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**Fun, lifelong relationships, and a safer community:
Understanding collective leadership practice in a grassroots association**

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Abstract:

The relational processes and practices that create and sustain Grassroots Associations have received limited attention from researchers. This paper addresses this gap, exploring collective leadership of Grassroots Associations through a Leadership-As-Practice lens (Raelin, 2016a, 2016b). It adopts the concept of 'bundles' of leadership practice (Schatzki, 2005) to analyse data from a single ethnographic case study. Adopting this conceptual lens, we identify a set of 'bundles' of related practices - *organising, engaging, accounting* - that constitute the enduring reality of the association's collective leadership.

Key words:

Grassroots Associations, Collective leadership, Leadership, Community Groups

8412 words

Introduction

The intimate processes and practices that create and sustain voluntary action within grassroots associations have received limited attention from academic researchers. This is despite estimates that there may be up to 900,000 informal community groups in the UK, many of them unregulated, absent from official statistics, and therefore described as 'below the radar' (McCabe et al., 2010). Characterised by their associational form, relational forms of organisation, and minimal bureaucracy (Rochester, 2013; Smith, 2000), it can be difficult for external researchers to access the internal dynamics and interactions of grassroots associations (GAs). The limited studies of leadership in voluntary organisations that do exist have not explored the detailed interactions that comprise leadership practice in these, informal organisations, instead tending to focus on the more accessible and higher-profile senior managers of larger charitable organisations (Cormack and Stanton, 2003; Paton and Brewster, 2008; Authors, 2020). This paper addresses this gap by exploring leadership practices through a grounded case study of a single GA that was undergoing a journey from an informal associational network to a constituted organisation.

We adopt the broad framework of collective leadership theory in order to probe and interpret the shared leadership practices of association members as together they co-constructed a new voluntary organisation. In contrast to more traditional approaches to leadership studies that focus on the activities, styles and traits of individual leaders, theories of collective leadership adopt a practice perspective (Raelin, 16a, 16b) that uncovers the social interactions that set direction and move agendas forward. Raelin (2011) conceptualises these interactions as relational practices - collaborative efforts embedded in the social and material context. Our analysis is strengthened by the application of the concept of 'bundles' of leadership in order to highlight the predominant patterns of activity that shape collective leadership practices (Schatzki, 2005). The *bundles* construct alerts us to the panoply of practices in play, and helps to make sense of the inherent complexity of the quotidian practice of leadership. In so doing we highlight the emergence of shared identity that in turn shapes further iterations of leadership practice within this setting.

We adopt a collective leadership framework first because, from the outset, the GA context is one that is characterised by social practices that constitute leadership *normatively* as collective, rather than individual (Raelin, 2011). This reflects an organisational context characterised by role ambiguity, that is (relatively) un-hierarchical, and is rooted in co-operative, localised behaviour (Billis and Glennerster, 1996). Although associations thus tend by their nature to be collective, and individual members retain a commitment to extending the collective endeavour, growth and change create tensions and dilemmas that actors have to negotiate. Second, through the process of conducting an inductive thematic data analysis, we established that a collective leadership reading was the most convincing way to account for the nature of leadership in this context. More specifically, we could discern in the data a set of 'bundles' of related practices - which we term *organising, engaging, accounting* - that constitute the enduring reality of the collective leadership of the association. This furthers debate in the nonprofit literature as to how informal grassroots associations account to and engage with local communities as organisational identity develops. It also offers an alternative narrative to individualistic accounts of leadership practice

in small organisations that highlight so-called ‘founder syndrome’ (see for example Carman and Nesbit, 2012).

The paper is based on an ethnographically-informed study designed to uncover leadership practice in one GA, ‘Bridgebuilders’, in its first year of existence. Through observation, participation, and semi-structured interviews, the study explored how leadership is practiced as the organisation evolved and formalised. Beginning as an informal network of community groups and activists in a new housing development, Bridgebuilders adopted a constitution, appointed officers, hosted regular community meetings, and delivered events. As the organisation developed, founding members attempted to retain informal ways of working and relating to each other and to the wider community that resonated with their values of inclusion, participation, and democracy – adopting limited structure and resisting further formalisation, despite potential financial benefits to the organisation and therefore by extension to the wider community.

