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Leadership-As-Practice: Appreciation, critique and future directions

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Abstract

This chapter addresses Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P) : a perspective on leadership which, rather than focusing on individual leaders and followers, draws attention to the importance of collective practices and sociomateriality in leadership processes. It emphasises the potential of leadership for building more democratic and just organisations, institutions and societies. The chapter is underpinned by the argument that, notwithstanding L-A-P's continuing positive role within broader leadership scholarship, the time is now ripe to engage in a critical appraisal this approach and to outline constructive directions for its future development. The view of L-A-P presented combines appreciation and critique. The chapter begins with a brief overview of L-A-P before offering a critical discussion that considers: 1) the historico-geographical positioning of the intellectual development of L-A-P in the Western, post-war, post-colonial context; 2) the limited empirical applications of the L-A-P approach to contexts where values of democracy and collective decision-making do not prevail; 3) questions of agency and power within L-A-P, and the need for examining inequalities with regard to the unfolding of leadership practice. Possible future directions for the development of L-A-P are considered in the concluding part of the chapter.

Introduction

The Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P) approach (e.g., Raelin, 2016a; Raelin et al., 2018) has offered a refreshing and insightful lens for studying and understanding leadership processes. Viewing leadership as a collective sociomaterial achievement, L-A-P questions fundamental

ontological assumptions and received wisdom about leadership; refocusing attention away from who (extraordinary) *individuals are*, to what *ordinary people and objects do* as they engage in leadership. L-A-P proposes a conception of leadership that emphasises the importance of process and emergence (Raelin, 2020), and that does not see leadership as ‘residing in the traits or behaviors of particular individuals’ (Raelin, 2016b: 3). Viewed through the L-A-P lens, leadership includes a range of participants, both human and non-human. L-A-P encourages agents to use ‘self-consciousness’ and ‘deliberation’, and to engage in ‘individual and collective reflexivity’ (Raelin, 2016b: 5). Instead of focusing on individual leaders and followers, L-A-P draws attention to the importance of collective practices and the role of sociomateriality in leadership. As such, it has opened up the possibility of examining leadership from novel perspectives, challenging many of the accepted wisdoms of the leadership studies canon. In addition, the explicitly emancipatory ethos of L-A-P has highlighted the potential of leadership as a force for good, and a vehicle for building a more democratic and socially just future for organisations and society at large.

Notwithstanding the positive role that L-A-P has played and continues to play within broader leadership scholarship, the time is now ripe to engage in a critical appraisal of L-A-P and to outline constructive directions for the future development of this perspective. Building upon the valuable scholarship that L-A-P research has generated to date, we adopt a view of L-A-P that combines appreciation and critique. We begin with a brief overview of L-A-P before engaging in a critical discussion of L-A-P that considers: 1) the historico-geographical positioning of the intellectual development of L-A-P in the Western, post-war, post-colonial context; 2) the limited empirical applications of the L-A-P approach to contexts where values of democracy and collective decision-making do not prevail; 3) questions of agency and power within L-A-P, and the need for examining inequalities with regard to the

extent to which different actors influence the direction of unfolding of leadership practice. We conclude by proposing some possible future directions for the development of L-A-P.

The leadership-as-practice approach to studying leadership

Studying leadership from a practice perspective has attracted research interest for a number of years now (e.g., Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008; Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2007; Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2005, 2010; Endrissat & von Arx, 2013; Raelin, 2011; Raelin, 2016a, 2016b; Raelin et al., 2018). Raelin (2016b: 1) proposes leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) as a ‘movement’ in leadership research and practice, adopting a ‘conception of leadership as occurring as a practice rather than residing in the traits and behaviors [*sic*] of particular individuals’. In the context of L-A-P, Raelin (2016b: 2-3) defines practice as ‘a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome’ (Raelin, 2016b: 2-3). Practices may also be considered to be ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings’ (Schatzki et al., 2001: 2). L-A-P views leadership as emergent and unfolding, and individuals as embedded within and experiencing it. In contrast to traditional views of leadership, L-A-P ‘does not rely on the attributes of individuals, nor does it focus on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers [...] Rather, it depicts immanent collective action emerging from mutual, discursive, sometimes recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment and over time among those engaged in the practice’ (Raelin 2016b: 3).

