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Jean Hartley,

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# Ten propositions about public leadership

Jean Hartley

*Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, The Open University,  
Milton Keynes, UK*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of some pressing but under-researched aspects of public leadership. Ten propositions about public leadership are set out and these are intended to be thought-provoking and even controversial in order to stimulate researchers to design research which addresses key theoretical and practical questions about leadership in the public sphere. They will also help practitioners navigate an increasingly complex leadership context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This invited essay uses ten propositions about public leadership, selected from three sources: the leadership literature, the author's own research and from collaborative research discussions with academics, policy makers and practitioners.

**Findings** – The first proposition argues for distinguishing public leadership from public service leadership given that the former is about leadership of the public sphere. Other propositions concern context; purpose; conflict and contest at the heart of public leadership; leadership with political astuteness; dual leadership; leadership projections; fostering resilience; leadership, authority and legitimacy; and the challenge to researchers to use research designs which reflect the complexity and dynamism of public leadership.

**Practical implications** – While this essay is primarily addressed to researchers, there are many ideas and concepts which practising leaders will find insightful and useful in their work.

**Originality/value** – This essay draws on deep experience in undertaking high-quality academic research about public leadership which draws from and feeds into policy and practice. It utilises organisational psychology, public management and political science to create synergies in order to enhance the understanding of public leadership.

**Keywords** Public leadership, Co-research, Contest and conflict, Context and leadership, Dual leadership, Political astuteness

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

This paper reviews the public leadership field through ten propositions. These are my personal choice, not only strongly grounded in the academic literature on public leadership but also drawing on my own research and on informal discussions with academics, policy makers and practitioners on this topic. I take seriously the value of undertaking Mode 2 research (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994), where stimulating ideas for research and for practice come not only from academics and journal articles, but also from policy and practitioner communities. This is consistent with my approach to research, with a commitment to both rigour and relevance. I hope the paper will be enriching, encouraging, enlightening and inspiring for those interested in public leadership ideas and action.

Some claim that the literature on public leadership is meagre (Kellerman and Webster, 2001) or in short supply (Getha-Taylor *et al.*, 2011), with public leadership the “poor cousin” to the generic leadership literature, which has been predominantly concerned with firms in

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the private sphere. Yet, there have been crucial contributions to generic leadership theory made by those studying public leadership and leadership development, showing that the public sphere is a rich and substantial arena in which to study and practice leadership. From the work of Plato and Aristotle on city leadership and on leadership “formation” (Wren, 2007) through Machiavelli’s writings about leadership in times of volatility and uncertainty (Machiavelli, 1984) to military studies (Jenkins, 1947) or the concepts of transformational and transactional leadership which originally derived from studies of elected politicians (Burns, 1978) and the unveiling of distributed leadership in schools (Spillane, 2005), the concepts derived from public leadership studies have shaped wider thinking. These are but examples. What else might we discover from research into public leadership? What else might be gifted to the leadership field in general?

It is a critical time to be studying and practising leadership. Societies, states and markets around the globe are in a period of profound, transformative change (Benington, 2011), and there are many different leadership approaches to those challenges (Crosby and Bryson, 2018). Globalisation has had both very positive and also deeply negative effects on societies, with growing economic and social inequality and a darkening sense of resentment and injustice. Concurrently, technological developments bring both opportunity and threat to employment, social relations, democracy, public discourse, knowledge, income distribution, surveillance and crime, in ways which leave many people feeling unsettled and distrustful. Further wicked problems such as climate change, international trade relations, migration and immigration, ageing of the population, the rise of illiberal democracies to mention just a few provide a potent mix for leadership to try to grapple with.

The paper now turns to the ten propositions which are intended to stimulate research and action for the benefit of society. Each proposition is a self-contained section with literature and questions for further research. In the conclusion, I draw threads together:

*P1. Distinguishing between public leadership and public services leadership.*

It is timely to revisit conceptualisations of what academic researchers mean by public leadership, because how a field is defined and understood affects very fundamentally the research questions which are addressed. At this period of profound societal change, it is valuable to re-look at these foundational matters.

Much of the literature on public leadership focuses on those who have formal authority in government and public services (e.g. Van Wart, 2013; Brookes and Grint, 2010) – elected and appointed politicians at all governmental levels, and public officials working for government and public services. Public leadership has often been assumed to be about public sector leadership or public services leadership.

