“You can’t Google everything” – Voluntary Sector and Leadership in the Eyes of Communities of Place

Abstract:
This paper addresses an identified absence in the place leadership literature by exploring how voluntary sector actors contribute to the leadership of place. We attempt to untangle the complex relationship between leadership, place and the voluntary sector, exploring first how understandings of both leadership and place are strengthened by the significant recent advances in the collective and critical approaches to leadership studies. We argue that collective approaches are particularly well suited to interrogating place leadership, and the voluntary sector, both of which are inherently collective endeavours. Drawing on an empirical study of locally-rooted voluntary organisations in a district in the Midlands of England, we produce a thematic analysis which highlights three core themes of the voluntary sector contribution to collective place leadership: their ability to draw on and mobilise local knowledge, their positioning in a web of dense local relationships, and the notion that their intrinsic characteristics are a key source of their distinctiveness and value to the wider ‘system’ of place leadership. In drawing these empirical strands together we offer insight into the centrality of the voluntary sector in the constitution of place (a role that has long been undervalued). Further, our findings shed light on the complexity and multiplexity of leading in the collective, and particularly the extent to which the voluntary sector is constrained by wider structures and macro-dynamics.
Introduction

Understanding of the role of actors in the voluntary sector in enacting and creating place leadership is underdeveloped in the literature (Pagani et al., 2020). Yet, the interactions between voluntary organisations, governmental and non-governmental organisations and communities provide a rich resource for exploring the fine-grained ‘relational ground’ that constitutes place (Collinge and Gibney, 2010: 388; Sancino, 2016), and upon which the meaning-making processes of leadership are enacted. This is an important perspective which contributes to responding to the call to give greater attention to place in leadership studies (Sutherland et al. 2020). Furthermore, foregrounding the voluntary sector in our analyses ultimately provides a more complete picture of how collective leadership - which is also integral to an improved understanding of place leadership - has to include the voluntary sector as a significant actor.

This paper addresses this identified gap in the literature by exploring how voluntary sector actors contribute to place leadership, drawing particular attention to how resources of local knowledge and densely networked relationships are combined through the prism of their local rootedness and a commitment to place. In addition, the paper identifies how the distinctive contribution and attributes of the voluntary sector generate a source of legitimacy with local communities that in turn cements the role of voluntary sector actors in the collective leadership of place. In doing so, we uncover the social processes through which people influence and motivate one another, mutually constructing place and ‘getting things done’ (Sotarauta et al., 2017: 188). We also highlight these processes are shot through with tensions and contradictions, particularly those facing the voluntary sector actors who are committed to place leadership through their commitment to place.

We explore these themes through an in-depth case study of a district in the Midlands of England, UK. Specifically, the paper addresses two research questions:

RQ1 > How does the voluntary sector contribute to the constitution of place?
RQ2 > What role does the voluntary sector play in shaping (collective) place leadership?

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical background to the paper, making sense of the relationship between leadership, place and the voluntary sector. Next, we outline the method of the study, including the processes of data collection and analysis. The fourth section explores the findings of the empirical study. This is followed by a discussion and a brief conclusion.

Theoretical backdrop: making sense of leadership, place and the voluntary sector

Leadership and Place through Collective and Critical Lenses

Leadership and place are two widely defined and used terms, but there is still no widely accepted and refined definition of what place leadership is. Place leadership can thus be
understood as an unfolding and multi-disciplinary field of research and theoretical debate and as a conceptual lens which focuses on the mutual influences of place and leadership (e.g. Beer et al., 2019; Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Jackson and Parry, 2018). Depending on the primary academic disciplines involved ( ), which spans from regional and urban studies (e.g. Sotarauta et al., 2017) and politics and international relations (e.g. Acuto, 2013) to public governance (e.g. Hambleton, 2019) and organisation and leadership studies (e.g. Jackson, 2019), there might be different combinations for describing the relationships that may occur between place and leadership.