As such, the conception of leadership underlying the L-A-P approach differs from the understandings underpinning established leadership research traditions, particularly those that conceive of leadership being attributable to, for example, specific individual traits, competencies or styles of behavioural conduct adopted in relation to subordinates or followers. L-A-P decentres the role of the individual ‘leader’, viewing human agency as one

element within an admixture of sociomaterial processes. Crevani and Endrissat (2016: 23), for instance, define leadership in L-A-P as being about ‘producing direction for organizing processes’, ‘reorientation of the flow of practice’, and ‘emergent co-construction through collaborative agency’. Discussions of L-A-P have been developing in line with what scholars refer to as ‘entitative’ or ‘relational’ ontologies. An entitative ontology gives priority ‘to entities or social states that pre-exist relations and processes’, whereas a relational ontology ‘gives ontological priority to unfolding relations’, through which ‘people and other entities are made and remade’ (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016: 23). As far as empirical study is concerned, the entitative approach treats *practices* as initiated by *actors*; whereas research adopting the relational approach addresses the emergence and unfolding of *practice*.

Whilst distinct from mainstream approaches to leadership, L-A-P, nevertheless, has its origins in a particular historico-geographical context and should be understood, in part, as a response to certain intellectual traditions within the leadership studies field. In what follows, we locate L-A-P historically and intellectually within the leadership studies canon.

The emergence of L-A-P: historical and intellectual legacies

L-A-P is arguably one of the most recent and radical forms of what has been framed as the ‘post-heroic’ turn in leadership studies (see, e.g., Crevani et al., 2007; Dutton, 1996), that is, the attempt to break free from the seductive pull of person-centric notions of leadership. All too often, ‘leadership’ is taken to be the exclusive province and privilege of those individuals who occupy formal positions of authority within organizations (typically, CEOs, senior executives, political figures, ‘rulers’ and so forth); cadres who are attributed with the capacity single-handedly to direct and shape organizational processes and outcomes. This heroic conception of leadership has held sway over lay and professional academic discourses for many decades. Finding deeper roots in the Western psyche – consider, for example, the person-centric accounts of heroics in the histories of Herodotus – its more recent incarnation

can be traced back at least to the Nineteenth Century and Thomas Carlyle's characterization of the Great Man in his famous lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Carlyle, 1841). Delivered at the height of British imperial expansion, it gave voice and form to Romantic ideas of the hero as represented in the art and literature of the time. This idea was transported by Carlyle into the realm of politics and organization at a juncture in history where masculine heroism served rhetorically to justify overseas endeavours associated with the expansion of the British empire and acts of entrepreneurial businessmen whose efforts were seen to have driven the Industrial Revolution (Case et al., 2011).

The heroic and individualistic model of leadership continued to be of value during subsequent historical developments and the formation of large business organizations which were to play such central roles in the global expansion of corporate capitalism during the Twentieth Century. The emerging academic study of leadership reflected the dominant discourse of individualism and heroics in its chosen focus and methodologies. Being the exclusive preserve of powerful individuals, leadership approaches were dominated by an interest in the psychological characteristics of those persons. The contention at the time was that various personality traits and attributes of effective leaders could be established and, most importantly, measured (see Stogdill 1948, 1974). The dominant epistemology of the emerging discipline around leadership was positivism; an approach which tallied well with Taylorism and the Scientific Management movement that held such sway in the earlier part of the Twentieth Century (see Jacques, 1995, for an overview).

Trait theory gave way from the mid Twentieth Century onwards to studies which sought to correlate attributes of the individual leader (qualities, styles or skills) with features of the social or organizational context in which leadership was purported to be exercised (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Likert, 1961; Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958). Although the positivist emphasis still persisted, such theory heralded the initial

acknowledgement that leadership might need to be understood as involving social and relational processes. This shift in the focus of attention, however, did not happen as a result of serendipity, we contend, but is, rather, a development that needs to be placed in historiographical context and understood in relation to a wider social and political *mise-en-scène*.