However, there is increasing recognition that a different conceptualisation is called for. In part, this is due to the changed governance context in many societies, including polycentric governance (Ostrom, 2010), also called multi-level governance (Benington, 2000), which means that a focus solely on state actors and state processes is insufficient to understand public leadership. Additionally, there is a greater interest in exploring whether and how leadership can contribute to the wider public interest, for example, the common good (Crosby and Bryson, 2005) or the public realm (Kellerman and Webster, 2001) or contributes to the creation of public value in wider society (Getha-Taylor *et al.*, 2011; Crosby and Bryson, 2018) or in the public sphere (Benington and Hartley, in press). This means that leadership may be in, with or against the state. Public leadership may come from state, market and/or civil society.

This paper therefore deploys the following definition of public leadership: mobilising individuals, organisations and networks to formulate and/or enact purposes, values and actions which aim or claim to create valued outcomes for the public sphere. Here, the focus is not only on individual actors but also on processes and practices which shape the attention and resources of others about publicly agreed or sought goals and actions. It is not solely

about public-office holders but about those who shape public debate and action. Habermas (1962/1989) conceived of the public sphere as an arena where people debate and shape public matters and challenge values, decisions and activities in the market, the state, and civil society, open to all citizens (see also Benington, 2015; Bryson *et al.*, 2014; Sennett, 1977).

The shift in perspective from a focus on public-office holders to all those who shape the public sphere is a fundamental shift. The focus is not only on those working in or for public organisations, but also the range of actors and processes which influence the public sphere. So, public leadership is not only about the public sector but also leadership from the other two sectors, the voluntary/community sector and the private sector. Public leadership may come from: political leadership (often elected in democratic societies but also appointed); professional leadership in public services (e.g. clinical leadership in health, public managers in local and central government; police leadership); community or civic leadership – formal and informal roles as civil society activists, voluntary sector leaders and in social movements claiming to act for the public good (e.g. social campaigners and activists, aspects of the media); and private sector leadership where it is concerned with generating public goods and with providing public value through corporate social responsibility.

Seen from this perspective, there is currently much more academic research about public officials, than on other actors and processes of public leadership. The interest in officials is very valuable – but perhaps academics need to clarify that where the focus is only about government and public services (the state) then it should be labelled public services leadership, reserving the term public leadership for leadership and leadership processes, from whatever quarter, which try to have an impact on the public sphere.

Crucially, for the future, this also means that as much consideration should be given to the concept of “public” as that of leadership. I would argue that the field will advance substantially once academics routinely take on board the need to conceptualise both concepts. Too often, “the public” element of leadership has been assumed or taken for granted:

## P2. Taking account of the highly dynamic context of leadership.

How far does research on public leadership take account of context? This is widely advocated for leadership studies (e.g. Porter and McLaughlin, 2006) but is rarely adhered to beyond a short description of context at the beginning of a case. How can we analyse context in ways which draws on and adds to theory and understanding?

The US Army coined the term volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) to describe highly dynamic and complex contexts (Barber, 1992; Petrie, 2011). The acronym and its implications for leadership have been deployed in the military and by strategic business leaders and multi-national firms, but academic analysis and research have not yet caught up with this approach (whether to research it or critique it).

Volatility concerns the nature, speed, volume and magnitude of change, which may change rapidly and suddenly. The work of Eisenhardt and Brown (1998) shows how organisations can try to cope with that rapidity of change. Uncertainty concerns the difficulties of predicting what may happen and what may be the effects of that change on organisations and individuals. The work of Milliken (1987) is particularly useful in teasing out different dimensions of uncertainty. Complexity addresses the inter-relatedness of dynamics and processes across a whole system, with emergent properties, not only those which are planned (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007). Ambiguity concerns the difficulties of coming to a clear view or clear meaning of events, with instead a variety of interpretations and sense-making (Denis *et al.*, 1996; Baran and Scott, 2010). These aspects of context create white-water conditions for leadership – where context and conditions change rapidly and where the purposes and processes of leadership are not necessarily shared or understood in that context. The influence of context on leadership (and vice versa) has not yet been sufficiently explored in public leadership research.

From a research point of view, there is much to take on board in considering this context. First, the various challenges themselves are worthy of investigation, providing new insights into leadership challenges and processes and in terms of impact contributing to trying to address wicked problems in society. Detailed empirical studies such as those of Baran and Scott (2010) on leadership in conditions of ambiguity for fire-fighters help show a way forward for such studies.

