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SPECIAL ISSUE • Place leadership and the role of the third sector and civil society

research

Essential, complex and multi-form: the local leadership of civil society from an Anglo-Italian perspective

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Individuals and organisations within civil society play a crucial role in our cities, but little direct research has been carried out on their leadership role. By employing a place-based leadership approach, this article aims to identify the leaders of civil society in two cities, one in Italy (Padua) and one in the UK (Peterborough). We draw our results from 34 interviews with city leaders. Our findings highlight important similarities between the two cities, such as the fundamental function of umbrella organisations and the influence of faith leaders. We discuss the multi-form character of the leaders of civil society as acting within three main spheres of city leadership – the third/voluntary sector, community and faith – as highlighted by the participants in this study. We also find that civil society exercises the key leadership role of intermediary between citizens and government in public services delivery and in enabling community voice from different publics.

Key words place-based leadership • civil society • third sector • cities • civic leadership

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Introduction

This article is part of a wider research project on city leadership that addresses conceptual and practice issues and challenges in identifying and defining leaders (individuals and/or organisations) who play a crucial role in our cities without being formally part of the government and business sectors. ‘Civil society’, ‘third sector’, ‘voluntary sector’ and ‘non-profit sector’ are indeed only some of the various terms used to identify this large and diverse group of individuals and organisations that

contribute to the delivery of public services (Osborne, 2008; Pestoff and Brandsen, 2010; Rees and Mullins, 2016), to local governance (Denters, 2011; Cheng, 2018) and, more generally, to public value co-creation (Bryson et al, 2017) and/or social innovation (Brandsen et al, 2016). However, even though their leadership role and dynamics have increasingly been acknowledged and attracted the attention of several scholars (for example, Macmillan and McLaren, 2012; Howieson and Hodges, 2014), the primary focus has been on the *leadership within the sector/organisations* rather than the *leadership of the sector/organisations* (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012). As Macmillan and McLaren (2012: 3) argued, far too little attention has been paid to the leadership role that the sector can play, as a whole or through sub-groups, because ‘the “room” for leadership of the third sector is hugely contested and constrained’.

Three significant elements still affect the investigation and understanding of these actors and, in particular, their leadership:

- the range of terminology and many definitions used within and for the sector,¹ which makes it ‘a loose and baggy monster’ (Kendall and Knapp, 1995);
- defining which organisations are part of the sector (Evers and Laville, 2004; Alcock, 2010);
- establishing how leaders (in this case, *in* and *of* the sector) can be recognised and identified.

This article focuses on this final element and seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the sector by exploring who its leaders are and what their main leadership role is in two medium-sized cities, one in Italy (Padua) and one in the UK (Peterborough). In doing so, and especially in exploring the relationship between the agency of civil society organisations and local leadership, this article also contributes to the theoretical development of place-based leadership and its typologies in practice.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly define the different terms that are used to describe who and what occupies the space that is not formally considered as part of the government and business sectors, drawing first on the emerging literature on place-based leadership and second on the broader literature on civil society. We also delineate how leaders may be identified. The third section focuses on the methodology. In the fourth and fifth sections, we respectively describe the findings and discuss them. Finally, we draw our conclusions, reporting the contributions of the article and suggesting possible directions for future research.

Theoretical background

The theoretical backdrop of this article is the recent and emerging interdisciplinary area of studies of place-based leadership (for example, Hambleton, 2014; Jackson, 2019). We believe that a place-based approach could help us to better understand the leadership roles and dynamics of actors from outside the government and business sectors, given their fundamental impacts on the places people live in. Place-based leadership is a relatively new stream of research that puts at its heart the role of place in shaping leadership while being influenced by the concept and processes of ‘leadership’ itself (Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Collinge et al, 2010). The theoretical basis of place-based leadership studies is in its infancy, drawing on an eclectic mix of collaborative concepts, but particularly that of ‘policy networks’ (Ayres, 2014; Beer and Clower, 2014). Bringing