Grassroots Associations

Small non-profit organisations are often described in the literature as ‘grassroots’ and ‘below the radar’ (Smith 2000; McCabe et al., 2010). Characterised as associational, informal and unregulated, they are distinguished from the formalised, regulated organisations that deliver services, engage with the state through lobbying, contracting and commissioning, and are, usually, led by paid staff (McCabe et al., 2010; Smith, 2000). While the latter feature in official sector analyses, GAs slip ‘below the radar’ of official data, making it difficult to know the extent and scale of these micro organisations (McCabe, 2010). GAs are characterised by the centrality of social relationships (Smith, 2000): social networking and personal relationships play a significant role alongside the structures and processes, through which actors constitute organisational life (McCabe et al., 2010, Rochester, 2013, Smith, 2000). Smith (2000) argues that the limited structure in such organisations means that leadership is even more important than in paid-staff voluntary groups that are in part sustained by bureaucratic routines. Rochester (2013) argues that voluntary organisations need ‘distinctive’ leadership that is non-managerial, ‘based in securing the willing consent of its constituents and... derived from its associational roots’ (p.174). However, Rochester does not examine leadership in any detail, and certainly not empirically (see p174-75 for instance). There are differences between leadership activities in GAs and paid staff voluntary organisations, with leadership in the former coming from inside the member group (Smith, 2000), but few, if any, empirical studies of non-profit leadership focus on GAs (Nesbit et al., 2016; Smith, 2000). It is unclear how the relational form and practices of GAs impact on leadership as that organisational life develops, and we know little about how leadership in this informal, relational context enables community and social action. One reason for this is the challenge for researchers to engage with and reveal this informal organisational life, with its reliance on social networking, and the aforementioned hidden nature of ‘below the radar’ activity.

A recent reflection on ten years of researching voluntary and community activity ‘below the radar’ (McCabe, 2018) highlights the ability of small, informal and semi-formal organisations to make things happen in communities – in spite of austerity politics, reduced public services, and increasingly hostile public perceptions of ‘charities’. Notably, with just one exception, the authors of this collection of

papers do not discuss leadership explicitly, perhaps because of the associations between this concept and ideas of hierarchy and position that do not sit comfortably with associational values. The exception argues that focusing on hyper-local community interactions points towards the need to understand distributed and collective forms of leadership (Gilchrist, 2018). In contrast to the more traditional focus on individual positional leaders, collective leadership theories - developed within the mainstream leadership studies corpus - offer a practice perspective to explore how individuals and stakeholders influence one another relationally, share responsibilities, and hold one another to account (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Furthermore, the collective conceptualisation acknowledges the multiple actors involved in leadership, the different ways in which those actors are authorised, and the mutuality of their practice (Heifetz, 1994, Ospina 2017, Quick, 2017). This understanding of leadership resonates with the espoused values and practices of grassroots associational life, and we explore this in greater depth in the literature review below.

Collective leadership and nonprofit organisations

Contemporary leadership literature accepts that leadership is a contested concept (Grint et al., 2017). However, until relatively recently two inter-related assumptions have permeated debates about leadership – first, leadership is an individual activity, and second, leadership is best understood in terms of the person who enacts that leadership. This led to numerous studies focused on the styles, attributes and capabilities of individual leaders, and a tendency to associate organisational success and failure with individuals represented as heroes and villains (as exemplified recently in the UK by the collapse of Kids Company). From the end of the twentieth century, scholars began to adopt a ‘post-heroic’ approach to leadership studies (Bryman, 1996), focusing on everyday social interactions of leadership practice rather than on the traits and styles of individual actors (Raelin, 2016a, 2016b). An influential group of leadership scholars conceptualise leadership as a collective practice (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani and Endrissat, 2016; Crevani et al., 2007; Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Ospina, 2017; Ospina et al., 2020; Raelin, 2011; Raelin, 2016a; Raelin, 2016b). Our research applies insights from this theoretical development to understanding leadership in the UK voluntary sector, recognising that these have resonance with recent UK policy debates that highlight the need for a more collective understanding of leadership in the sector (Civil Exchange, 2017; Clore, 2019; Terry et al., 2020).

The descriptor ‘collective’ is one amongst several used to refer to ‘post-heroic’ conceptualisations of leadership, including distributed, shared, and collaborative (Bryman, 1996). Ospina et al. (2020) represent collective leadership as,

‘an emerging theoretical umbrella that captures diverse scholarship on the shared, distributed, pooled, and relational aspects of leadership...’ (Ospina et al., 2020, p.442)

Like leadership per se, the concept has been applied in multiple ways - to capture the collectivity of leadership practice and to offer an alternative theoretical lens that locates leadership within the dynamics of relationships and systems. In this paper, we follow Ospina and Foldy (2010) to conceptualise collective leadership as composed of a plurality of individual leaders who are collaborating to lead together. Leadership involves multiple actors; emerges from and across different

levels within and beyond the organisation, and from sources that are authorised in different ways (including but not limited to position); and is enacted through everyday practices that take place within an organisational and/or societal 'system' (Heifetz, 1994; Ospina, 2017; Ospina et al., 2020). Applying this theoretical lens, collective leadership research uncovers practices that constitute leadership 'work', producing 'collective capacity' that in turn delivers societal impact (Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Ospina et al., 2020). These practices *may* be characterised by the mutuality, respect and reciprocity that are frequently associated with collectivity (Quick, 2017), but equally may reflect the challenges, tensions, and power asymmetries that the literature recognises as inherent in collaborative work (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