Furthermore, such dynamic aspects of context mean that there needs to be a greater research emphasis on the processes of sense-making and sense-giving in leadership studies than perhaps has occurred so far, because context is at least partly socially constructed (Grint, 2010). The analysis of context is also a reminder of the distinction between “tame” and “wicked” (also called technical and adaptive) problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Brown and Head, 2018), and the emphasis by some leadership scholars of different forms of leadership for each (e.g. Heifetz, 1994). Research designs need to be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances if there is to be an understanding of how leadership operates in VUCA conditions. Of course, VUCA is not the only contextual framework which might be deployed in research, but it also offers much analytical richness if well-specified and studied:

### P3. Clarity of purpose in leadership.

Leadership is sometimes defined as concerned with pursuing, shaping, finding or agreeing particular goals (e.g. Stogdill, 1950; Kempster *et al.*, 2011) yet very often studies of leadership overleap this feature, taking for granted that leadership has purpose. Yet, it can be one of the most difficult and the most revealing aspects of leadership.

Sometimes the over-leaping may be a methodological artefact, if researchers come along *post hoc* to a challenging context and the leadership articulates a compelling vision and plan of action as though this had always been in place. Hind-sight often creates order and logic which may not have been present earlier.

Some studies which probe more deeply or for a longer period can illuminate the difficulties leaders often have in finding, defining or clarifying purpose, or in avoiding being distracted from key purpose. Rice (1958), in the Tavistock Institute tradition, showed that identifying the primary task is not always easy but is vitally important. Heifetz (1994) indicated that the first – and continuing – job of leadership is to identify the adaptive challenge. Both Rice and Heifetz indicate that purpose cannot be assumed but must be thought out, explored and often refined. Heifetz emphasises that learning is involved – for the leadership as much as others involved in the situation. This is shown in the case study by Benington and Turbitt (2007), which illustrated that the key leadership purpose for the police shifted, over time, from keeping two opposed groups from harming each other (with the police often in the middle) to being focused on the police behaving differently towards law-keepers and law-breakers (whichever side they were on) and encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their own behaviour. This was a major shift in purpose and therefore leadership role.

But do researchers really spend enough time exploring how purpose is perceived, articulated and communicated, and where it comes from? This, surely, is an important area for researchers to pay attention to. This is much more than having a mission or a vision (the usual organisational policy statements on paper) because public leadership is often contested, and concerned with conflict and tensions, due to working with multiple stakeholders. In a dynamic context, purpose may change.

The need to think about purpose is particularly relevant in a VUCA world. If control over the immediate environment is relatively low (e.g. it is unpredictable due to volatility and complexity), then leadership based on detailed, singular planning may be unrealistic. Instead of detailed planning in such environments, there may be a need to articulate and communicate the overall purpose, and to revisit this regularly, even if the precise

mechanisms for how to get there are opaque or not yet known. The metaphor of a sailing-boat or row-boat captain may be apt. The captain knows where s/he wants to arrive at, but the timing, and the route taken will depend on the wind, the currents, the tides, the waves, and the skills and motivation of the crew. The captain may not be able to say with any accuracy what will happen each day, but s/he will help to maintain the morale of the crew by focusing on purpose and goal, in a realistic and encouraging way.

Interestingly, this is well illustrated through the analysis of Shackleton's leadership in the Antarctic over nearly two years, after the team had to abandon its original purpose to reach the South Pole, and the goal became to survive in a hostile, complex and uncertain context, while maintaining a strong sense of purpose and resilience (Morrell and Capparell, 2001).

One concept which is particularly relevant to leadership purpose is that of discerning and creating public value. This concept was developed originally by Moore (1995) and since extended by Benington (2011), with some links to leadership made explicit (Benington and Hartley, in press; Hartley *et al.*, in press). Benington's (2015) conception of public value as a contested democratic practice critically addressed questions about what adds value to the public sphere. For Benington (2011), public value is based on two inter-linked dimensions, concerned with what members of the public most value in this specific context and also what adds value to the public sphere. These two dimensions are sometimes in tension and can be dynamic and changeable. These are often (though not exclusively) matters for leadership activity, either to decide directly or to orchestrate the conditions in which others decide/participate in decision making. Leadership may be needed to bring people together to explore and discuss a range of views and find ways to reach a degree of consensus so that action can be taken, and public value assessed in a satisfactory way for many stakeholders. In a recent research case study, part of the role of a particular police leadership was not just to uphold the law, or to offer a service to protect citizens, but crucially, the leadership had to first create and support a public concerned with a difficult pervasive problem (Hartley *et al.*, in press).

