analysis of discursive systemic learning in the group is then developed and discussed. In particular, we examine the practices and experiences of consensus decision-making as it developed through the progression of the group; the dynamics of problem-generation, selection and retention, and the associated learning and other effects; and, the centrifugal and centripetal tendencies observed. The paper concludes with a number of reflections on the praxis of discursive systemic learning and what it implies for the pluralities of leadership development.

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1 We view a person as an intersubjective phenomenon – that is, we do not assume that there is such a thing as a ‘unitary subject’. Leadership, therefore, can be an intra-personal phenomenon (but still inter-subjective in that different subjectivities can be at play within a person).

2 While the group did not explicitly take up an action learning or critical reflection process, a number of individuals were familiar with (and/or became familiar with) these and other organisation development approaches (such as appreciative inquiry and ‘problem-structuring methods’ such as soft systems methodology), and were used to inform a variety of activities and processes.
References