This approach to collective leadership is closely linked with the idea of 'leadership-as-practice' (LAP) (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin, 2011; Raelin, 2016a), turning attention away from individual attributes and focusing attention on the day-to-day practices through which actors with and without position influence one another (Uhl-Bien, 2006, Raelin, 2016, Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011) to create organisational life and direction. Whereas traditional person-centred leadership studies tend to present the individual as isolated and de-contextualised, a practice perspective is inherently situated and relational (Carroll et al., 2008). This in turn draws on an understanding of organisational life as 'leaderful' (Raelin, 2003, Raelin, 2011), as leadership is constituted by multiple actors within and beyond the organisation through processes of mutual influence. This approach 'privileges practice over actor' (Carroll et al., 2008, p.166), and process over style (Crevani, 2018). The focus on relational and social processes leads collective leadership researchers to explore how people talk, act, and interact; and the ways in which everyday conversations shape and are shaped by the discourses of organisational life (Raelin, 2016a, 2016b, , Crevani et al., 2010, Carroll et al., 2008). Rather than focusing on individual actions, researchers identify 'bundles of practices' (Schatzki, 2005) that capture the inter-related actions of multiple actors:

'Leadership, seen from this perspective, is co-constructed by actors in certain practices/practice; the "unit of analysis" is thus not a single "unit", but bundles of related actions or "the work of leadership" as it takes form in patterns of action and interaction...' (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016).

The concept of collective leadership is particularly suited to researching leadership in nonprofit organisations – first because a form of collectivity is built into their governance structures (Cornforth, 2015); and second because plurality and mutuality are reflected in espoused organisational values of participation, democracy, and inclusion (Blake et al., 2006). More specifically, collective leadership is a useful theoretical lens for analysing leadership in GAs because of their reliance on small groups of well-networked volunteers, with ambiguous and multi-faceted roles, who wield influence within the organisation and beyond, including in the blurred spaces of community, family and the private sphere (Billis and Glennerster, 1996; McGovern, 2014). These actors lead 'without authority' (Heifetz, 1994) in terms of their formal position within networks of public agencies tackling societal issues. Instead, they lead by offering alternative viewpoints into such networks, and acting on 'new possibilities' (ibid p.184). In spite of these indications that collective leadership has particular resonance to their practice, there is little empirical literature that applies collective leadership theory specifically to the context of these small nonprofit organisations.

Three useful empirical studies in the US context are provided by Ospina and Foldy (2011), Quick (2017), and Han (2014). All three uncover the social interactions involved in leading in a non-profit context. Ospina and Foldy (2011) adopt the concept of the 'work of leadership' to explore how 'social change organisations' collaborate to advance organisational mission and engage in processes of collaborative governance. Focusing on building connectedness and the development of relational bonds within and across organisations, they identify five 'bridge-building' leadership practices: prompting cognitive shifts; naming and shaping identity; engaging dialogue about difference; creating equitable governance mechanisms; and weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, they identify two assumptions that underlie this practice – first recognising and minimising power differences between collaborating actors; and second recognising 'difference' as a strength. The latter reflects the finding that unity and diversity are equally important for successful collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011). The current study has some similarity to Ospina and Foldy's study. However, participation in the latter was limited to organisations progressing social and racial justice in the US, and the study focused on practices that enabled collaborative work to 'bridge divides'.

Quick (2017) undertook a single case study of collective leadership in a US city as it enacted stewardship of the urban environment. This provides a rare example of an empirical study focused on collective leadership in pursuit of a societal goal, highlighting how individualistic organisation-centric leadership practices developed over time to become more pluralistic and mutual. This finding has some similarity to Cornforth and Macmillan's (2016) account of the shared leadership of chief executive and chair as a process that shifts over time. However, the latter focuses only on the two positional actors rather than on the collective. Quick identifies two key processes in the shift from individual to collective leadership: fuelling a public imaginary; and inclusive organising..

Han's (2014) study of civic associations in the US highlights the significance of social interactions and interpersonal connections in the leadership practice of associations characterised as 'high-engagement' (ch.4). To achieve 'transformational outcomes', leaders of these associations engage volunteers in a way that is relational rather than transactional, structuring tasks so that volunteers work together and build relationships. In line with LAP studies (Raelin 2003, 2011, 2016), Han's work uncovers how everyday relational practices grow more leadership within the association, as new affiliates transition to become activist leaders who share responsibility for organisational outcomes. This study usefully highlights the social practices of leading associational life.

In summary, the research literature has yet to apply the concept of collective leadership to empirical studies in the specific context of UK grassroots associations, or more broadly to the UK voluntary sector, and it is unclear whether empirical findings and conceptual lenses developed in other contexts are transferable to this context. However, the informality, mutuality, and limited structure that characterise such groups suggests that collective leadership is an appropriate concept to help us to understand leadership practice within GAs and beyond.