Purpose can be fascinating for researchers. It is not a given but is often socially constructed. Public leadership, through having to work with and against a variety of stakeholders, has to grapple extensively and intensively with this issue of purpose because different stakeholders may hold radically different views of purpose themselves:

*P4. Conflict and contest lie at the heart of public leadership.*

Conflict and contest are pervasive in public leadership activities and processes. This can be seen particularly in the leadership of elected politicians (Hartley and Benington, 2011) but is also evident in the work of public professionals, who have to grapple with contradictions within policies, multiple goals, diverse publics and a wide variety of stakeholders each with particular interests, or among voluntary sector leaders who may champion and advocate for currently unpopular causes, or private sector leaders trying to win over a skeptical public about some of their proposals about public matters.

Public leadership is about actions and decisions about the public sphere or public realm, so politics, both formal and informal, surround and infuse it. Sometimes the variety of interests and values is occluded by the calm, legal-rational explanations about the power, roles and institutions of the state and talk of "the public interest", but contest and conflict borne out of politics is always under if not on the surface. Do public leadership academics make enough of this in their analytical assumptions?

The context of polycentric governance, or collaborative governance (Torfing and Ansell, 2016), reinforces rather than reduces some of the contestation and conflict. There are overlapping spheres not only hierarchical tiers of influence, with devolution and localism creating new sources of authority and power, and civic and social movements creating new

sources of legitimacy, discourses and activities. Leadership has to navigate and influence multiple arenas, where ideas and actions are scrutinised, contested and debated.

Furthermore, the existence of wicked problems means that there is often no single, consensually agreed public goal to be achieved. Instead, leadership has to work with, and negotiate with, many different stakeholders who have divergent values, goals, ideologies and interests. There may be complex negotiations between multiple, cross-cutting and competing interests before it is possible to create a coalition with a degree of actionable shared purpose. Contest is endemic.

Part of the work of public leadership – if it is to achieve public value – is to work with multiple publics (Benington and Hartley, in press; Hartley *et al.*, in press) in order to channel contest in ways which are productive and which avoid where possible antagonistic bi-polar zero-sum conflict. Of course, there are populist leaders who do work with such Manichean dichotomies and who “other” minorities or the less powerful (Crosby and Bryson, 2018). However, for a fair society (Wren, 2007), leaders try to channel contest and conflict into agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2005) in order to generate respectful contest over ideas and actions so that action can be taken, with consent and agreement, in recognition of rather than in denial of differences. Contest is sometimes formally channelled into institutions such as parliaments and councils, elections, courts, and also sometimes more informally in public meetings, other debates in the public sphere, whether physical or virtual, and in private meetings. Managing conflict and contest is pervasive for public leadership and is in marked contrast to private leadership which can focus, quite legitimately, on single purposes and “winner-takes-all” competition if it so chooses.

There is much more that public leadership academics could do to research conflict and contest, examining where it is present and how it is dealt with under, for example, different structural arrangements and in different arenas, often with multiple leaders claiming legitimacy to speak on behalf of others. Polycentric governance systems where there is contest and complexity include: leadership roles in parallel (distributed leadership); leadership roles in concert (collaborative leadership); and leadership roles battling each other (adversarial leadership). There is scope for researchers to explore the varied relationships between context and leadership constellations to a greater extent than has happened so far:

*P5. Leadership requires political astuteness.*

A corollary of contest in public leadership is that the capabilities to handle diverse and sometimes competing interests across a range of stakeholders needs further theorisation and research. Public leaders need political skills. This is as true for generic leadership theory as for public leadership theory but is especially pertinent in the context of public purposes and multiple stakeholders.

Generic leadership theory in organisational settings has, until recently, neglected the existence and treatment of both formal and informal politics in the workplace and this has impoverished leadership theory in whatever sector or sphere. The predominant approach to politics in organisational settings had been to view it as illegitimate or dysfunctional activity (Hartley, 2017).

In part, this avoidance or suppression of the analysis of politics in the workplace may reflect a unitarist bias in generic leadership, which has tended to emphasise shared goals and aspirations in leadership. However, as already analysed in this paper, for a variety of reasons, there are likely to be a plurality of interests, goals, aspirations and values, so part of the purpose of leadership is about fostering a sufficient degree of consensus to achieve outcomes (which may not be the same as having shared goals). Baddeley and James (1987) echo this approach in arguing that “being politically skilled means being able to manage the requisite variety of your organisation” (p. 5). This covers both “small p” and “big P” politics.



