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The difference leadership makes? Debating and conceptualising leadership in the UK voluntary sector

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This paper sets out to assess the state of the academic, and policy and practice debate around leadership in the UK voluntary sector context. There has been a lack of sustained academic interest in the notion of leadership in the UK, and equally a lack of dialogue between academic, policy and practice conversations. As a result it is often far from clear whether there is any agreement about what leadership consists of, and the difference 'improved' leadership might make. The paper considers what is meant by leadership in the sector, and considers three dominant approaches that have been used to frame leadership in debates within the sector. In particular it draws attention to the over-reliance on individual or person-centred accounts of leadership in the sector. The paper posits instead the promise of accounts that draw attention to collective notions of leadership, and the implications of a more widespread adoption of these frames for leadership development practice and research.

Keywords: voluntary sector, leadership, collective leadership, management

Introduction

Leadership, and leaders, in the voluntary sector are under scrutiny perhaps more than ever before, but this does not appear to be matched by a clear evidence base nor a consensus as to what constitutes ‘good’ leadership. A set of challenges and ‘threats’ facing the sector in recent years have contributed to the impression that there is a deficit in leadership (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012). There is a sense in which, if leadership can be problematic in a large and well-resourced organisation like Oxfam - to take one high profile example - it must be a problem across this heterogeneous sector (see also Kirchner, 2006; DCMS, 2018). Oxfam’s travails are not an isolated example: ‘charity scandals’ and governance failures in the UK voluntary sector (for instance the collapse of Kids Company in 2014, and the death of ‘poppy seller’ Olive Cooke in 2015) have led to the calls within recent sector reviews and strategies (Marsh, 2013; Lords Inquiry, 2017; DCMS, 2018) for improved leadership. This is despite the fact that there have existed a number of leadership development initiatives designed for the sector; though there is recognition that they may need to be better-funded and more accessible (see Terry et al., 2018 for an overview).

This deficit view reflects widespread beliefs that voluntary organisations (VOs) lack leadership skills – and that if these could be identified and distilled, they could then be imparted and embedded via leadership development programmes. However, there is a lack of convincing evidence of this deficit; and as is widely rehearsed in community development and public engagement, it is problematic to start from a deficit model even when the motivation is to improve skills and capacities (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2016). Moreover, this concern with leadership in policy and practice domains doesn’t always seem rooted in a solid knowledge base, including an examination of such basic questions as: what is leadership, is there a leadership problem in the voluntary sector, and is there something distinctive about leadership in the sector?

Responding to these linked issues, we ultimately suggest that a way forward is to reject theories and models that traditionally place the focus on individuals and on hierarchical models of leadership. Instead, there is emerging evidence that, particularly in a voluntary sector context, conceptualisations of leadership that emphasise the collective nature of leadership point to productive discussions about ‘who are leaders’ and whether leadership in the voluntary sector is inherently more collective, shared or dispersed (addressing the question of whether there is something inherently distinctive about leadership in the social sector) (see Jacklin-Jarvis, 2015; Cornforth and Macmillan, 2016). This paper sets out to address these questions within a wider context, and assess the state of the academic, and policy and practice debate around leadership in the UK voluntary sector context. Although *leadership* seems, to many, as an attractive element of the solution to some of the apparent challenges facing the sector, it is far from clear whether there is widespread agreement about what leadership consists of, within academic, policy and practice conversations, and what difference ‘improved’ leadership might make.

The paper first considers what we mean by leadership in the sector, and explores three dominant approaches to framing understandings of leadership. In particular we draw attention to the over-reliance on individual or person-centred accounts of

1 leadership in the sector. Next it briefly considers the promise of accounts that instead
2 draw attention to collective notions of leadership (which have particular salience in
3 wider academic debates about leadership), and the implications of a more widespread
4 adoption of these frames for leadership development practice and research. We
5 conclude with some discussion of future directions for research and policy debates.
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7 **Key themes in the UK leadership debate**