Methodology

This paper draws on analysis of an ethnographically-informed case study of 'Bridgebuilders' first year of existence. Single case studies may have an exploratory, descriptive or explanatory purpose, achieved through observation and interviews of people engaged in social practice (Taylor, 2002; Yin, 2018). In this case, our purpose was first to describe practice in a particular context that has received limited attention from academic literature through a case study that is 'ethnographically-informed'. We use this descriptor to indicate that we draw on ethnographic tradition (Taylor, 2002), whilst distinguishing the study from those where the researcher becomes fully embedded as an insider within the research context, over a longer period of time. Our second purpose is to draw on the descriptive account to understand how the 'bundles of practices' approach contributes to theories that aspire to illuminate the empirical reality of collective leadership practice, as advised by Crevani and Endrissat (2016).

The centrality of observation makes ethnography a particularly appropriate research approach for understanding leadership practice (Raelin 2011), giving access to participants' formal and informal interactions. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) outline, ethnography offers different potential researcher positions on a continuum from complete observer (outsider) to fully-engaged participant (insider). Researcher positionality impacts on access and engagement with the object of the research, and is significant for reflecting on researcher influence on data and findings (ibid). The challenge is to engage sufficiently, participating with the object of research to develop deep 'familiarity' to understand everyday practice, whilst retaining 'distance' in order to be able to retain the objectivity necessary for analysis (ibid). As Raelin 2021 advises, looking for leadership practice requires both observation and participation to gain access to and understand the everyday. Acting as a volunteer, getting to know participants through the informal conversations around and between meetings, and, later, facilitating a strategy session at the group's request – in this project these activities all increased familiarity and gave insight into the social interactions that constituted leadership. This familiarity necessarily impacts on the data interpretation. To retain 'distance', the researcher moved between observer/outsider and participant/insider roles (see below). Furthermore, as described below, at the analysis stage, the interpretative process was shared iteratively between the researcher (Author 1) and Author 2 to increase the distance between the researcher and the data.

The study began with Author 1 adopting an insider position, gaining access relationally through personal contacts developed during earlier engagement in the local community as a volunteer and as a former resident. These contacts brokered access into the small relational network at the heart of the case study. As recorded in observation notes, 'I have become part of the usual extras around the committee.' In this role, Author 1 was included in informal conversations before and after meetings, and volunteered at two community events delivered during the year. However, to maintain distance, she did not participate in public meetings but rather maintained a strict role as observer. As the year ended, Author 1 was asked to facilitate a participative priority-setting workshop. Although this was not an element of the original research design, notes on the process and outputs of this activity are included in the data. This illustrates the balance retained between participant/insider and observer/outsider roles: as a volunteer and regular presence, Author 1 was trusted to facilitate a productive discussion, as an

observer, she was not expected to contribute to the substance of the discussion or actively influence its outcomes.

Data collection

Data collection was undertaken through observation, semi-structured interviews, and engagement in the network's associational life as a volunteer. Table 1 summarises the types and sources of data and gives detail of observation, participation and interviews conducted over a thirteen month period:

Insert Table 1 here

Table 1: types and sources of data

These multiple sources of data, together with Author 1's insider position provided insights into informal interactions around meetings and events, in addition to public-facing activities, enabling the development of a 'rich picture' or 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of leadership practice within the case context. In line with the LAP approach, the aim was to capture how leadership emerged through the everyday interactions of the key actors, rather than through their individual actions, styles or attributes (Raelin, 2020). The section below describes the data analysis process.

Analysis

Analysis proceeded in two stages. The first took the form of an inductive analysis to identify collective leadership practices within Bridgebuilders' first year of existence. Following Raelin (2011), a practice is defined as relational, a collaborative effort or accomplishment embedded in the social and material context. Adopting the practice (rather than person) as a unit of analysis involves identifying the shared processes of meaning-making and direction-setting (Raelin, 2020). Such practices are emergent and dynamic but also recur, forming patterns in the data (ibid). In this first stage of analysis we looked for practices through which participants moved Bridgebuilders from a small informal network to a formalised organisation through the emergence of shared ideas, activities, and discourses. We coded these practices inductively in NVivo. This process identified practices including idea generation, consensus-building, contestation, explanation, decision-making, involving, organising, disrupting, reporting, recording, and disseminating information. Although we identified these practices inductively, rather than through any coding scheme, they have some similarity to the list that Raelin (2020) suggests the researcher might consider, which includes dissent, dialogue and deliberation.