The immediate post World War II era saw the beginnings of an ideological shift in emphasis away from an *exclusive privileging* of individual corporate executives and other senior figures to a more plural and relational conception of leadership processes. This gradual change in the direction of leadership studies can be understood to have taken place against a backdrop of the confrontational political dynamics of Cold War politics; a context that resulted in a geopolitical standoff between the democratic principles of what we now think of as informing liberal democracy and, as positioned in the discourses of Western powers, the ‘freedom-stifling’ autocracies typical of Soviet Union Marxism Leninism and the Maoist Communism of the newly formed People’s Republic of China. The values of purportedly democratic systems made space for, and normatively privileged, dialogue in contrast to single party authoritarianism that actively suppressed political involvement and participation. At least this was the Western discourse during this period; a discourse which ultimately ‘prevailed’ with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of what was hailed in the late 1980s as the Washington Consensus (Williamson, 2004) and geopolitical developments that some celebrated as the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992).

It was within this political climate that conceptions of pluralism and dialogue in the fields of leadership and organization studies began to gain a foothold and gradually flourish. Whilst this influence takes highly variegated forms and is hardly a conscious phenomenon, we nonetheless consider it to be evident in such democracy-inspired dialogism as seen, for example, in the work of early advocates of participatory approaches to organizational

consultancy and intervention (see, inter alia, Lewin, 1997 [1948]; Revans, 1983; Schein, 1969). It is also present in the writings of such organizational theorists as Perrow (1970; 1974), Silverman (1970; 1974) and Weick (1979) who, by introducing multiple frameworks, raise the possibility of relativism and pluralism in conceptualizing organizing and organization. These, alongside many other works in organization theory and organization development that proliferated from the late 1940s onward, have contributed to corresponding shift in the academic study of leadership. L-A-P arguably finds its origins in the democratic values and practices associated with the Organization Development (OD) movement (Burnes & Cooke, 2012) which also emerged in this period of pluralistic post-war ferment and was directly related to the growth of participatory and action research approaches to organizational change interventions.

L-A-P draws inspiration from OD's emphasis on seeking to understand interactive and relational *processes* of organizational change. Whereas OD limits democratic and participatory agency to individuals and groups within organizations, however, L-A-P adopts a more radical stance by extending the scope of agentic possibilities from individuals to non-humans. One sees in this democratization of organization and leadership not only the acknowledged influence of existential philosophy – particularly that of Sartre (Raelin, 2016c) – but also a debt to post-structural thought. This is evident, for example, in the sociomaterial conception of leadership processes which admit the agency of such non-human elements as the physical configuration of spaces, objects, documentary materials and such like. Here we see a distinct resonance, for example, with the in-the-moment radical ethnographic empiricism of Actor-network theory (ANT), with its emphasis on networks of relationships between human and non-human 'actants' within fields of organization and organizing (Latour, 2005). Certain L-A-P scholars (e.g., Kempster et al., 2016; Sergi, 2016) acknowledge the importance of ANT and it seems reasonable, therefore, to draw parallels

between the two approaches, not least with the respect to the radical pluralism and democratization of agency and socio-material process that both embrace.

Empirical applications of the L-A-P approach

Our discussion above highlights that the L-A-P project has grown out of the Western context, and is immersed in Western thinking about democracy, dialogue and collective decision-making. It places value upon conversation, consensus, and negotiation of shared understandings and meanings, and sees the operationalization of these processes through the formation of action learning teams. However, one might argue that viewing the social world as consisting of flows of practices requires that we are open to conceptualizing *all* leadership as practice, and to applying the ‘practice lens’ to explain leadership also in contexts where democracy, dialogue and collective decision-making are not prioritized, and where action learning teams are absent. Otherwise, we are in danger of restricting ourselves to using the L-A-P discourse and terminology only in limited situations: namely, those where leadership is performed in a way that adheres to the values of democracy and dialogue. In restricting our use of L-A-P in this way, we would be replicating the same problem that, arguably, much of leadership studies suffers from: presenting leadership as inherently ‘good’, and dismissing situations where ‘bad’ leadership is evident as not really being examples of leadership (see also Alvesson, 2019; Spoelstra & Ten Bos, 2011). We would argue that, rather than limiting L-A-P to situations characterised by democracy and dialogue, it is important to use its potential for understanding the whole range of entwinements of human and non-human aspects of practice. The notion of practice, in itself, allows us to view and explain the world as we encounter and experience it, rather than just as we would like it to be. Following this logic, a conceptualization of leadership as practice has the potential to help us appreciate how different aspects of practice are entwined and come together, and how leadership emerges also in situations and contexts where – as is the case with the majority of contemporary

organizations across the world – there is little scope for forming action learning teams, and the need for sensitive negotiation of shared understandings and meanings is not explicitly recognized or valued.