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10 The broad academic leadership literature is extensive and difficult to categorise,
11 spanning a range of disciplines including psychology, organisational studies, and
12 management and business (see; Grint, 2010, for an overview). In comparison to
13 literature that focuses on 'corporate' or public leadership, leadership in the voluntary
14 sector is underdeveloped and relatively lacking in theoretical sophistication (Macmillan
15 and McLaren, 2012). It is also true that mainstream leadership scholars rarely consider
16 the voluntary sector context in their research and writing, raising doubts over whether
17 'mainstream' theories translate well to this context. By the same token, it is open to
18 question whether there is an identifiable form of 'voluntary sector leadership'; and
19 likewise whether, *a priori*, we would expect the voluntary sector to present a
20 significantly different context to, say, other social domains, though we do not seek to
21 answer those questions here. In making these observations we refer particularly to the
22 UK context.
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26 Leadership is notoriously hard to define: "Neither the scholars nor the practitioners
27 have been able to define leadership with precision, accuracy, and consciousness so
28 that people are able to label it correctly when they see it happening or when they
29 engage in it" (Rost, 1993: 6). A useful overview by Grint (2005) suggests scholars
30 have broadly used four different approaches to explore leadership. These are: 1.
31 Leadership as Person: is it *who* 'leaders' are that makes them leaders?; 2. Leadership
32 as Results: is it *what* 'leaders' achieve that makes them leaders?; 3. Leadership as
33 Position: is it *where* 'leaders' operate that makes them leaders?; 4. Leadership as
34 Process: is it *how* 'leaders' get things done that makes them leaders?' (Grint, 2010:
35 4). Partly reflecting these emphases, in the sections that follow we demonstrate that
36 the existing UK literature on voluntary sector leadership has followed a particular set
37 of themes, and offer a brief critique.
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42 ***The 'person and beyond' in voluntary sector leadership***

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45 The majority of UK voluntary sector leadership literature reflects an attempt to identify
46 the competencies and traits associated with being a 'good' leader. Effective VS
47 leaders have been said to embody 'charismatic' and 'visionary' qualities, and strong
48 personal skills to actively engage with and motivate groups of individuals. For
49 example, based on research with chief executives, Cormack and Stanton (2003)
50 identified a list of characteristics, including emotional attachment, passion, enthusiasm
51 and affinity with the cause, a strategic perspective and a customer service orientation,
52 networking and influencing; personal humility, resilience, self-confidence and being a
53 visionary and inspirational communicator. Similarly, Chambers and Edwards-Stuart
54 (2007) argued that strong leadership requires integrative and speculative thinking,
55 drive and persistence, a strong value-base, focus; and networking. Literature exploring
56 the challenges of leading volunteers also refer to individual leadership traits and styles
57 (see Wilks, 2015).
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1 While Buckingham et al. (2014) suggest that such lists may be problematic, as “‘good’
2 leadership cannot be captured within a definitive set of functions or skills that can
3 easily be taught or learnt by aspiring leaders” (p.10), they nevertheless identify a
4 similar set of components, as well as noting the importance of ‘authenticity’ in a leader.
5 This point is echoed (in the wider leadership literature) by Avolio et al.’s (2009) idea of
6 an ‘authentic’ leader having self-awareness, self-regulation, relational transparency,
7 and a clear moral compass. According to some commentators, VS leaders are also
8 required to manage the passion and values of their workforce (Kirchner, 2006), which
9 at times can be emotionally challenging. Thus ‘emotional intelligence’ increases
10 awareness of their own and others’ emotions and the skills to enable a productive
11 team, “such people get the best out of others, who in turn love working with and for
12 them” (Edwards 2011; see also Goleman, 1995). Furthermore, there has been a push
13 to require leaders to display ‘cultural intelligence’ in order to lead effectively in an
14 increasingly diverse and fluid polity (Common Purpose, 2017). Nevertheless, what
15 these accounts still have in common is a focus on the individual leader. The problem
16 with this, argues Grint (2005), is that no two lists of leadership traits are ever the same,
17 and there are risks associated with individuals being required to acquire ‘god-like’
18 status with an extensive array of attributes.