In a second stage of analysis, we looked for further patterns to group these practices into 'bundles' of inter-related activities (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016; Schatzki, 2005) that persist, become routinised, and evidence the emergence of shared understanding. This process is inspired by Schatzki's (2005) description of identifying bundles of practices in an academic department, including grading, advising, consulting, and meeting practices. This second stage of analysis consisted of an iterative and interpretive process in which Author 1 grouped the previously identified practices and labelled the 'bundle', then

shared the output with Author 2, who challenged the bundling and labelling, offering alternative interpretation. Author 1 then returned to the bundling process with a focus on clarifying the meaning of shared practices and the inter-relationship between them. We undertook this process of bundling, challenging, and re-bundling twice to ensure we achieved a shared and plausible interpretation that stayed close to the data. Findings begin to uncover the shared leadership practices through which the group's members co-construct a new organisation that is recognised by external stakeholders, and the emergence of a shared identity that in turn shapes further iterations of leadership practice. Table 2 introduces three leadership practice bundles identified through this process.

Insert Table 2 here.

Table 2: bundles of leadership practice in Bridgebuilders

The findings section below first describes Bridgebuilders in more detail, then outlines these bundles of leadership practices through which participants together constructed collective leadership. The bundles are each illustrated by interview quotes that in turn illustrate recurrent practices identified through ethnographic immersion. It goes on to uncover how actors moved continually between those bundles of practices, as they together constructed Bridgebuilders as an organisation, whilst retaining a narrative of informal, relational leadership. This is followed by a discussion and brief conclusion with pointers for future research.

Findings: Constructing Collective Leadership in a grassroots community organisation

Introducing Bridgebuilders

Bridgebuilders is a community group in a new residential area on the edge of a large town in southern England. At the time of the research, house building had been progressing for ten years and was expected to continue for a further ten to fifteen years. As noted in previous studies (see for example Authors, 2019; Platt, 2007), residents in these new areas have limited opportunities for social interaction and no shared history or sense of belonging. By definition all residents had come from somewhere else, and were in the process of building new social networks within the locality. Research has shown the importance of community development work in these new spaces to make connections between new residents (Drake et al., 2014). Early community development work in this area took place as residents moved into the first houses, building relationships and holding small events in communal spaces despite continued construction work - 'Making it up, seeing what happens...' (Former community worker). As the research began, the community development work that took place in the early years of house building was coming to an end. However, small community groups had begun to emerge, grassroots associations of people with shared interests – including a cycling group, uniformed youth organisations, residents' and a faith group - the latter supported by a church minister, Lucy, employed to engage with this new community.

Bridgebuilders emerged through informal day-to-day interactions between Lucy and individuals who had created separate community groups to address particular needs familiar in new housing developments such as childcare, leisure opportunities, and advocacy. Moreover, these individuals each engaged in several of these groups, as volunteers but also as 'consumers' of community activities – for example one was a parish councillor but also coordinator of a growing cycling group; another volunteered for an annual community lunch and children's holiday activities, and facilitated community activities at the new school; a third was the founder of a residents' group whose children participated in holiday activities. They encountered one another through these multiple layers of engagement, discovering that they were wrestling with similar challenges: a need for more volunteers, anxiety regarding bureaucracy, and a shared desire to involve more residents in community life. They began to meet informally in the pub and in homes to learn from one another, sharing their encounters with bureaucracy, and their fulfilment as they engaged with fellow-residents with shared interests. These interactions were described by participants as informal in that they were based on developing inter-personal relationships and mutual support, rather than building an organisation. However, after several years of such interactions, and with advice from departing community workers, these individuals called a public meeting where they formed a constituted community group to provide activities for all residents. Bridgebuilders' constitution describes the purpose of this group as building community cohesion, 'harnessing the energy of local volunteers and groups to coordinate community events under one banner, providing tools, resources, advice and removing barriers' (Bridgebuilders Constitution). Participants described their motivations for this move towards more formal organisational life as twofold – first, to share processes of resource acquisition (e.g. insurance cover); and second to extend community activities to *all* residents, beyond the small group of activists and their immediate contacts.

The next section of the paper describes the three bundles of leadership practices introduced in Table 2. These practices generated further practices and discourses of leadership that became embedded in the organisation, creating patterns of shared leadership practice that in turn limit the potential for alternative ways of leading to develop and to further shape identity. While bundles 1 and 3 relate most clearly to the process of becoming an organisation, and to the perceived need to account for organisational life to external stakeholders, bundle 2 relates to the aim to include, engage, and identify with the local community. Practices in all three bundles took place in the context of actors' stated intent that the organisation and its leadership should continue to be 'informal' - in terms of meeting style, relational interactions, and minimisation of bureaucracy.