To illustrate the point we are trying to make and the ways in which the analytical possibilities of L-A-P could be expanded, we shall use an example drawn from our own work. Case and Śliwa (2020) adopt L-A-P as a framework for understanding leadership practices in the context of a rural development project in Lao People’s Democratic Republic that one of the authors, Case, was engaged in from 2011-16. Based on Case’s experiences at an early stage of the project, we published a co-constructed auto-ethnographic account of the emergence of leadership process that took into account such culturally specific and socio-material factors as the configuration of meeting spaces, positioning of participants, the function of ‘turns-at-talk’ and meeting agendas. The article also documents Case’s learning over time and his deliberate agentic interventions in the leadership process as his understanding of the cultural context evolved. We report on how Case set out to learn how leadership was accomplished in this context and how he subsequently used his growing knowledge to promote project outcomes directed at increasing food security and improving smallholder farmer livelihoods.

Our work attracted the attention of one of the foremost protagonists of L-A-P, Joe Raelin, and prompted a friendly and constructive debate. Raelin raised a number of issues that carry implications for the scope and remit of L-A-P (Case, Śliwa & Raelin, 2022; Raelin, 2022; Śliwa & Case, 2020;). One of the concerns Raelin (2022) expresses about our study of leadership in Laos was the seeming lack of any attempt on the part of the protagonist, Case, to use his agency to change the prevailing autocratic, person-centric modes of leading that he encountered. Raelin frames this as a privileging of ‘distributive justice’ (a concern with the

project's utilitarian outcomes) on our part over 'procedural justice' (a focus on the ethical dynamics of leadership process in the settings described).

However, Raelin argues that this was a misdirected effort. Case, he implies, *should* have used whatever influence he developed to intervene in settings to promote more participatory, equitable and democratic leadership processes. In our rejoinder (Śliwa & Case, 2022), we offer several reasons why such an approach would have been counterproductive and, indeed, could have exposed Case to personal risk in a context in which the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) governs with unquestionable and unchallengeable authority. What we take from this aspect of the debate from Raelin, however, has wider implications for L-A-P.

It seems to us that, in its current form, L-A-P is being unwittingly constrained by the kinds of normative participatory, pluralistic and democratically-inspired legacies that we outlined in an earlier section of the chapter. In short, should L-A-P take as its *raison d'être* the normative and avowedly interventionist project of democratizing leadership at every opportunity or, alternatively, can it be interpreted as offering a programme of *empirical enquiry and analysis* which is unencumbered by any form of *à priori* ethical assumptions about *leadership practices*? Is it able to 'bracket' its own ethical orientation for analytical purposes or must it invariably adopt a normative stance toward leadership practice? It has perhaps taken our study of leadership in a radically different cultural context (Laos) to bring this question to the fore. We contend that our study demonstrates the fecundity of adopting a L-A-P lens for analysing and interpreting leadership phenomena and processes in what was, for us as Western trained academics, a remote and decidedly unfamiliar setting. Observed leadership practices in Laos, informed by both its ancient and more recent histories, are unselfconsciously *person-centric* and *authoritarian* in quality (Case et al., 2017). The analytical power we discovered in L-A-P stemmed from the facility it gave us to examine,

understand and learn from the empirics of *actual practices*. This power was not circumscribed by what we take to be an unhelpful layer of normative ethics that would necessitate intentionally *changing* what we found in the Lao context so it might conform to an *à priori* assumed set of ideal values and expectations underpinning the current conceptualization of L-A-P; an ideal which, in contemporary organizations across the world, including the West, is rarely adhered to.