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24 In recognition of these criticisms of the person-centred or ‘traits’ approach to
25 leadership, VS scholars and policy and practice commentators have moved on to more
26 process-oriented accounts. Kirchner (2007) for instance, developed a model in which
27 the key leadership skills of a leader (in this case a chief executive) can be summarised
28 as, a) Leading upwards – managing the governance of the organisation, b) Leading
29 downwards – harnessing the organisation’s resources organisation, and c) Leading
30 outwards – representing the organisation (Kirchner, 2007). Kirchner’s model highlights
31 that leadership consists of a number of interconnected processes, that leadership is
32 not static in nature nor fixed by an individual’s characteristics and traits, but instead is
33 dynamic and dependent on the processes involved. Other approaches to
34 understanding leadership in the VS literature include: leadership styles (Buckingham
35 et al., 2014), leadership approaches (Howieson and Hodges, 2014), and leadership
36 practice (Paton and Brewster, 2009). Paton and Brewster’s research focused on the
37 chief executive role, but argued that there were limited empirical studies on the inner
38 experience of those playing a leadership role. Instead, in focusing on day-to-day
39 experiences, and on the experience and interpretations on the unfolding challenges,
40 they re-emphasise the role of actors and agency, the contextual environment, and how
41 leadership practice can be played out in various ways. The resulting conceptual
42 framework they describe as ‘what it is like being a Chief Executive’ includes the notion
43 of adopting a ‘helicopter view’ in order to see the bigger picture, emotional awareness,
44 moral reasoning and intuition. Thus what we can discern in the developing VS
45 leadership literature are indications of a move away from the traditional ‘leader as
46 person’ perspective, albeit to one that is still focused on the chief executive at the
47 centre of ‘top’ of a hierarchical organisation.

48 49 50 51 52 53 54 ***Exploring processes within voluntary sector leadership***

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57 A relatively small strand of UK VS literature has begun to explore voluntary sector
58 leadership from a process perspective. For example, Kay (1996) argues “leadership
59 as a multi-dimensional *process* of social interaction, creating and sustaining
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acceptable meanings of issues, events and actions” (p.131; emphasis added). Rather than adopting a downward-facing model (a feature of Kirchner’s leadership model outlined above), it explores the interactions between individuals from all levels of the organisation (for instance staff, volunteers, board) involved in the sense-making process. For Kay the leadership process consists of four dimensions:

- *Social and cognitive*: involves a sense-making process on issues and events, not only using one’s own meanings, but also accepting the meanings of others
- *Socio-political process*: involves encouraging the commitment towards particular meanings
- *A cultural process*: involves embedding particular meanings within an organisation’s culture
- *The enactment process*: refers to meanings being reproduced through actions.

In common with the ‘process’ approach, this conceptualisation shifts the focus from leadership as constructed by one individual ‘at the top’. Instead it highlights that a wider group is involved in continuous negotiation through social interactions: “any account of leadership has to take account of this context of social relations; as well as the cultural context within which the meaning-making process is taking place” (Kay, 1996, p.134). Similarly, Schwabenland explores in more depth the sense-making process used within narrative, or more imaginatively, the role of ‘storytelling’ by leaders (Schwabenland, 2006). An important facet of this is leaders telling organisational stories, particularly the founding story, which can construct and reinforce the values and commitment of the organisation’s members. However, individuals from different levels are also involved in this storytelling process, interrelating and interpreting meanings. This practice of storytelling can enhance the leader’s strategic position by building both the internal legitimacy, as well as, the external profile of the organisation.

Macmillan and McLaren (2012) expand on this by adopting a wider perspective on *leadership of the sector*, rather than just *leadership in the sector*, deploying the idea of ‘strategic narrative’. They argue the focus should not only be on who created the story, and what the story refers to, but also that it is essential to locate the story within a broader context and whether there is ‘room’ for it within a particular ‘field’. They distinguish two types of leadership narrative that is involved in this process:

- Illustrative narrative: this is important for a voluntary sector organisation to effectively demonstrate its impact and activities
- Strategic narrative: from the perspective of the national umbrella bodies, to develop a clear narrative of the sectors’ direction and focus, which in turn can inform a strong foundation to build alliances across sectors

Macmillan and McLaren (2012) identify a number of ‘strategic narratives’ that have evolved from VS leadership national bodies, which are informed by their own ideas of leadership and what it should look like, which in turn has developed “discursive’ constructions of the field’ (p.7). This demonstrates that multiple strategic narratives can co-exist, each with its own interpretation and representation of the sector, however some narratives obtain more ‘purchase’ than others and become influential within the field. It is important to understand whose interests a story is representing, or whether it is supporting a wider, potentially political, agenda.