There is increasing recognition of the value of political astuteness in leadership (sometimes also called political “nous” savvy, or political acumen). Hartley *et al.* (2013) defined political astuteness as “deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to create sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes” (p. 24). This conceptualisation views politics as being about constructing consent out of different interests, which sometimes requires competition and sometimes collaboration. This definition is neutral about outcomes. It is assumed that political astuteness can be used to pursue personal or sectional interests, as well as organisational or societal interests. Empirical research suggests that public servants mainly view political astuteness as a necessary and beneficial set of skills to get things done for constructive ends (Hartley *et al.*, 2015; Manzie and Hartley, 2013).

Leadership with political astuteness can be conceptualised as a set of capabilities (skills, qualities and judgements) exercised in context with a variety of stakeholders. Hartley and Fletcher (2008) identified the following inter-locking dimensions, creating a meta-competency, but operable within particular contexts and with particular stakeholders. The dimensions are: personal skills; interpersonal skills, reading people and contexts; building alignment and alliances; and strategic direction and scanning. Analysis using this framework has been deployed across all sectors (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008) and in public services such as local and central government (Hartley *et al.*, 2015; Manzie and Hartley, 2013) and in the police (Hartley *et al.*, in press).

There are many further contexts where detailed analysis, over time, of the deployment of political skills, and how such skills are acquired or enhanced, would be valuable. Such research can bring together an understanding of the rational, the political and the emotional. More research on the interplay between skills and context would also inform the understanding and theory of public leadership, and it could help to underpin studies of collaborative leadership across organisations, partners and sectors. It has also been suggested as relevant to public strategic management (Bryson *et al.*, 2018):

*P6.* The value of thinking about dual leadership.

It has been fashionable for some time now to eschew a conceptualisation of leadership based on a single leader, in favour of some form of leadership constellation (Denis *et al.*, 2010), where leadership is distributed, shared, conjoint or collective. This is sometimes called “post-heroic” leadership (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer, 2011) though to my mind this terminology is misleading, because it conflates individualism with heroism. It is possible for a team or a group to share leadership and to be heroic. (The rescue of the Thai boys from a flooded cave in 2018 involved both heroism and distributed leadership).

However labelled, leadership constellations are particularly valuable for considering public leadership, whether that is, for example, political leadership (Kane *et al.*, 2011), or professional leadership (Spillane, 2005; Bolden, 2011) or collaborative leadership in partnerships (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Sergi *et al.* (2017) noted that organisations may pluralise their leadership (intentionally or not) for a number of reasons, including structural or collaborative imperatives or idealistic beliefs. Leadership may be in constellation where there are inter-linked roles to achieve complex change, and/or where power is diffuse. While leadership across networks and across partnerships is widely mentioned in the public leadership field, the number of studies which go beyond rhetoric into why, how or with what success such distributed leadership occurs is relatively sparse. There is a real need for more hard-headed and critical research in this field, rather than the recirculation of often normative constructions of distributed leadership. It would be useful to have studies of the dynamics of distributed leadership which examines why, how and to what extent leadership roles are shared and shaped over time, and in what circumstances beyond the obvious facts that these matters are “complex”, “dynamic” and “have tensions”.

One spectacular and curious gap in the pluralistic leadership literature is that concerning dual leadership. Many public organisations have dual leadership at the strategic apex, (e.g. government minister and permanent secretary; local government mayor/political leader and chief executive; university vice-chancellor and registrar). Dual leadership is also prevalent in other situations (artistic organisations, business start-ups), but here I focus on duality in public leadership.

If dual leadership is a prevalent phenomenon, why is it so little studied? The few studies are prominent by their relative isolation. Gronn (1999) examined a “leadership couple” in school leadership. There are studies of the “politics-administration dichotomy” (or debate) (Svara, 2001) though largely couched in terms of roles rather than leadership as such. Alford *et al.* (2017) proposed a zone not just a line between elected officials and public servants, noting they co-constitute dual leadership. Manzie and Hartley’s (2013) empirical study of leadership by senior public servants in central and local government (working daily with elected politicians) found that a useful metaphor for understanding dual leadership was “dancing on ice”. This metaphor captures “the delicate, symbiotic and sometimes precarious process of working together which [...] politicians and senior public servants have to undertake [...]”. The sense of moving together, giving each other space, sometimes one in the spotlight, sometimes the other, where sometimes the partnership may stumble and occasionally fall, encapsulates this dual leadership relationship”.