together the literatures on policy network theory, leadership and territorial governance is one of the contributions of the emerging praxis of place-based leadership in its different settings, which include scale and agency (Ayres, 2014). Yet, despite the growing literature on place-based leadership and, for example, its role in the socioeconomic development of regions (Sotarauta and Beer, 2017; Beer et al, 2019), in public service innovation (Hambleton and Howard, 2013), in the creation of smart cities (Nicholds et al, 2017) and in the socioeconomic resilience of cities (Bristow and Healy, 2014; Budd et al, 2017), place-based leadership still needs to be better understood (Sotarauta et al, 2017; Beer et al, 2019). For instance, while studies widely acknowledge that place-based leadership is collectively produced and exercised by formal and informal actors belonging to the public and private sectors and civil society (Hambleton and Howard, 2013; Brooks et al, 2016; Budd et al, 2017; Nicholds et al, 2017; Beer et al, 2019), the classification of place-based leaders remains generic, with related advantages and disadvantages.

To date, two place-based leadership frameworks have been developed and may help us recognise the different arenas (or sources) of place-based leadership: the Civic Leadership Framework, developed by Hambleton (2009; 2014; 2015), and the City Leadership Framework, developed by Budd and Sancino (Budd and Sancino, 2016; Budd et al, 2017). The two frameworks are very similar as the latter draws on the former, but the authors used two different labels to classify what they both define as the leadership exercised by those actors not formally part of either the government or business sector. Indeed, Hambleton uses the term *community leadership* whereas Budd and Sancino use *civic leadership*. This is in line with the tendency within the sector to use different terms and concepts interchangeably (that is, ‘civil society’, ‘third sector’, ‘voluntary sector’ and ‘non-profit sector’), even though each of them puts the focus on specific characteristics of the considered individuals or organisations. We expand on this issue in the subsection below.

Defining what is beyond government and business

It is not easy to define the multitude of actors who are not formally part of the more traditional sectors of government and business. Six terms may be helpful to this endeavour: ‘community leadership’, ‘civic leadership’, ‘civil society’, ‘third sector’, ‘voluntary sector’ and ‘non-profit sector’. These terms may represent different things to different people (Edwards, 2005; NCVO, 2008), especially because their meaning has varied over time and may depend on the geographical and cultural context in which they are used (for example, Jenei and Kuti, 2008).

For example, the meaning of *community leadership* largely depends on the interpretation of the word *community*. Smith et al (2006: 50) note two possible definitions:

1. Collectivity of people interacting in networks, organizations, and small groups within a more or less definable geographic area where the people carry out most of their daily activities accompanied by a sense of belonging to the collectivity.
2. Cohen (1985: 118) has described as “symbolic” those collectivities that fail to meet the geographic criterion but that members still see as an existing entity to which they belong.

Communities used to be seen as informal social institutions that were independent from formal structures, local authority, government and the private sector (Pigg, 1999; Flanagan and Hancock, 2010). However, several studies have recently broadened the definition of the term by considering also local authority leaders, public servants and business leaders as (potential) community leaders (Hartley, 2002; Sullivan et al, 2006). In other words, everyone who leads, mobilises and influences a community, at every scale and in every form, could be defined as a community leader. Furthermore, Edwards (2011: 307) has pointed out that community is changing in what is sometimes termed ‘postmodern society’, becoming even more porous, fluid and characterised by *multiple belongings*.

The meaning of *civic leadership* seems to depend mainly on the context where the term is used. For example, in the UK context, the term is usually understood by practitioners as the leadership exercised by the local authority, politicians and public servants² and employed from a municipal perspective. In the US, it is understood as the leadership exercised by citizens through civic engagement (for example, University of California, undated). In this case, civic leadership refers to the leadership of civil society and recalls the ideas of civic responsibility and citizens’ civic virtues in building the good society (Foley and Hodgkinson, 2009; see also the subsection below). In the same vein, Reed (1996: 100) defined civic leadership as the leadership of the followers or non-leaders who genuinely commit to creating a better world through ‘public advocacy, debate, education and the fostering of dialogue and group reflection’. However, since Hambleton’s works on the Civic Leadership Framework (Hambleton and Howard, 2013; Hambleton, 2015), the term has gained a broader meaning, at a higher territorial scale. According to Hambleton (2009: 10), ‘civic leadership is defined broadly to embrace all leadership activity that serves a public purpose in the city region’ and it can be exercised by political, managerial, business and community/voluntary sector leaders (Hambleton, 2015; Brooks et al, 2016).