Our contention is that much greater care and self-reflexivity are needed to avoid imposing assumptions regarding an ‘ethics of liberation’ and putative ‘democracy’ in contexts where such values would be seen by research participants as deeply alien and possibly threatening. This is not to advocate a position of political quietism or suggest that critique of a given status quo from a democratic and participatory perspective should not be advanced. Indeed, many academics and observers both within and outside Laos have been highly critical of the regime (e.g., Sims, 2018; Stuart-Fox, 2006); but we believe that L-A-P might be better deployed in this and other non-democratic organizational and political contexts to expose, empirically, *the situated unfolding of leadership* the better to understand the intricate sociomaterial dynamics of observed practices. Moreover, we contend that this should be done with as much sensitivity and reflexivity as can be mustered by (participant) observers in any given context. Understanding and learning might also be tested, moreover, in context-sensitive and appropriate ways with local practitioners by, for example, applying the social anthropological principles of ‘emic operations’ (Case et al., 2017; Harris, 1979; Pike, 1993). According to Harris (1979: 32): ‘emic operations have as their hallmark the elevation of the native informant [*sic*] to the status of ultimate judge of the adequacy of the observer’s description and analyses. Etic operations, in contrast, elevate the observer to the status of judge of the concepts and categories employed’. So, we are suggesting that local practitioner perspectives and understandings should be garnered by *engaging* with research

participants and finding opportunities to test conclusions arrived at through immersive observation.

To summarize, whilst acknowledging the ‘democratic roots’ (Woods, 2016) of L-A-P, we would like to draw attention to the potential of the L-A-P lens for ‘recognizing and studying what is’ (Woods, 2016: 73), regardless of the context and its prevalent values.

Agency, power and inequalities within leadership practice

An emphasis on L-A-P as an analytical lens that can be applied in different contexts and situations presents a provocation to L-A-P thinking insofar as it implies that ‘practice’ in ‘leadership practice’ might not necessarily always be about ‘noble means’ and ‘noble ends’. Applied as an analytical lens, L-A-P can allow us to discuss individuals’ interventions within the flow of leadership practice as not only intentional and self-reflexive but also as potentially manipulative. Here, we pose a challenge for L-A-P researchers who might argue that there are no circumstances under which manipulative conduct is justifiable. But does this mean that manipulative conduct cannot be analysed using the L-A-P approach?

We suggest that, rather than discounting ‘manipulative’ conduct as falling outside the remit of what the L-A-P perspective can offer to our understanding and improvement of leadership, it is important that we acknowledge within L-A-P that individuals are capable of influencing the direction of leadership practice. Indeed, many people aspire to positions of formal authority precisely in order to be able to have influence on leadership processes and outcomes in organizations. In ethical terms, such acknowledgement implies that we need to pay attention to the fact that we have individual responsibility for the ‘leadership effect’ (Kempster & Parry, 2019) that emerges out of the flow of leadership practice we are part of. Adopting the L-A-P lens can remind us that the complex entwinements within the flow of practice mean that no one has a complete influence on leadership practice. It also helps us see

that we are part of this flow and therefore through exercising our own human agency, we can consciously play a role in its unfolding in a way that non-human actants cannot.

Viviane Sergi (2016: 111) eloquently draws our attention to materiality of leadership, and to the fact that human beings are not the only participants in leadership practice: ‘leadership is about persons and [...] they need to be at the heart of our inquiries into leadership’, however, ‘by active accounting for the contribution of materiality to leadership interactions’, we can ‘shift the focus of leadership from individuals to collective, material and embodied practices in context’. To Sergi (2016: 117), agency ‘emerges out of the associations between human and non-human actors as they happen in context’; although she highlights that this ‘should not be interpreted as “removing” or “denying” agency to humans’.