1. A bundle of organising practices: Roles, Meetings, Boundaries, Sharing tasks...

These practices focused on the transition from a group held together by informal relationships to the adoption of a committee structure and committee roles. Prior to this, 'nothing was ever formal, it was all great fun...'. The initial group came together through relationships rather than any formal mechanism,

‘...it was knowing people. [Lucy] knows me obviously. [The chair] knows me, because he used to be on the parish council which was where I first met him. And then I know [another committee member] through her husband, because of the fire service.’ (Resident/Councillor)

Acting on the advice of a community worker, this relational group called a community meeting via social media and house-to-house leafleting, at which they elected a committee. Following this election, the group advertised regular meetings (again via social media), which the newly-elected chair began to structure - introducing standard agenda items, including minutes and finance. Informal meetings in homes and the local pub moved to the local community hub, with room rental and other costs funded by the parish council and local community foundation. Tasks were allocated to actors with and without committee roles, depending on who turned up to meetings, and (in some cases) recorded. A process of minuting meetings began but notes were frequently unavailable to future meeting attendees. Although meetings were open to all residents, when decision-making, a boundary was drawn between committee members and members of the wider community. As the year progressed the content of meetings moved from a focus on delivery of a large community event and other smaller community activities, towards more strategic conversations about the future of the organisation. Roles were reallocated, largely through informal conversations, as new actors were drawn into the relational network, and reaffirmed at the annual meeting at the end of the first year.

These organising practices in some ways reflected the norms of managing a committee-led organisation, with individuals performing their new roles and negotiating those roles in relation to other committee members and external stakeholders. However, these practices were characterised in two distinct ways. First, as the committee began to develop a strategic conversation about the future of Bridgebuilders, they retained a focus on practical operational tasks, moving repeatedly and continually between strategic and operational conversations. Second, the commitment to informality and ‘fun’ remained explicit throughout the year alongside these more formal organising practices. While some individuals intentionally focused their leadership activity on creating ‘fun’, others adopted more formal organising practices: collectively they found a balance between the two. As one committee member asserted:

‘I’m all about fun, I like to do quiz nights, Christmas dinner in the pub, street parties, BBQ. Because I think the purpose is all the same, we’ve built relationships, lifelong relationships, we have a safer community, I think the children are safer – they have a bigger support network around them, but I like to do that with fun. And other people like to do that formally. And I need to learn how to do things a bit more formally, and I think other people need to learn how to have more fun. I can do the fun bit. And I think that’s why people sign up to committees...’

Organizing practices contributed to the building of collective structure and identity, but in this group this did not result in the adoption of a shared managerial approach. Instead, participants expressed their commitment to maintaining a balance between increasing formalisation (including record keeping, adopting and complying with a constitution, and role allocation) and a continuing emphasis on informal (inter-personal relationships, mutual support, and fun). This dynamic balancing act enabled differences to be expressed and learning to emerge between actors with different strengths, experiences and skills.

2. A bundle of engaging practices: Meeting, Disseminating, Involving, Networking...

A second bundle of 'engaging' practices focused on engaging the broader community with the emergent organisation. Again, these practices were evidenced in processes in and beyond Bridgebuilders' meetings. A decision to hold meetings as open public meetings was embedded formally in the constitution. Meetings were conducted in a conversational style between committee members and community attendees and, at least initially, with limited reference to paperwork. Committee members referred to these practices as evidencing their legitimacy as an accessible, participative community organisation. However, following the inaugural meeting, and in spite of the large turn-out at community events, resident attendance at bi-monthly public meetings was low.

Conversations within and activity beyond meetings focused on how to engage the wider community – disseminating information; involving people in events; developing volunteering processes; and intentionally networking with other community groups. The initial committee members had all been involved in smaller community groups focused on particular interests or spaces, and identified broader community engagement as central to their motivation to develop the Bridgebuilders network. For example, the chair of a successful residents' group for one street explained the importance of involving the *whole* community:

'we knew we wanted to do something big, we'd been formed a year, we needed to do something huge, that we'd never done before – not huge, that's wrong, but included the whole of [the locality]. It needed to be accessible, it needed to be something that wasn't just for children, not just for adults – it needed to suit everyone.'

The group together prioritised dissemination of information, deciding to spend money on printing and leafleting, recognising the limited reach of the less labour-intensive route of social media. To reduce costs, and evidence their collaborative approach, they produced and distributed publicity together with other organisations in the network. However, to signal Bridgebuilders' independence from faith and political positions, and avoid the impression of a community take-over, the decision to share (or not share) publicity was taken repeatedly, reflecting the macro political context, as well as the micro context of local community activity. For example, they agreed that information about Bridgebuilders and other community groups should be included in a political newsletter on one occasion, saving printing or distribution costs. However, as an election approached, they decided not to repeat this in order to avoid appearance of political bias.

A small number of individuals did begin to attend Bridgebuilders' meetings in addition to the original group, largely drawn in through relational networks. These new attendees were welcomed warmly, and over the period of the research several became embedded in the informal network through which committee members interacted between meetings. They were allocated volunteer tasks, such as booking stalls or acts for an event, giving them responsibility and the task of accounting for that responsibility. The group identified volunteering as a priority for its second year, and began to develop increasingly formal volunteering processes. The dual aim of this increased formalisation was to recruit more volunteers for events and to ensure health and safety. Providing process was seen as a way of

drawing event attendees into volunteer roles. However, due to the timing of the research it is unclear whether this attempt at formalisation impacted on volunteer numbers.