Civil society is usually considered the broadest term among alternatives (that is, community, third sector, voluntary sector and non-profit sector) as it encompasses all others (NCVO, 2008; Howieson and Hodges, 2014). As highlighted by Jenei and Kuti (2008: 9), the term is ‘connected with the Aristotelian notion of an ideal way of life’ (see also Edwards, 2005; Foley and Hodgkinson, 2009), and it has been conceptualised and understood in various ways over time (for example, Plattner and Diamond, 1994; Shell, 1994; Hardt, 1995; Foley and Edwards, 1996; Ershova, 2015). In this article, we refer to it not only as a group of individuals and organisations, but also as a *way of acting*: it is the *collective, creative and values-based action* carried out by active citizens with the aim of creating a better society (Edwards, 2005), by expressing their interests and ideas, exchanging information, achieving mutual goals, making demands on the state and holding state officials to account (Diamond, 1994).

The *third sector* can be conceptualised following Jenei and Kuti’s (2008: 12) definition as:

the third alternative sector between the state and the market. According to Etzioni (1973), the main advantage of these organizations is in their combination of the entrepreneurial spirit and organizational effectiveness of the business firm with the common-good orientation of the public sector. Third sector organizations have an ‘intermediary role’ between state and market and they constitute a very specific segment of modern societies.

Some authors, however, include a wider range of organisations under this umbrella term, such as faith groups, community groups and grassroots groups (Howieson and Hodges, 2014; Rees and Mullins, 2016). This more inclusive choice may though lead to misinterpretations and confusion around the two concepts of civil society and the third sector.

The terms *voluntary sector* and *non-profit sector* are sometimes used as umbrella terms and synonyms for the third sector, especially in specific cultural and geographical contexts. The term ‘voluntary sector’ is mainly used in the UK to emphasise ‘the noncompulsory, nonstatutory (nongovernmental) aspect of that sector’ (Billis, 1989, cited in Smith et al, 2006: 239), whereas ‘non-profit sector’ is mainly used in the US to represent ‘all nonprofit groups in a society, in addition to all individual voluntary action found there ... and one of the four sectors of society’ (Smith et al, 2006: 159), together with government, business, and family and household (Smith et al, 2006: 205–6). However, focusing on the literal meaning of the terms, both refer to narrower realities, with specific organisational and legal structures, as their names suggest. The term ‘voluntary sector’ refers to non-profit organisations whose activities are mainly based on voluntarism (for example, Halfpenny and Reid, 2002), whereas the term ‘non-profit sector’ is commonly used to distinguish the organisations whose objective is to achieve a social purpose rather than seeking profit (for example, Howieson and Hodges, 2014).

Quite clearly, these definitions of the sector describe areas that often overlap, and the same organisation may be included in several of these classifications. These terms may also be used in two different ways: first, in a narrow sense, closer to their original and literal meaning; and second, in a broader sense, as umbrella terms that can be used interchangeably.

Conceptualise leadership, identify leaders

Given the focus of this article is on the leadership exercised at the local scale by individuals and organisations outside the government and business sectors, it is also important to concisely refer to two key and contested themes in leadership studies, that is, the conceptualisation of leadership and the identification of leaders. We agree with Grint et al (2016: 4) when they argued that ‘a consensus [on leadership] might be unachievable’, also because ‘there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are writers on the subject’ (Goodwin, cited in Liddle, 2010: 657). In fact, the definition of leadership may depend on the form of leadership that is being investigated and/or the perspective used in the investigation. To date, six complementary perspectives on leadership have been distinguished in the literature (Grint, 2005; Grint et al, 2016; Jackson and Parry, 2018), namely leadership as/through:

- a person (the who);
- a result (the what);
- a position (the where);
- a purpose (the why);
- a process (the how);
- a place (the where).