From a leadership studies point of view, two lenses seem particularly suited for examining and understanding leadership and place: a collective and critical view of leadership (Gibney and Nicholds, 2016). As for the first element, Raagmaa and Keerberg (2017: 262) pointed out that ‘place-based leadership is inherently collective, choosing the ways in which leaders mobilize other actors and entire communities.’ Moreover, it is also critical because it implies issues of power, which are inherent to the notion of place: according to Cresswell (2015) which draws on Agnew (1987), ‘place at a basic level is space invested with meaning in the context of power’ (Cresswell, 2015: 19). Place is indeed a key source of power for governing (intended both as governance and governmentality - Bevir, 2011) and can be leveraged by leadership as a site, object, means, and/or spatial imaginary (Jessop, 2016).

Coming to a more analytical definition of collective and critical, with collective leadership we refer to ‘an emerging theoretical umbrella that captures diverse scholarship on the shared, distributed, pooled, and relational aspects of leadership, its emergence and relation to hierarchical leadership’ (Ospina et al., 2020: 442). As Jackson, Nicoll and Roy have written (2018: 72), ‘under the umbrella term of “collective leadership”, many leadership scholars have rejected a leader-centred perspective and redefined leadership as a property of the collective, be it a group, an organisation or a social system’. In terms of critical leadership, we refer to a field of research which, originating from critical management studies (e.g. Adler et al., 2007), studies leadership as a relational, socially constructed and culturally specific phenomenon, sharing with collective leadership the assumption that leadership is much more than the result of a stable set of leadership attributes that inhere in ‘the leaders’ (e.g. Collinson, 2011; Grint, 2005).

One fruitful point of connection between a collective and critical view of leadership has recently been established by Ospina et al. (2020: 443) by distinguishing between collective as a type or as a lens, and by considering the locus of leadership as either residing in the group or in systemic dynamics. Collective and critical lenses match when collective refers to a theoretical lens rather than to a reified type of leadership, and when leadership resides in systemic dynamics rather than in the group(s) (the locus of leadership). This means observing leadership dynamics in a way ‘attentive to the conditioning effect of social, economic, cultural, and political structures - such as capitalism, patriarchy, or imperialism (Coule et al., 2020: 2) - as well as to ‘broader ideological and institutional conditions’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 373).
However, how does this work when adding place and the voluntary sector as focus of analysis to study leadership from critical and collective lenses?

Taking place and the voluntary sector seriously

We believe that taking seriously the aim of reinvigorating notions of place in leadership – which was identified as one of the key aims of this Special Issue - has huge implications, especially if using collective and critical lenses. In this regard, Sutherland et al. suggested a powerful insight: ‘Leaders must first be in place before acts of leadership can be delegated and enacted’ (Sutherland et al., 2014: 763). Also, according to Grint, placing leadership is important as it ‘constitutes similar problems differently’ (Grint, 2010: 365). Taken literally, this means place in some ways both precedes and explains leadership, being a ‘container of leadership’. However, what is place? Place is “a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place” (Agnew, 1987) and a combination of “materiality, meaning and practice” (Cresswell, 2004) which provides a unique configuration of social relations and culture. Indeed as Massey reminded us each place is unique and reflects the ‘accumulated history of a place, with that history itself conceptualised as the produce of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages both local and to the wider world’ (1993, p.68). According to Collinge and Gibney (2010: 388), place is ‘the relational ground upon which the interpreting ‘activities’ of leadership unfold at a variety of levels… and across a variety of boundaries.’ Thus, place is a locus where spaces with opportunities and constraints (e.g. Hambleton, 2014) for leadership happen because of contingencies, economic and political context, culture, geographical spaces, and historical patterns. Also, the place of leadership is strongly connected to the purpose of leadership, as Jackson, Nicoll and Roy emphasised: ‘Place foregrounds the context within which leadership is created. It asks where leadership is created, encompassing both its geographic and historic construction. Purpose focuses on the vital yet frequently unanswered question of why leadership is created. These two elements are often very closely interlinked.’ (Jackson, Nicoll and Roy, 2018: 74)

The link between the constituting elements of the concept of place (e.g. context, culture, history, etc.) and purpose makes evident the need to adopt a critical lens for understanding leadership. In this respect, a focus on the voluntary sector - and especially on local (typically ‘smaller’) and thus rooted in a place - organisations (the specific empiric focus of this paper) can help to better understand how and why people come together because of place, what practices are socially constructed in places, and how these practices, in turn, contribute to the construction of place.