This proposition is an encouragement to researchers to ponder further the gap between the prevalence of dual leadership and our understanding of it – but also to undertake theoretical and empirical studies focused on dual leadership. It is a very particular form of pluralistic leadership which is under-theorised and under-studied. It could yield great insights in the rich spectrum between individual leadership and completely shared leadership. Gibeau *et al.* (2017) suggested that dual leadership is fascinating because it challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about how leadership occurs in organisations (and I would add partnerships and networks). The challenge for public leadership scholars is to also understand this in the context of polycentric governance:

*P7.* Leadership may include projections from others.

Leadership is, at heart, a relational process (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012) and so there is a need to consider not only leaders and leader activities, but also the processes of connection between leaders and those they interact with. How far have public leadership academics taken account, not only simply of “followers” (with its rather passive connotations) but also of citizens, partner leaders who may be involved in joint initiatives, and peers who may be influenced by ideas, practices and interactions? There is scope here to extend research to understanding much more about the dynamics of leadership processes, not simply taking a leader-centric approach (Riggio, 2014). This involves thinking about attributional processes (which are present in several leadership theories and frameworks), and also psychodynamic processes about power, dependency, identity and authority (De Vries, 2003; Roberts, 2017). Leadership may involve projections from others, and public leadership scholars could fruitfully pay more attention to implicit leadership theory (e.g. Schyns and Schilling, 2011). Projections also influence public, media and even expert assessments of the success or otherwise of leaders, which might be a focus for research.

The relational element in public leadership bears particular analysis, shaped as it is by context. Hoggett (2006) suggested that public servants in general – and we can apply this in spades to public leaders – have to handle the projections of citizens and clients about the public service being a psychological “container” for the mad, the bad and the sad, so that citizens and clients can deny problems and difficulties in their lives or in society by projecting those anxieties and concerns onto public services. This is quite a burden to handle, and it is not often present to the same extent for private sector leadership.

(The situation for the voluntary sector may be very varied). The volatility of the context also means that leadership can quickly go from hero to zero with particular actions or inactions.

With psychological projection mechanisms widely in play, handling such projection could be an indispensable leadership capability. However, relatively speaking, this remains something of a gap in the public leadership literature.

Heifetz (1994) argued that it is the job of leaders to disappoint their followers. Initially, this seems quite a shocking statement, but in uncovering processes of inappropriate dependency and expectations which can occur with leaders who take on fully the projections of others, Heifetz shows how disappointment can spur so-called followers to pay attention to a problem not just expect the leader to take care of everything. Heifetz argues that the disappointment must be at a rate which people can stand, suggesting the value of observant and empathic leadership, with an interest in psychodynamic processes not just rational policies and practices.

Recent work on leadership in post-conflict societies (Khalil, 2018) shows that peace-building leaders trying to reduce violence and blame need to have political astuteness in order to be able to handle the projections from their own group and the opposition groups they work with. They not only deploy political astuteness in order to both differentiate themselves from their own group but also to stay sufficiently integrated with the norms and values of their own group, in order to foster peace-building across communities. Khalil shows how in such extreme contexts, the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001) may be up-ended in that the leader's own group may project feelings and ideas of betrayal onto the leader for not being prototypical of their own group.

Examining implicit leadership theories, attributional biases and/or psychodynamic approaches to leadership is an important counter approach to the sometimes overly rational analysis of public leadership in carrying out agreed policies and practices. Public leadership academics still, perhaps, remain too shackled to the legal-rational basis of authority and of action, with a dangerous under-analysis of the feelings, emotions, projections and other psychological and social processes which can influence dynamics. In leadership development, how much attention is given to helping leaders acquire and enhance their capabilities in understanding and acting in the context of projections from others? At a time of populist leadership, where demagoguery is on the rise, we ignore these issues about projection at our peril:

*P8. The need to foster personal resilience in public leaders.*

Resilience has been linked to well-being in the workplace and the ability to cope with stress (Hesketh and Cooper, 2018). Resilience has gained prominence in academic circles (Bache and Reardon, 2016) because of the pressures on the workforce to perform. It is particularly relevant for those providing public services, who have to deal with increased demand, higher expectations from the public about service standards, and sometimes hostility (and often of course psychological projections) from the public and the media, often in the context of declining resources for public services. Public leadership, particularly where it carries the authority of the state (e.g. elected politicians, chief executives of public organisations), is subject to additional pressures of accountability, often along with public prominence in part based on all the scrutiny which 24-hour rolling news can muster. Resilience is needed because the pace can be relentless and breathless. Given the often VUCA context, a public leader representing government is likely to need to deploy constant attention to a fast-changing environment, to pluralist and sometimes highly divergent interests, to working in a context of polycentric governance, mobilising the workforce around purpose, and assessing whether or not public value outcomes are being achieved. The physical, intellectual and emotional demands of leadership can be very high, leading to the possibility of feeling drained or burnt out. So how can leaders deal with this situation and how can public leadership research help?