We are fascinated by this tension between understanding agency as located within practice itself, i.e., as emerging out of associations between human and non-human actors, and as residing within individuals. Moreover, we believe that there is scope for developing a more nuanced understanding of agency and power within L-A-P, and especially of the variegated and unequal ways in which different actors can use agency to influence practice. To begin with, although leadership practice involves both human and non-human participants, the former have the ability to purposefully exercise awareness and reflexivity in ways that the latter, as is widely accepted, do not. This does make a difference to how we can conceptualize the presence and agency of, say, a person, a dog and a chair in the flow of practice. People not only participate in leadership practice, they also have the capacity to observe, appreciate and reflect on its complex and relational nature. In turn, the potential to understand, at least partially, the leadership practice one is part of, gives rise to responsibility for both developing this understanding and for purposefully shaping how one participates in it and contributes to leadership. Put differently: in conceptualizing leadership as involving interactions between human and non-human participants (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016), L-A-

P requires human participants to have clarity about their own situatedness within and significance for leadership practice.

The direction of the flow of leadership practice might be emergent but it is not random. Crevani and Endrissat (2016: 23) usefully refer to the idea of ‘reorientation’, i.e., changes in the direction of the flow of practice. If we know that human participants have the capacity to understand their own situatedness in the flow of practice, and that their agency contributes to the direction of leadership practice and the leadership effect, then we must also acknowledge that people might want – and be able – to consciously exercise power within this flow. This is important, not least because, as Collinson (2018a: 389) observes, the L-A-P movement has attributed ‘disproportionate significance’ to the concept of practice whilst giving too little attention to structure and power. To quote Carroll, ‘there is something about power with which L-A-P needs to grapple a whole lot better than it has and does’ (in Raelin et al., 2018: 377). If we accept that, when participating in the flow of practice, individuals: 1) are able to understand, even if only partially, their embeddedness and complicity within it and 2) that they might want to influence it, we also need to accept that different individuals will have a different level of capacity to both develop this understanding and to exercise influence on the flow of practice. To push this argument further, some human participants in leadership practice might choose to act purposefully to limit other participants’ influence on the flow and direction of practice. As such, the flow of practice is not only characterized by the presence of power but also by its unique, context-dependent power relations. All participants, be they human or non-human, are contextually embedded in different ways and typically, some participants have greater scope to influence the re-orientation of ‘the flow of practice towards new directions’ (Raelin, 2016b: 12) than others.

As we argue based on our study of leadership learning and practice in Laos (Case & Śliwa, 2020), when we shift analytical emphasis from ‘leaders’ to ‘leadership’, and when we

believe this emphasis on the flow of leadership practice to be ontologically and epistemologically more accurate than an emphasis on individual leaders, this does not change the fact that people experience themselves in terms of an 'I', and, based on the conventional experience of individual consciousness as separate from the external world, use their agency purposefully to, among others, influence the world around them. This influence can sometimes be easily discerned, as exemplified by a situation in which a person changes the spatial arrangement of a meeting room to ensure that the way in which chairs are arranged in the room 'works' to the person's advantage (see Case & Śliwa, 2020). The L-A-P perspective helps us understand that, in a situation like this, agency emerges in interaction between the human being and the chair, but it is important to note that these two actants' ability to purposefully exercise agency is very different. Whilst we agree that ultimately, leadership practice can be understood as resulting from a conjoint, hybrid agency and reciprocal dependence (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016; Gronn, 2002; Raelin, 2014), this hybrid agency represents multiple individual agencies, which are neither equal in terms of their degree of self-consciousness nor in terms of their agentic power.

Importantly, this inequality is not limited to the difference in capacity for self-consciousness and purposeful action between human and non-human participants in leadership practice. The differences in how different participants are embedded in the flow of practice, and in the extent to which they are able to influence it, are also substantial when only human participants are considered. Here, we would like to point to another challenge that L-A-P faces – and another area that is currently under-developed within L-A-P research – namely, the lack of consideration of the role of diversity and inequalities (for example, in relation to gender, race, ability and location within organisational hierarchy) among human participants in the flow of practice. Discussions of leadership in the context of gender have been taking place for a few decades now, both within the mainstream leadership literature

(e.g., Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Shen & Joseph, 2021) and among critical scholars, drawing on feminist perspectives (e.g. Ford, 2005; Kark, 2004). Similarly, considerations of leadership in conjunction with race and ethnicity can be found in different strands of leadership literature (e.g., Liu & Baker, 2016; Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Yet, analogous discussions are yet to be held within the L-A-P literature and to enrich our theorisation of leadership practice. We believe that L-A-P would greatly benefit from unpacking the ‘black box’ of the ‘flow of practice’ through engagement with how power, agency and inequalities within leadership practice shape the direction and effect of leadership.