Arvidson et al. (2018) have previously argued for the importance of understanding the different ways in which voluntary organisations develop and act together in different localities within a nation-state, in their case Sweden. They suggest that ‘local civil society regimes’ – liberal, corporatist, and social democratic - develop in response to differences in local ideology and politics that in turn influence collaboration, cross-sector dialogue and funding regimes within a city. This paper highlights the significance of place in understanding voluntary sector development and activity. There is scant literature so far on leadership in and of the voluntary sector (e.g. Macmillan and McLaren, 2012; Terry et al., 2019). However, from our analysis and
knowledge of the topic, there are some important issues observable from a place perspective. First, the role of government (at any level) and governmentalities in manufacturing the voluntary sector (see Brandsen et al., 2018). As Lough (2020: 4) discusses ‘due to its informal and voluntary nature, leadership in local places from voluntary sector and civil society is often hidden, difficult to study and overshadowed by formal governance structures’ (Sotarauta, 2018). Second and related to the first point, looking at what voluntary organisations do in places can help to understand the impact of neoliberal systemic structures (Teasdale and Dey, 2019). For example, (2020) discussed the prominence of the public services delivery role of the voluntary sector, which may disempower its collective political and advocacy potential (Della Porta, 2020; also . Third, in terms of practices of leadership, a voluntary sector and place focus has the potential to open up interesting insights. For example, Teasdale et al. (2019) have pointed out practices of deviance and ignorance might be necessary to be pursued by civil society leaders in interactions with government to achieve their social mission. Lough (2020) uses the term organic leadership pointing out that ‘it cannot be divorced from place because the relational capital required to make organic leadership work voluntarily is dependent on regular and repeat interactions of trust-based reciprocal exchanges between people’. The social technologies employed by voluntary sector organisations for leading are also often infused by post-capitalist and/or anti-capitalist practices (e.g. Zanoni, 2020), such as solidarity, gift and generosity.

So, to summarise, by looking through critical and collective lenses at leadership in place as enacted by the voluntary sector, what can we learn about leadership?

Research Design and Method
The research findings on which this paper is based originate from a larger qualitative study that sought to understand the value and contribution of small voluntary organisations in the UK by conducting area case study research in four localities in England and Wales (see Dayson et al., 2018). Here we discuss data gathered in just one of those localities because of the compelling and spontaneous discourses of interviewees that arose in relation to the ways in which the voluntary sector influences place leadership. The original study did not explicitly focus on nor ask directly about such a theme, and its presence in the data called for a further and deeper analysis on that direction, in line with the gap in the literature discussed in the previous section. Our focus of analysis is on a district in the British Midlands (from now on referred to as DISTRICT to guarantee anonymity), namely the second tier of local government sitting below that of a County Council. Very briefly, DISTRICT is a semi-rural locality that includes two small market towns and a number of smaller villages. It is characterised by its distance (physical and perceptual) from the county city and its identity as a former mining area. These characteristics in turn shape DISTRICT’s social and economic identity.