As regards the perspective used, for example, scholars may investigate leadership using:

- an individualistic approach, focusing on the attributes of the single key individual who exercises leadership, such as with the ‘great man theory’ (for example, [DeRue, 2011](#));
- a relational approach, highlighting the relationships that leaders have with other actors ([Clark et al, 2014](#)), for example with followers (for example, [Riggio et al, 2008](#)) or peers (for example, [Pearce et al, 2008](#));
- a collective approach, taking collective leadership as a critical lens to observe the dynamics of leadership embedded in socially constructed contexts (for example, [Ospina et al, forthcoming](#); [Ospina, 2017](#)).

Once the investigated form(s) of leadership and the perspective employed have been clarified, the approach(es) to leaders’ identification can be considered. In particular, despite the literature on this topic being large and variable ([Epitropaki et al, 2017](#)), leaders can be identified according to:

- their formal position or office, also called the positional approach to leaders’ identification ([Bonjean and Olson, 1964](#));
- their self-perception as a leader, also called the intrapersonal approach to leaders’ identification ([Epitropaki et al, 2017](#));
- their followers’ perception or evaluation, also called the reputational approach to leaders’ identification ([Bonjean and Olson, 1964](#); [Epitropaki et al, 2017](#));
- their actions during decision making, also called the decisional approach to leaders’ identification ([Bonjean and Olson, 1964](#)).

Methodology

As we have previously stated, the aim of this article is to explore who are the leaders not formally part of the government and business sectors, and what their main role is in two cities: Padua (Italy) and Peterborough (UK). Before proceeding with a description of the methodology, it is necessary to clarify two preliminary methodological choices, which were aimed at simplifying the data collection processes. First, we preferred not to define the term ‘leader’ but consider it in its widest sense as anyone or anything (that is, organisation, committee, groups) that exercises some sort of leadership and is identified as such. Second, given the place-based leadership approach of this article, during data collection and analysis we referred to the leaders of the sector as *civic/ community leaders*, drawing on the two place-based leadership frameworks identified in the literature ([Hambleton, 2014](#); [Budd et al, 2017](#)). We were aware that this choice could have been contested and that another terminology could have been used, but it was important to temporarily label the leaders of the sector, prior to the fieldwork, to delineate them in the most simple, effective and cross-contextual manner.

Research settings

We decided to focus our investigation on an Anglo-Italian comparison of two cities, given the different historical, socioeconomic, political and cultural contexts and civic

traditions in which the concepts and practice of leadership and their identification occur (see, for example, [Hambleton, 2014](#)). This study also builds on the results of our previous work with respect to the City Leadership Framework (see [Budd and Sancino, 2016](#)). Our selection criteria were based on our critical reading of the literature above, which guided us in the following informed choices.

First, we decided to investigate leadership within medium-sized cities, since they tend to be overlooked despite their important presence and role. Medium-sized cities have a population of between 100,000 and 250,000 inhabitants ([Dijkstra and Poelman, 2012](#)); specifically, we focused on the ones with a population close to 200,000 inhabitants. Second, each city is potentially a *unique* and *typical* case ([Yin, 2009](#); [Bryman, 2012](#)) as cities have both very specific economic, social and cultural characteristics as well as common ones (for example, local government systems, central government influence and public sector dynamics). Accordingly, we purposively selected the two research settings considering the following criteria:

- cities with political continuity during the study, meaning that no local political elections were planned in 2018 due to councillors' end of term;
- cities of which we had no prior knowledge (both theoretical and field) to minimise biases;
- cities at a reasonably close distance from where we are based, given the logistical and financial costs of the study.