Who leads? The rise of concern with representativeness in an increasingly diverse society

Recent 'grey' and policy literature has raised concerns that within a changing society that recognises increasing diversity and power differentials, placing increased scrutiny on whether leaders within the UK voluntary sector adequately reflect this diversity (both in general and in terms of beneficiary groups). For instance Harris (2016a) highlights 'gaps' in leadership development, stating "whilst notions of the 'heroic leader' are now considered quaintly old-fashioned, replaced by a recognition that leaders can come from all walks of life, there remains little consensus about how to create an ecosystem that successfully identifies and nurtures leadership talent" (p.3). In another report, Harris (2016b), argues for an approach that targets different demographic groups. One example is the so-called 'millennial' generation, who, it is argued, approach leadership with very different preconceptions, and are "looking for a different type of leadership. Not for the stressed-out, burnt-out 'heroic' leader, with no time for delegation and succession planning, desperately trying to hold back the tides of change washing over their organisations" (p. 5).

Similar concerns were articulated in the influential Marsh Review (2013): leadership support should "not just [be] at the level of directors and chief executives, but for aspiring and emerging leaders across all positions and for trustees and volunteers too" (p.8). Marsh (2013) argues that too much support has been targeted at those already in established roles rather than encouraging and developing aspiring leaders. One consequence of this focus on those already in positions of power is the reproduction and dissemination of limited conceptions, definitions, and experiences of leadership across the VS. Such perceptions do not acknowledge the range of leaders, or diversity of organisations, or provide a representative view of VS leadership. Furthermore, the Marsh Review highlights under-representation of specific demographic groups – women, BAME and individuals living with disabilities – as (senior) leaders within the VS. There has been little exploration within the literature as to why this might be the case. Teasdale et al. (2011) provide one of the few insights into this underrepresentation, specifically focusing on how gender-based barriers and organisational size, can act as constraints to female leadership in social enterprises. This is likely to be an increasingly important theme within VS leadership debates, and it is important to acknowledge that there are connections to a stream of mainstream leadership literature around identity and a related literature that explores democratic leadership. Though space precludes a detailed discussion of these connections (see Ibarra et al., 2014 for an introduction), these concerns so far highlighted in the policy and practice literature are likely to increase in salience.

The potential of collective accounts for voluntary sector leadership

A key way of exploring a more expansive and inclusive approach to leadership in the VS is via a number of theories that we group together in this paper under the heading 'collective leadership'. Our interest here is in exploring the application of theories from the broader leadership field that highlight the plurality of leadership – including shared, distributed, collaborative, and relational leadership. These leadership theories are not confined to UK scholarship, originate from different theoretical traditions, and each have different emphases. However, here we highlight five characteristics that recur in discussions of collective leadership practice. Collective leadership is:

- Shared between two or more people (Pearce and Conger, 2003);
- Constructed relationally between people (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011, Uhl Bien 2006), and through everyday practice and interactions (Carroll et al, 2008; Raelin 2016), rather than through individual actions and attributes;
- Enacted at all levels of an organisation (Bolden, 2011; Raelin, 2003);
- Plural - including the diverse voices and interests of multiple stakeholders, (Sergi et al, 2017), and leading beyond boundaries of organisation and sector (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Crosby and Bryson, 2010);

For the purposes of this paper, we do not unpick the differences between relational, shared, distributed and collaborative leadership, but instead point out the particular relevance of this set of theories to the VS context. Collective accounts are compelling for a number of reasons, not least that in spite of the prevalence of the narrative of the unique individual in the sector literature, a shared approach to leadership is embedded in the structure and governance of VOs. The shared responsibility of trustee boards, and the ambiguity of their relationship with chief executives (Cornforth and Macmillan, 2016), focuses attention on interactions between trustees, and between trustees and chief executives and senior staff. Leadership is distributed (Gronn, 2002) between volunteer trustees and employed staff, raising questions about the processes and practices through which people in these roles interact with one another to set the direction of the organisation (Cornforth and Edwards, 1999).