In contrast to this attention given to volunteering, very little conversation focused on low meeting attendance. However, attendance increased following the group's Annual General Meeting (AGM), with new committee members sharing officer roles with longer-standing members. This increased engagement was attributed to informal endeavours to involve people behind the scenes, links with existing community groups, the developing volunteering network, and 'getting people talking' about issues within the community. Conversations within and beyond meetings focused on developing this informal network, and invitations were extended through personal contacts to known community groups to share information about current activities and future plans.

These informal processes continually reasserted Bridgebuilders' identity as a networked and associational organisation that engaged with and held itself accountable to the local community. However, an important shared leadership practice was also to hold the boundaries of this collaborative networking in order to maintain Bridgebuilders' independent identity.

3. A bundle of accounting practices: Explaining, Decision-making, Recording, Reporting...

The third bundle of practices captures the ways in which participants accounted internally and externally for their activities; and the gaps in those accounting practices. Bridgebuilders' meetings provided a platform for the development of accounting practices. Accounting – to one another, to the wider community, and to external actors (including funders) - proceeded through the activities of explanation, recording, reporting, managing risk, safeguarding and maintaining information flows.

Rather than relying on written agendas, minutes, and reports, meetings proceeded largely via verbal reporting. Notes or agendas were rarely tabled at the meetings. This was explained in terms of officers' multiple commitments and lack of capacity, leaving those in attendance to offer explanatory accounts of earlier decisions and future priorities. Despite the absence of paperwork at meetings, the chair offered assurance that records are maintained:

'Although our treasurer doesn't turn up to the meetings, she has everything there. I went round to see her not so long ago, and she does have everything documented, it's all in the drive we can see it. So, anything finance, we document. At the meetings, anything that we agree, or any actions that we have are all in the minutes, so they're all there as well, so we can go back in a year and say, 'at that meeting, I remember we said, we all agreed that we were going to do such and such'.'

One resident who attended meetings regularly was also a local councillor and therefore accustomed to more formal processes. However, he too accepted the informal approach:

'I just turn up. It's in my diary for the last Tuesday of every month. But I don't get the minutes or anything. I have to remember to email... – it's the meeting isn't it?'

From an observer's perspective, it was often difficult to identify how decisions were made. Occasionally an officer intervened, cutting across an explanatory account given in a meeting, to request a formal decision-making process via a show of hands and the recording of that decision in the minutes. However, this was rare and multiple decisions were made outside the meeting room:

'[X] asked group to agree the budget but they are unable to do this in treasurer's absence... Committee will agree funding with treasurer via email.' (Observation notes, meeting 2.)

Behind this apparently limited transparency in decision-making lay two things. First, early committee members were well-networked and interacted at a range of community venues, determining how to act through their informal conversations. Explanatory accounts given in meetings affirmed that consensus had been or would be achieved through these informal interactions. However, this backstage decision-making did not systematically include all committee members. Second, an online process of decision-making was established between committee members: the chair described this as involving weekly interaction, and noted that the group's constitution authorises online decision-making where necessary. However, there was no apparent process for recording online decision-making, other than the potential of retrieving online exchanges in extremis. Interviewees described the process of determining which decisions should be recorded, and reported as initially an implicit one informed by their prior experience in other community organisations, including schools and councils. It was also informed by their shared preference for interaction that is informal and 'fun', rather than bureaucratic. However, these 'back-stage' processes did in effect exclude some participants from decision-making.

As meetings continued through the year, attendees agreed a shared list of 'must-dos', determining which issues must be addressed explicitly, recorded, and reported to external stakeholders – health and safety, volunteer records, insurance, and funding. In particular, they highlighted the need to account to funders as a reason for introducing recording systems. However, gaps in the official record also highlighted the importance of practices through which committee members accounted to one another. This became evident when the treasurer failed to attend successive meetings and provided no written report. While continuing to assure one another of their confidence in the individual, the group began to identify others who might take on the reporting element of the treasurer's role. Their concern was to ensure that the money was not only managed well; but also to ensure that it was well accounted for within the group and beyond. This was one of the rare points at which the group asked the researcher to stop taking detailed notes:

'At this point, I am asked not to write down detail of the discussion about how to manage finances – there's informality and jokes as they discuss how to find a new treasurer and how to take a formal approach, whilst also finding someone who can be on top of record keeping, finance reporting and so forth.' (Observation notes, meeting 3)

As the first AGM approached, the chair acknowledged the need for formal processes to record and report on the organisation's plans so that 'we can say, yes, we achieved that one. We did that.' Recording processes became more prominent; verbal references were made to the requirements of the constitution; and the chair acknowledged in his interview that gaps in the first year's record were filled

retrospectively. Activity focused on accounting to the wider community in the public arena of the AGM, and following this meeting, newly-appointed joint secretaries implemented increasingly formalised processes of decision-making and recording. They justified these breaks into the informal flow of meetings by referencing the need to account to one another, to funders, to the broader community. In the facilitated prioritisation activity at the end of year one, the group together identified 'Evaluation and Celebration' as the priority for their second year of operation – creating shared processes that more explicitly accounted for and evidenced the value of their activities.