Very briefly, Padua is a city in the north-east of Italy that is commonly described by its citizens as an artistic, cultural and religious place (Turismo Provincia di Padova, undated). At the end of 2018, it was awarded the title of 'European Volunteering Capital 2020' ([CEV – European Volunteer Centre, 2018](#)). Peterborough is a cathedral city in East England. The city has been a unitary authority since 1998 and in 2017 it formed with Cambridgeshire County Council a combined authority with an elected mayor. The city is described as a 'heritage, environment and event city' ([Peterborough Visitor Information Centre, 2018](#)), while research participants mainly defined it as a

Table 1: Basic characteristics of the two investigated cities

	Padua (Italy)	Peterborough (UK)
Population (est. 2017) ¹	210,440	198,914
Local government typology and administrative culture	Napoleonic/Southern Europe	Anglo-Saxon
Local government form	Strong mayor	Council leader and Cabinet
Higher local government form	Province	Combined authority
Unemployment rate (2015)	9.4% ³	5.3% ⁴
Disposable income per capita (US dollars – regional level) ⁴	21,271	21,369
Civic engagement (regional level) ⁴	7.6	5.3
Community wellbeing (regional level) ⁴	6.8	9.1

Source: Own elaboration. Official data from: ¹ Citypopulation.de; ² Istat; ³ Eurostat; ⁴ OECD Regional Well-Being indicator ([OECD, 2018](#))

city with a very diverse population and one of the fastest-growing cities in the UK. The basic characteristics of the two cities are set out in [Table 1](#).

Data collection and analysis

This article is mainly based on a qualitative content analysis ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#)) of interviews with 34 city leaders: 15 in Padua and 19 in Peterborough. We decided to identify and explore the role of civic/community leaders through the lens of key city actors. In other words, also to ensure a multi-actor examination, different types of leaders were involved: political, managerial, business and civic/community. These city leaders, who represented the potential participants in our study, were selected in two phases:

- We carried out extensive desk research mainly based on a positional approach to leadership identification ([Bonjean and Olson, 1964](#)).
- We used a reputational approach ([Bonjean and Olson, 1964](#); [Epitropaki et al, 2017](#)) based on the interviewees' perception of who were the leaders of the sector. In other words, we used interviewees' responses not only to collect data but also to recruit further potential participants, similarly to a snowball sampling process. In this way, participants were recognised as city leaders or key city actors not only by us but also by participants, thereby improving the quality of our sample of city leaders.

Participants (that is, city leaders) were asked to answer the following question: In your opinion, who are the most important civic/community leaders in your city today? To help participants, we provided them with the following definition drawn from the work of [Budd et al \(2017\)](#): Civic/community leader(ship) exercises the function of active citizenship aimed at co-creating public and social value (for example, associations, volunteering activities, charities, ...). Participants were invited to name (where possible) at least three civic/community leaders of their city and they could answer in any way they wanted (that is, giving names, formal positions, organisations, groups and so on). This generated a wide variety of answers, according to their perceptions of civic/community leadership and leaders.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in NVivo ([Bazeley and Jackson, 2013](#)). We then conducted a conventional content analysis ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#)) to further familiarise ourselves with the data and identify potential patterns of leaders' identification. As a result of this, we identified three main spheres of civic/community leadership as perceived by interviewees (see the Findings section below) and we then recoded the interviews following a summative content analysis, which 'involves counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context' ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#): 1277). Finally, we counted, compared and explored more in-depth results within and among cities.

Once the analysis was completed, we invited participants to a follow-up focus group to discuss the findings of the study. Two focus groups, one in each city, were organised, with a total of 17 participants: eight in Padua's focus group and nine in Peterborough's one. As a result of the focus groups, the findings that emerged from the analysis were validated and we selected the more compelling

and representative passages of the interviews as support for the description and discussion of the findings.

Findings

Three compelling themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data:

- the importance of the arena of civic/community leaders;
- its complexity;
- its multi-form character.