The research was primarily qualitative and involved two stages: first, a ‘mapping’ of the ecosystem of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in each area; and second, organisation level research. We selected eight voluntary sector organisations (VSOs, VSO A to H) from within DISTRICT that reflected a range of organisational sizes, provided a
range of services associated with social welfare and disadvantage, and were located in different parts of the district. The selection reflected a pragmatic balance between convenience sampling (including the organisations’ accessibility and willingness to take part in the research) and a sampling strategy aiming for representativeness of the diversity of voluntary sector activity in the area. Also, in order to triangulate the data, we involved in the study five key public sector organisations (PSOs, PSO 1-5) because of their important role with and influence on the local voluntary sector. In total, 36 semi-structured interviews were carried out with directors, staff, volunteers, trustee of the organisations, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of case studies selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisations</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
<th>N. of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VSO A</td>
<td>Medium, £493k</td>
<td>Provides an emergency hostel, move on accommodation, and advice and support in one of the towns.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO B</td>
<td>Medium, £407k</td>
<td>A community resource agency offering help and support to individuals and organisations throughout DISTRICT, including older and socially isolated people</td>
<td>5 (with 4 participants – one interviewed twice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO C</td>
<td>Small, £41k</td>
<td>Church-led organisation providing a range of community projects aimed at tackling deprivation and social isolation.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO D</td>
<td>Large, £158m</td>
<td>A large national charity that delivers a range of health and social care services to individuals, young people and families seeking to overcome issues such as substance misuse, homelessness, deprivation, offending and domestic abuse.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed, and then analysed in NVivo by conducting a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). More specifically, the thematic analysis was based on an abductive reasoning (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), focused on semantic themes (rather than latent ones) and driven by the RQs, namely:

RQ1 > How does the voluntary sector contribute to the constitution of place?
RQ2 > What role does the voluntary sector play in shaping (collective) place leadership?

Findings
Three main and interconnected themes emerged from our thematic analysis. They are discussed here, under the headings: local knowledge, relationships, and distinctiveness.
Local Knowledge
This is the first key theme emerged from the thematic analysis. From a voluntary sector perspective, place leadership is based on local knowledge, which could be defined as what and who you know about the place and its particularities, the needs and characteristics of local people at a fine-grained scale, and/or the knowledge of and links to particular communities of need (e.g. homeless, elderly). The centrality of the voluntary sector’s local knowledge was strongly emphasised by participants who consider it as their ‘unique selling point’ and added value to local governance:

“Everything we do is about local knowledge and working with the clients on the ground. We know the local services (...) Outside services coming in don’t have that so they can’t help people in the same way because if you don’t have that knowledge you don’t know who to refer on to or signpost to. You can’t Google everything.” (VSO B).

“it’s realising that the value again of local knowledge and local relationships, so commissioning on that perspective is a real threat and a challenge to the sector, that’s where the value of small and local really does come through.” (VSO E)

Local knowledge is, firstly, crucially deeply ingrained in the working practices and day-to-day activity of organisations. It gives them legitimacy in the eyes of communities of place and of need, and enables them to advocate on their behalf. As one interviewee from a PSO recognised:

I think life would get easier [without small VSOs], cos that voice, that street-level local understanding and advocacy for those people, that would go, so we’d end up with not a lot of noise, and we wouldn’t really know what was going off and as nice as that would be, you’d kid yourself that everything’s going smoothly, the reality is we’ll be more disconnected from understanding the true needs. (...) I don’t think there’s much difference in terms of voluntary sector organisations’ voice between DISTRICT or any of the other districts, I think it’s about the same, it may be slightly stronger in places like DISTRICT purely cos they’re the most deprived areas so there are more organisations there cos of that reason, there are more of them and they’re more vocal cos they’re passionate about vocal needs. But if they weren’t there, we’d lose an important connection or connectivity with very low-level population need (PSO 3).

The concept of local knowledge is closely related, indeed intertwined with, the sense of being locally rooted and embedded in place and community. Many, if not most, local voluntary organisations emerge from a need within or affecting particular communities within their locality. The knowledge gained in their activities gives them further legitimacy with the wider community: the more knowledge they gain, the more they are embedded within that context, and the more knowledge they further gain, setting up a positive feedback loop:
“We’re local people, we know our customers, we know the [DISTRICT] economy… being locally embedded… it’s not about whether you’re small or medium, it’s about how crucial you are locally built into an area” (VSO B).