Collective leadership theories hold considerable potential for understanding and researching VS leadership as a practice that is social, rather than individual (Uhl Bien 2006). As Gronn (2002) argues, they shift the focus away from traditional concepts of hierarchical leadership, and point towards a more inclusive and participative practice. And as Grint (2005) points out, these critiques do not negate the essential role played by key leaders, but do acknowledge that there are other factors that come into play. Models of collective leadership “relax assumptions that leaders and followers are always distinctively different actors with fundamentally distinct characteristics and behaviours, and focused increased attention on the interactive relationship at the core of the leadership process” (Bligh, 2011 p.427). This moves from a view of the passive and compliant follower to a more inclusive viewpoint, and is part of the growing recognition within leadership studies that followership is an integral part of the production of outcomes in a dialectical relationship with leadership. To explore this concept of followership further it is essential to take into account both the interactions between people, and the context in which those interactions take place (Howieson and Hodges, 2014).

What does thinking in terms of ‘collective leadership’ mean for VS leadership development and research?

What then does adopting the lens of collective leadership mean for the ways in which we think about leadership development and the production of resources to enable that development? At the most basic level, these theories suggest that leadership development opportunities should be opened up to a much broader group of people beyond those individuals with formal leadership roles. Furthermore, they suggest that leadership development opportunities need to engage with the social interactions of everyday organisational life. Rather than extracting individual positional leaders from

1 their context for 'development' (Grint and Holt, 2011), leadership development might
2 involve working with whole teams or groups of staff or volunteers. The recognition of
3 the specificities of the VS context is an important step forward in leadership
4 development thinking, in its own right.
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6 Understanding leadership as an inherently social practice raises issues for the
7 mechanisms of leadership development (for example, delivered face-to-face, online,
8 or blended; in the workplace or outside), but also more fundamentally for its content
9 and focus. Carroll and colleagues for instance frame leadership development as
10 identity work that engages with issues of power, participation, and democracy (Carroll
11 and Levy, 2010; Carroll and Simpson 2012; Carroll and Smolovic Jones, 2017). This
12 approach implies that participants are not simply engaged in acquiring a fixed set of
13 skills and knowledge, but rather in a process through which they together constitute
14 the leadership being developed (Carroll and Smolovic Jones, 2017). The practices of
15 leadership development are therefore likely to focus on relational practices, including
16 story-telling and narrative development, questioning and challenge, rather than on
17 individual skills development.
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21 We pose three questions to all interested stakeholders, for further reflection in terms
22 of adopting a collective leadership lens to leadership development for voluntary sector
23 organisations (VSOs):
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- 26 • First, how can access to leadership development for individuals be opened up
27 at all levels of VSOs, for those with and without positional leadership roles?
- 28 • Second, how can development opportunities that are embedded in the social
29 interactions that are at the heart of leadership practice be better provided?
- 30 • Third, how might a more inclusive and social approach to leadership
31 development reflect the specific challenges of the current VS context? (for
32 instance the particular challenges of austerity, the focus on cross-boundary
33 working to tackle complex social problems, and the consequences of Brexit?
34 (Unwin, 2018).
- 35 • Fourth, how might responsibility be distributed in collective leadership
36 structures and provide capacity to nurture and develop more diverse sources
37 of leadership?
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42 Arguably a more relational, democratic, and inclusive approach to leadership
43 development is particularly relevant for the sector in the current social context,
44 characterised by continuing collaboration to address complex public problems.
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47 Furthermore, adopting insights from theories of collective leadership also has
48 implications for framing a research agenda, and for the selection of research
49 methodologies to explore a practice of VO leadership empirically. Four issues arise
50 for research design:
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- 53 • First, to understand leadership as a social practice, it is important to observe
54 leadership as it happens in the interactions between people – their actions and
55 conversations. Such observation should not be focused on specific 'leadership
56 acts', but rather on everyday practice – the meetings (formal and informal),
57 communications, routines, and micro-interactions of organisational and inter-
58 organisational life.
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- Second, as a practice approach is closely intertwined with experience, empirical research should continue to include interviews. These interviews are likely to focus on participants' retrospective sense-making of the social interactions of organisational life, rather than on their individual actions.
- Third, to understand leadership as a contextualised practice, VS researchers also need to understand the ways in which leadership interactions are enabled and constrained by an environment of power relationships, culture, and discourses (Raelin, 2016).