The importance of civic/community leaders results from two central roles that they play: first, in the day-to-day function of the city, as enablers of the delivery of a multitude of public and associated services. Two interviewees explicitly remarked on this role:

‘We have so many charities, non-profit organisations, volunteers’ organisations that if they get tired to deliver services, Padua closes. Strictly speaking. ... It is impossible to govern without them. ... They replace the public sector in many ways.’ (Pa2-PL,³ translated by the authors)

‘You need the voluntary sector to deliver so many things because actually you as a city can’t afford to deliver these things, so you need to stimulate and finance the voluntary sector to be out and deliver many services that you can’t.’ (Pe3-PL)

Second, civic/community leaders are recognised as promoters of citizens’ and communities’ *voice*, even though the level of success of such voice was perceived differently in the two cities. In Padua, it was perceived as more balanced and efficient, able to represent the various opinions of the territory, whereas in Peterborough the loss of this voice was also emphasised due to resource constraints and lack of funding. As one interviewee put it:

‘There is nobody funded to do work on civic or community leadership. So, as an organisation you need infrastructure funding to support the voice. If we want a voice and we want a forum, there needs to be resources in that and there isn’t. ... The communities no longer have a voice here, there is no structure for it.’ (Pe9-CL)

However, although this interviewee emphasised the lack of structure to the expression of this civic/community voice, most interviewees in both cities also pointed out the fragmented character of the sector, reinforcing the second key theme that emerged from the analysis, namely its complexity. In fact, despite the recognition of the important role played by these leaders, interviewees of both cities used expressions like “there are hundreds”, “very confusing picture”, “fragmented”, “quite diverse”, “a constellation of actors” and “very complex machine” and they often struggled in naming civic/community leaders, as they hardly recognised a specific person or organisation that exercises that leadership role. For example, one interviewee said:

‘I think anybody who, I don’t know if you know the British expression “get up and go”, anybody who has any get up and go in community leadership quite quickly finds himself on the city council. ... [But], you know, civic and community leadership outside of the council, I think you see that in terms, you can see that at very local level so neighbourhood level, you can see that kind of leadership manifests. But I am struggling to think of any people who fit that section. You’ve got inevitably the sort of round tables and all of those kinds of things. The church, lot of which is underestimated, and this is a cathedral city, the Church of England ... They still exert quite a bit of power, usually in an informal way but they are powerful. I am struggling to think of others.’ (Pe11-BL)

The complexity of civic/community leadership is also the result of the third theme that emerged, namely its multi-form character. In fact, what stands out from our analysis, and especially from the Peterborough interviews, is the recognition of different types of identified civic/community leaders. The two following excerpts clearly represent this:

‘That’s a good question. I think that the most important are probably geographic leaders, so people who represent particular geographic communities, such as the villages, an area of the city and I think that, probably after that or along so, you’ve got the demographic-based representatives, whether that, for instance, are representatives of women groups or representatives of old people, younger people. Then you also have faith-based representation. I think it’s very important in a city which is as ethnically diverse as Peterborough, faith-based representation seems important, particularly for the Muslim community or the Hindi community or indeed the Christian community, they have a really important role to play. You’ve got charity leadership as well. You’ve got quite a few infrastructure charities or enabling charities that cut across a whole range of different disciplines and represent the third sector quite well. So, we have, for instance things like Peterborough Council for Voluntary Services, that acts as an umbrella organisation for many different charities in the city.’ (Pe12-BL)

‘The religious leadership, the voluntary sector, and then I think there are quite a lot of small community groups, but they are more competing for space perhaps, then we have Vivacity, which is the leisure trust and which obviously runs a lot of resources, but maybe it is more managerial leadership really. And you do have groups like Inspire Peterborough, which is a disability group, which is very influential.’ (Pe17-ML)

These quotes clearly illustrate that three main different spheres of civic/community leaders can indeed be recognised, underpinning the summative content analysis we conducted:

Table 2: Results from the summative content analysis

	Padua		Peterborough	
	Number of times cited	Examples given	Number of times cited	Examples given
TS/VS sphere	40 (by 14 interviewees)	Fondazione Cariparo, Centro Servizio Volontario (CSV), Legambiente	31 (by 14 interviewees)	Peterborough Council for Voluntary Service (PCVS)
Community sphere	2 (by 2 interviewees)	–	23 (by 14 interviewees)	Italian community, Pakistani community, Polish community
Faith sphere	10 (by 7 interviewees)	Diocese and bishop	19 (by 13 interviewees)	Faith leaders, mosque

Source: Own elaboration

- the third sector/voluntary sector (TS/VS) sphere, in its narrow sense, which includes all cited third sector organisations (TSOs), voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) and charities;
- the community sphere, in its narrow sense, which mainly includes all references to community groups and community associations, but also to neighbourhood groups, the local authority/councillors and people with no specified affiliation or role;
- the faith sphere, which refers to faith leaders and organisations.