Discussion and conclusion

In this final section, we reflect on how the collective leadership lens and the concept of bundles of practice together enhance our insight into collective leadership practice in a grassroots association. Our intent here is to reflect on the insights that emerge through applying this conceptual lens and on how this expands insights that might be generated by more traditional person-centred approaches to leadership.

This single case study unpacks collective leadership practice within a GA and the challenges of that practice for sustaining GA identity. In contrast to narratives of sector professionalisation, the example of Bridgebuilders acts as a reminder that many GAs seek to retain their informal, relational identity, even as they become constituted organisations. Following Crevani and Endrissat's (2016) recommendation to identify 'bundles' of practices to examine collective leadership, we have identified the actions and interactions through which group members co-construct a GA and move it forward. Applying a collective leadership lens (Ospina et al., 2020) to our exploratory study uncovers the dynamic balancing act constituted by continually moving between organising, accounting and engaging leadership practices. This balancing act is characterised by sharing and mutuality. It is also characterised by plurality, as there is recognition that the individuals who collaborate to move the group forward have both overlapping and different objectives and motivations for sharing in the group's leadership (Ospina and Foldy, 2010).

As Bridgebuilders enters its second year of existence, the challenge is to sustain its informal GA identity through leadership practice that is plural and inclusive as it accounts *both* to the local community and to the system of external stakeholders and regulation that becomes increasingly significant as the organisation formalises. This also relates to the explicit intention to retain an associational (rather than bureaucratic) organisational form and relational ways of interacting (Rochester, 2013; Smith 2000), whilst recognising the need to engage in limited organisational bureaucratic process. This exploratory study suggests that sustaining the dynamic balance between organising, accounting, and engaging leadership practices will be significant in sustaining this identity, which is itself central to the purposes of its founding members. Retaining this balance, involves drawing on the informal authority (Heifetz, 1994) that is generated through growing engagement with community members, rather than simply on the positional authority of role allocation.

This is by no means the only leadership narrative that could be constructed around the first year of Bridgebuilders' existence. Applying a more traditional leadership lens, we could have constructed a narrative focused on individuals, describing their skills, traits and prior experiences, and analysing the significance of these individual attributes for the activities that create and sustain Bridgebuilders. Alternatively, we could have adopted a leadership-as-position perspective and described how individuals played out the roles of chair, vice-chair, secretary and treasurer. However, this traditional focus on individuals is limited in terms of producing generalisable knowledge as it tends to produce narratives focused on the purported uniqueness of individuals; while its broader conceptual limitations were discussed in the literature review. In contrast, applying the collective leadership lens and more specifically the bundles of practice concept within this lens, draws attention to actions and interactions that researchers and practitioners can test out in further GA and other non-profit contexts. In this way our study addresses a gap in the GA literature which previously has not addressed the detailed interactions through which GA members enact and further co-construct collective leadership.

Our study also contributes to the collective leadership literature by providing an empirical example of the application of Schatzki's concept of 'bundles of practices', as suggested by Crevani and Endrissat (2016). As indicated above, this affirms the value of this approach in generating new knowledge. Although our findings are specific to the context of the UK form of GAs and to the early existence of a GA, they have considerable affinity with the findings of the three leadership practice studies from the US highlighted in the literature review. They share a focus on organising practices that are inclusive or engaging, rather than organisation-centric (Quick, 2017) and affirm Han's (2014) finding that leadership practice that is characterised by relationships rather than task engages volunteers in an increasing commitment to the association and its outcomes. Like Ospina and Foldy (2011), this study also surfaces leadership practices that shape shared identity as interpersonal relationships weave together people with different perspectives and purposes. These findings appear to transfer well to the GA context because of their focus on the relational and informal organisational context. However, our study draws out how collective leadership practice that creates and sustains GAs involves balancing and moving between the more relational leadership practices with those that produce at least a minimal organisational structure that in turn allows the group to account to key stakeholders.

The strength of this study is in its examination of the detailed interactions of a Grassroots Association (GA) and explication of its collective leadership. However, this focus on a single case study also constitutes its limitations. Further research is needed to confirm that the continuing dynamic balance between organising, engaging and accounting practices can also be identified in the collective leadership practice of other GA groups, and to examine what factors within and beyond the group influence their ability to sustain this balance.

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