Resilience is about the ability to “bounce back” from adversity (whether major events or daily hassles) and there are two strands to this ability. Preventative resilience is concerned with building up a person’s capacity to proactively deal with adverse events and situations, while restorative resilience can help individuals and groups to cope with stress (acute or chronic) and contribute to bringing the person back to normal functioning after high-adrenaline and/or high stress situations. The academic literature seems to suggest that both personality and learned skills contribute to individual differences in personal resilience (Jackson *et al.*, 2007). It is also known that stress can be prevented or ameliorated through social support systems (at or outside the workplace), as well as through certain types of training and personal development programmes so there is much that public leaders can do to both support their own workforce and themselves. Research into blame games can help leaders to navigate the “right” amount of blame to accept in the media which both not only recognises problems but also avoids aggravating unproductive public blame (Resodihardjo *et al.*, 2016). Organisational systems and processes can strengthen or inhibit the resilience of leaders.

But are public leadership academics doing enough research into leadership resilience? As well as drawing on the literatures in relation to stress, well-being and social support, there are some particular features of public leadership which could contribute to productive research. In part, this is the projection of negative feelings onto public figures (noted in *P9*). It is also about working in the public domain, where actions and “solutions” to wicked problems are intended to be beneficial to the whole of society but where conflict and contest are endemic (*P4*). There are many publics and many views about public value (Benington and Hartley, in press). Consequently, the pressures to be resilient are perhaps beyond those found in some other sectors. Leaders also have to manage the paradoxes of remaining empathic to the public while also resilient in terms of their own well-being, which is a topic which would reward well-designed research:

*P9. Leadership, authority and legitimacy.*

The leadership literature in general has often conflated leadership with authority, and public leadership research has sometimes fallen into the same trap. This is not surprising in that early studies of leadership took place in military and in manufacturing contexts, where the leader was the line manager, and the “followers” were subordinates in a hierarchical setting. In public leadership, most attention has been paid to elected politicians and to senior public servants, where authority relations may be still be predominant through formal roles. Also, authority here may come not only from organisational position but also from the authority of the state, with its monopoly on certain aspects of legal and regulatory power.

It would be valuable for research to disentangle the processes of leadership from those of formal authority derived from positional power and institution. Heifetz (1994) distinguished between leadership with authority and that without authority. I prefer to use the terms “with authority” and “beyond authority” (e.g. Hartley and Benington, 2010), recognising that formal authority may often be insufficient as the basis for leadership action, for example, in partnerships and networks, where a combination of formal and informal influence may be used together. Whatever term is used, there is a very different basis of power, of purpose and of relationships according to whether a leadership role is imbued with formal authority. Some of this analysis goes back to forms of power (French and Raven, 1959; Townley, 2008). Informal leadership is less constrained by roles and rules, and by the expectations of others. For those working outside formal authority, such informal leadership can focus on a single issue, without regard for the whole system. Research into informal leadership by opinion leaders, positive deviants and tempered radicals (e.g. Øvretveit, 2005; Meyerson, 2003) has perhaps been under-emphasised in

public leadership research. In many settings, leadership may be exercised by a range of leaders, not just those leading public services (Hartley *et al.*, in press). How far is public leadership examining the informal leadership of civic activists, the protesters and ideas-shapers, as well as those leading state policies and practices?

In addition, leadership beyond authority is a key capability for many state actors. Leadership may have to be exercised beyond the organisational boundaries to which formal authority extends. Collaborative working provides many opportunities to explore leadership processes where legitimacy rather than formal authority is key. While there are some studies of collaborative leadership, the underlying basis of authority and legitimacy is not always differentiated and analysed, yet this could be very fruitful.

Legitimacy also deserves analytical scrutiny, having roots both in legal texts, in policies but also in the subjective assessments of various publics. The local authority responsible for Grenfell Tower (where over 70 people died in a fire in London in 2017) had formal authority but many in the local community do not see it as having legitimacy to sort out the aftermath due to distrust.