Table 2 summarises and compares, within the two cities, the number of times each type of civic/community leader was cited in each sphere and the more cited examples given by interviewees.

Looking at Table 2, two differences between the investigated cities stand out. First, in Padua, the presence of the community sphere was not perceived, whereas in Peterborough it was recognised by most interviewees, especially because of the ethnically diverse character of the city, as clearly explained by Pe12-BL (see the quote above). Strongly related and evident from some of the quotes provided so far, the second difference concerns the types of faith leaders identified. In Padua, a central role is still predominantly played by the Catholic Church (that is, the diocese and bishop), while in Peterborough, the leadership role is more balanced and shared among different faiths. In fact, several interviewees mentioned, in general, *faith leaders* and the mosque.

In contrast, the perception of the TS/VS sphere is similar between the two cities, except for the key role of Fondazione Cariparo, recognised by most of Padua's interviewees, but that, however, is an exceptional case. Fondazione Cariparo is a former bank foundation, which invests considerable sums of money each year in the city by funding large projects for the benefit of the whole city and community. As one interviewee put it: "If Fondazione Cariparo did not exist in Padua, it would be a tragedy" (Pa14-CL, translated by the authors). In both cities, interviewees recognised the leadership role of the TS/VS, but mainly as a whole group of organisations or, in other words, considering all TSOs/VSOs within the city. As one interviewee in Padua put it, "there isn't one that is more important than the

others” (Pa9-PL, translated by the authors). Also, a central role was given to the umbrella organisations that gather together the views and voices of all TSOs/VSOs, namely CSV in Padua (that is, Centro Servizio Volontario, which means Service Centre for Volunteering) and the Peterborough Council for Voluntary Service (PCVS) in Peterborough.

Discussion

The main aim of this article is to provide an analysis of the identification and comparison of civic/community leaders and their leadership role in Padua and Peterborough.

First, our analysis confirms a strong association between leadership and place (Hambleton and Howard, 2013; Budd et al, 2017; Sotarauta et al, 2017; Beer et al, 2019) and, more broadly, between leadership and context (Osborn et al, 2002; Shamir, 2012; Osborne et al, 2016). In fact, in both cities, the identification of leaders is influenced by context. The two spheres of *community leadership* and *faith leadership* provide an illustration of this. In Peterborough, community leadership plays an important role and faith leadership is seen in its broadest terms, regardless of the specific religious or shared spiritual belief (that is, participants named faith leaders in general). In fact, as we reported when describing the research setting, Peterborough was described by participants as an ethnically diverse city and, given the significant immigrant population, large multiple communities and related faith groups live within the city. This may explain the importance given by Peterborough’s interviewees to community groups. By contrast, in Padua, community leadership is not even recognised and the fundamental faith leadership role is still exercised by the Catholic Church, through the bishop and the diocese. This is due in part to the national and historical context and the presence of the Vatican in Italy, but also by its appellation as ‘The City of the Saint’, referring to Saint Anthony of Padua, which makes the city famous for its religious character and as a destination for pilgrimages.

Second, despite the differences due to these contextual factors, in the two cities, interviewees cited the TS/VS sphere as providing an important leadership role. In both cities, however, they also remarked that usually it is not a specific TSO or VSO that plays this leadership role, but the whole group of these types of organisations that exist in the city. This supports Macmillan and McLaren’s (2012) suggestion to start focusing on the *leadership of the sector* rather than the *leadership in the sector*, perhaps with a particular focus on the relationships among different TSOs/VSOs within the same city.