Future directions for the development of L-A-P

The appreciative assessment of L-A-P’s innovative contribution to the field of leadership studies, coupled with the various points of critique that we have outlined in this chapter, lead us to conclude that there remain fresh and as yet untapped potential in this perspective. We conclude by offering some reflections on possible future directions that research and scholarship informed by L-A-P might take. Our suggestions are by no means exhaustive but, rather, intended to set out some ideas that interested readers might like to pursue.

We have argued that there currently exists an unresolved tension between L-A-P’s normative ethical preoccupations (put crudely, concerns about what ‘good’ leadership process *should* involve) and its interest in revealing the momentary empirical dynamics of leadership practice in any given setting. One way of resolving this tension would be to temporarily ‘bracket’ the *à priori* assumed set of values and expectations concerning ‘participation’, ‘dialogue’ and putatively ‘democratic ideals’ – which, as we indicated, find their roots in L-A-P’s particular intellectual genealogy – and, instead, use the L-A-P lens to focus with as much research reflexivity as possible on *empirically observed practices*. A reflexively ‘enhanced’ form of L-A-P, as it were, would be empowered to examine leadership in contemporary organizations across the world, including those in the West, in which

democratic and participatory ideals are rarely adhered to. The avowed purpose would be ‘recognizing and studying what is’ (Woods, 2016: 73), fully acknowledging, but not prejudging, any values and expectations that inform leadership process.

Various authors have called for closer examination of learning, agency and power in the L-A-P approach (e.g., Collinson, 2018a, 2018b; Kempster et al., 2017; Raelin, 2016a; Raelin et al., 2018). We agree that these dimensions of leadership practice deserve careful study and interrogation and contend that the ‘warts and all’ empirical approach we advocate would better equip L-A-P to reveal these dimensions of leadership process. Whilst fully endorsing the sociomaterial analytical ambitions of L-A-P, we nonetheless argue that the ontological status of agency with respect to human and non-human participants differs both in terms of availability (not everyone or everything has equal access to the possibility of ‘influence’) and scope. Certain individual human agents, we contend, are capable of influencing the direction of leadership and effects in a self-reflexive way that is not possible for non-human agents. This, again, carries implications for what the L-A-P lens is able to apprehend and expose if unencumbered by normative ethical presumptions. The empirical form of L-A-P that we imagine would be able to analyse and better understand what it heretofore has found unpalatable, for example, situations in which human agents are deliberately intervening to manipulate the direction and flow of leadership. Moreover, we strongly contend that ‘manipulation’ in pursuit of what are perceived by human agents to be utile and/or ethical ends is an everyday occurrence in organizational settings. Whether such manipulation is deemed ethically ‘desirable’, ‘good’, ‘bad’ or something ‘in between’, would be a matter to suspend for analytical purposes and to revisit once an appropriately reflexive account of *actual situated practice* had been derived. L-A-P’s analytical power would be enhanced rather than diminished by revealing and scrutinising such practices.

The reflexive empirical focus we advocate would generate knowledge that could better inform normative interventions and map the conditions of possibility for future changes to leadership process in any given organizational context. In other words, improved knowledge of practices could, under certain conditions, form the basis of planned interventions (themselves expressions of human agency) within a leadership process. The fresh orientation we are proposing would also better equip L-A-P to explore and examine the dynamics of diversity, inclusivity and inequality wherever and under whatever circumstances they manifest. We propose that it is time for L-A-P to seriously and explicitly consider the diversity of human participants within the flow of practice, and to analyse the different ways in which the different ‘materialities of human bodies’ – as represented by aspects of diversity such as gender, race, and ability – impact individuals’ positioning within the flow of practice and their ability to influence it. L-A-P has drawn our attention to, and enabled us to understand much better the entwinements of human and non-human participants within leadership practice. Time is now ripe to explore the complexities and power relations within entwinements *among* the human participants in leadership-as-practice; an endeavour that would be greatly aided by drawing on insights from research into equality/equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in organizational contexts.

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