The need to consider not only authority but also legitimacy is urgent, as trust in politicians, in public servants and in “experts” wanes and as the legitimacy (and sometimes authority) of populist leaders in various countries increases. This returns us to questions about contested leadership. Public leadership scholars can contribute to safe, prosperous and socially just societies by teasing out different strands of, and interactions between, authority and legitimacy:

*P10.* Research designs and methods to reflect complexity and dynamism.

Public leadership is a complex, contested and physically grounded practice. It is about mobilising a wide variety of people and publics, even where there is conflict and contest, and divergent interests. Sometimes it is about creating a public so that action can follow. The ten propositions recognise that much leadership is based on tacit knowledge, and the careful reading of context, people and situations. The context is fast-changing and sensitive antennae are needed to interpret that context and to engage in sense-making and sense-giving for others, and to understand that others may read the situation (context and challenge) very differently.

Such leadership skills are likely to require tacit knowledge – which is hard or even impossible to articulate to others (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001), including researchers. This creates limits as to how far researchers can understand leadership if they are not situationally and contextually involved. Furthermore, some leadership works are preventative not reactive, with shaping and nudging behaviours to influence others and to socially construct contexts. This also creates limits as to how far researchers can understand leadership solely through *post-hoc* interviews, in questionnaires or through document analysis alone, or at a single point of time. To understand and analyse the nuances of leadership and to be able to reflect on the thousand and one small and large actions which are part of the flow of leadership work requires researchers to be close to or in the action, and over extended periods of time. Crosby and Bryson (2018) also argued for longitudinal case studies, as well as comparative case studies.

The need for researchers to understand context and dynamic forces suggests that some research designs could fruitfully draw on action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001), on co-research (Hartley and Benington, 2000) and using case studies which collect data in context, over time and able to draw on multiple stakeholder perspectives to understand the complexity and polyphony of public leadership. Such case studies can be hard to do, are time-consuming and can be harder to publish than research based on, for example, questionnaires, but they are ultimately very rewarding in their contributions both to knowledge and to improving society.

## Conclusions

Public leadership is, and can be, a rich area of enquiry which provides insights not only for those concerned with the public sphere, and with public value and values, but it can also provide insights which are highly relevant for generic leadership theory. The ten propositions highlight selected areas as challenges for researchers to take up to improve theory and empirical understanding of a number of concepts and processes of leadership. Other propositions could have been chosen and would also provide important insights (cf. Crosby and Bryson, 2018; Getha-Taylor *et al.*, 2011; ‘t Hart, 2014; Storey *et al.*, 2017). These particular ten have been selected as areas of emerging concern and/or interest in a rapidly changing world. Wren’s (2007) historical analysis is a reminder that new ideas about leadership often emerge at times of turbulence and change.

First and foremost, there is a need to be clear about what we mean by public leadership. Its definition is shifting, reflecting changes in society, and the role of a variety of groups and institutions in conditions of polycentric governance. Many voices and actions help to shape leadership outcomes, across all sectors so that state actors are no longer necessarily predominant in all settings. Yet, there is also a key role for state actors, who operate as representatives of society, either in elected political roles or as experts aiming to provide public value which takes account of a range of stakeholders in democratic societies. Leadership from the market and from civil society can present partial and partisan views, unconstrained by those democratic imperatives. This paper perhaps does not directly address theories and frameworks about democracy, though it urges the need to think hard and deep about what is meant by “public”, “the public” and “creating publics”. It also urges the need to distinguish between public services leadership and public leadership conceptually. Both are important and the latter incorporates both concepts.

The propositions, while very varied, represent some underlying themes – a changing context with multiple stakeholders in the public sphere; the pervasiveness of contest; the need to think and act politically as well as legally, organisationally and procedurally; the existence of multiple leaderships; the need to find ways to be resilient in these conditions. Plurality of context, leaderships, interests and publics are ever-present.

Finally, high levels of volatility, uncertainty, loss of confidence and direction in society are a reminder that public leadership may be necessary but not sufficient for dealing with these contextual conditions. Populist and illiberal leadership addresses these matters with simplistic “solutions” which sabotage or undermine important institutions in society, such as the legal system, parliaments and councils, and a free press. Societies need institutions as well as leadership, so research needs to be prepared to undertake multi-disciplinary work to properly understand public leadership and for research to contribute to societal ways of addressing these challenges.

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**Corresponding author**

Jean Hartley can be contacted at: [jean.hartley@open.ac.uk](mailto:jean.hartley@open.ac.uk)