Third, in both contexts, the three identified spheres of civic/community leaders seem to play a specific and crucial public role as being intermediaries between citizens and the state. In particular, this role seems to be enacted in two main ways: through the delivery of public services and as the voice of citizens and communities (that is, multiple publics). In other words, civic/community leaders might be replacing the more traditional public actors (for example, politicians and public servants) in meeting and responding to citizens’ and communities’ needs, despite (or even because of) austerity measures. This interpretation intriguingly connects with wider debates on ‘manufacturing civil society’ (Brandson et al, 2017) and clearly needs further research and attention to keep investigating the changing phenotypes of leadership within civil society as a result of interacting with government.

Finally, terminology requires some further consideration. It was evident that there was a lack of shared language among the interviewees: the use of the term ‘civic/ community leadership’ induced a great variety of answers and particularly the term ‘community leadership’ was intended in both its broadest and narrowest senses. In fact, some interviewees considered community leadership as being exercised by leaders of community groups or organisations (narrow sense), as well as by TSOs/VSOs and faith leaders (broadest sense), confirming the difficulty of finding an unequivocal classification of the sector.

Conclusion

Our findings confirm that the importance and complexity of the sector, especially viewed through a leadership lens, are recognised and perceived by key city actors. It is therefore crucial to continue investigating leadership of and within the sector, at and beyond the local level. The comparison of the two cities of Padua and Peterborough highlights both differences and important similarities between the two cities, such as the key role of umbrella organisations (that is, CSV in Padua and PCVS in Peterborough) and the influence of faith leaders. Also, the sector’s multi-form character and the lack of a shared conceptualisation and classification were emphasised, confirming that a definitive delineation of the sector might be unachievable. However, it is still important for scholars and practitioners to clearly explain how they define the sector, and according to our findings and the literature reviewed, we suggest considering these leaders as representatives of *civil society* and as *civic leaders embedded in a given place*.

Civil society is indeed the broadest term in use and encompasses all three spheres that emerged from the analysis, namely the TS/VS, the community and the faith spheres (Howieson and Hodges, 2014; NCVO, 2018). Also, it describes a *way of acting*, recalling the US’s conceptualisation of civic leadership as a leadership exercised by citizens and followers (or traditional non-leaders) through civic engagement, responsibility and virtue to make their voice heard in a given place (Diamond, 1994; Reed, 1996; Edwards, 2005; Jenei and Kuti, 2008). The use of the term ‘civic leadership’, rather than other terms, might also further open up discussions about the dynamics of local governance, enabling the involvement (or demand for involvement) of a larger audience of key players within civil society. The contribution of civic leaders, in all forms, is indeed crucial for an effective co-production and co-creation of local leadership and public value. However, as we attempt to show in this article, the identification of these leaders should not be taken for granted nor underestimated by academics or practitioners.

Many questions still remain unanswered and future research should be undertaken to further understand the leadership of the sector. In particular, further studies with more of a focus on the (unconscious) collective leadership exercised by civil society are needed. In fact, it seems likely that these individuals, groups, organisations and communities are unconsciously exercising collective leadership because, even though they mostly act for themselves (individually and at the organisational level), they are actually perceived as leaders as a whole (together and at the group level). This – mainly unconscious – democratic and political potential of innovation and representation from below by civil society was pointed out by Della Porta (2020) in her keynote speech delivered at the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) Conference

held in 2018 in Amsterdam and it deserves further debate and exploration (see also Terry et al, 2019). Finally, similar work on other cities and countries might help to better understand how different contexts shape civil society and provide opportunities and constraints for civic leaders. Lastly, the role of faith leadership is poorly investigated in place-based leadership studies and scholars may wish to ponder how to analyse this aspect in city leadership and governance in future work.

Notes

¹ We use the term ‘sector’ instead of ‘civil society’, ‘third sector’, ‘voluntary sector’ or ‘non-profit sector’ to emphasise both the contested use of these terms and our decision to define it according to the findings that emerged from this study.

² This definition is not a result of the literature review but of the conversations we had with the project’s participants and colleagues.

³ The reference number of the participants identifies: the city they belong to (that is, Pa for Padua and Pe for Peterborough); the sequential number of the interviewee; and the role played within the city (that is, PL for political leader, ML for managerial (public service delivery) leader, BL for business leader and CL for civic/community leader).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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