It is likely that research that offers substantive insights into leadership practice in VOs will need to address all three of these issues, and will draw on data collection from different sources. This suggests ethnographic methodologies will be most appropriate for future research, posing challenges of access and time commitment for researchers.

If leadership is viewed as a social process that is enacted by multiple actors across and beyond the organisation, then leadership is best understood by attending to the experiences, interpretations and interactions of those involved (Badaracco, 2001). This has implications for thinking about the ways in which we research leadership in the VS. It suggests that such research should focus not only on the decision-making actions of individuals, but rather on the interpretation and sense-making of those involved, and the relational processes of negotiation between different actors. Grint (2005) recognises that 'this 'negotiated' or 'deep' leadership is often overlooked precisely because it remains informal and distributed amongst the collective rather than emanating from a formal and individual leader' (p.20). This raises further important questions about how power is shared or moves between individuals at different organisational levels or across organisational boundaries.

Conclusion

We have argued here that academic debates related to leadership in the UK voluntary sector lack theoretical sophistication and has been limited by its focus on a person-centred account of leaders. It is therefore accurate to suggest that its conceptualisation in this context has so far been "embryonic" (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012). This is unfortunate at a time when there is an appetite from practitioners and policy makers to understand the role and contribution of leadership; and there is pressure on academics to work with other societal stakeholders to demonstrate impact. This brief review highlights that the UK VS literature has offered limited exploration of leadership *processes*, focusing instead on the characteristics and skills of individuals in formal leadership positions. Furthermore, media narratives all too often associate the achievements of VSOs with the heroic endeavours of extraordinary individuals, and failure with the character failings of occupants of senior positions (a yearning to identify and celebrate such individuals is also apparent in the wider culture). This model is not best equipped to understand UK voluntary sector leadership; and the brief review of a selection of recent developments in the broader leadership literature suggest more productive avenues.

From a policy perspective, the repeated emphasis on the 'person' in leadership debates and development practice is problematic because it encourages an elusive search for heroic leaders (or the fostering of such attributes in existing identified

1 'leaders') and entrenches the idea that such individuals can solve all the problems
2 facing an organisation or setting. It is also potentially elitist in its consequences, and
3 off-putting for those who are currently 'followers' yet could develop into leaders.
4 Finally, it obscures the ways in which leadership can emerge from other sources, and
5 in practice in settings which are more relational and bottom-up. It encourages leaders
6 and the wider range of stakeholders in the voluntary sector to overlook such promising
7 sources of leadership practice. In contrast, we argue that collective approaches
8 challenge the narrative that organisational survival and solutions to complex public
9 problems are dependent on individuals. A policy focus on collective leadership would
10 promote models that disperse and share leadership responsibilities, and provide
11 capacity to nurture and develop more diverse sources of leadership. This would
12 challenge practice that promotes the heroic individual, and offer more bottom-up
13 relational organisations ways of understanding and exploring leadership that resonate
14 with their values.
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18 Finally, collective approaches to leadership offer a *process perspective*, in which
19 individuals and stakeholders influence one another relationally, share responsibilities,
20 and hold one another accountable. This understanding of leadership resonates with
21 the values of many VSOs, and reflects structural requirements to share leadership
22 between individuals with different roles and responsibilities. Adopting this approach to
23 leadership development and research would focus attention on how actors interact
24 and influence one another within and beyond the distinctive structure of a voluntary
25 organisation. It would lead to practice-focused leadership development that avoids
26 dependency on individuals, and instead adopts a more inclusive approach to
27 leadership. This resonates with the values of openness and inclusion that are
28 important to many VSOs, particularly those that are smaller and community-based
29 organisations and that promote community engagement and accountability, and which
30 rely on a small group of individuals, whose roles and responsibilities within and beyond
31 the organisation are overlapping and ambiguous (Billis and Glennester, 1998).
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