A notable additional dimension is the extent to which key players within VSOs (staff, trustees and volunteers themselves) are long-term residents of the area:

“Yeah, I think I have benefited from really strong foundations and local knowledge… you feel embedded, I’m passionate about getting the services right for local people cos it impacts on all of us” (VSO E).

“Our uniqueness at VSO E is because we’re local and our local knowledge and experience is us whether that’s through mapping, personal experience, living in the area and understanding the [local] dynamics ” (VSO E).

This reflects a multi-faceted commitment to place, not just to direct ‘clients’ or service users, but a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to the wider set of actors in the place.

Other governance actors recognise that added value of VSOs, and contrast it with perceived shortcomings of public sector counterparts:

“They’re sat there in the local communities, people know them, they know what else is going on locally, so you might end up going to organisation X but they would know enough to say round the corner there is… so it’s that local knowledge.” (PSO 4)

“They bring a wealth of expertise, knowledge, understanding, they bring specific services to needs, cos they tend to be much closer to the service user than we are as an authority” (PSO 1).

Nevertheless, there was also recognition of contestation, reflected for instance in the acknowledgement that the large national charity providing services in the area could bring an added value as well: a wider knowledge of different local realities. In fact, while it doesn’t “have that connection so closely with the local population as the smaller voluntary sector organisations”, it “turns out a national organisation delivers contracts in areas that are quite similar… and they have that expertise to translate over here” (PSO 3).

Thus, public sector stakeholders recognise that the local knowledge held by and actively translated by the VS represents a distinctive asset that enables influence within wider governance networks, offering them ‘a seat at the table’. Hence, we see reflected in the data the way local knowledge is deployed (consciously or not; altruistically or instrumentally) as an asset within the construction of place leadership:
“I think our unique selling point is our local knowledge base and networks and that is viewed very highly by our statutory partners particularly cos they now recognise that they need to understand that a bit more and they don’t have to do it themselves cos it exists here.” (VSO E).

There is clearly variance in the degree to which respondents acknowledged whether this local knowledge was deployed in the construction of (collective) place leadership and interaction with other governance actors.

**Relationships**

The second key theme concerned the centrality of relationships in the voluntary sector, and into communities and the public (and sometimes private) sectors. A multiplicity of relationships exists among these actors and creates a complex environment characterised by both collaboration and competitiveness (especially over resources, including volunteers). Like ‘local knowledge’, relationships can be seen as an asset, and as crucial to the collective pursuit of the common good, for both the voluntary sector and for public sector stakeholders. Relationships also appear to be central to the identity and self-image of the voluntary sector itself: seen as essential to the achievement of organisations’ social mission, but also as an inherent part of the sector’s ‘way of being’. But relationships can also be seen as highly variable and dependent on context. On one hand, relationships even within a relatively bounded set of VSOs can be experienced in highly multivalent terms exhibiting differing degrees of consensualism/tension (for instance, outwardly extolling collaboration while acknowledging undertones of competitiveness); on the other hand, relationships with the public sector seemed to be marked by both mutual dependency and power imbalance. We briefly set out the types of relationship most emphasised by participants, acknowledging that there are more forms visible in the data: collaboration, commissioned-funded relationships (and competitiveness), and informal relationships.

Each of these different types of relationship sheds light on different aspects of collectivity/collective action, and thus both explain and influence the complexity of leading within the collective - and the difficulty of leading if you are not embedded in that relational complexity. Presumably, it is their co-existence and inter-relatedness that produces the complexity.

Before discussing the three main types of relationships that emerged from the analysis, it is worth noting that terminology around relationships is ambiguous and can be conceptualised and perceived in a variety of ways. The three terms used here were not selected for their potential positive, negative or hidden connotations, but as they emerged from the analysis.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration is critical to the self-image of the sector, and seen as essential to achieving collective action and ‘doing the right thing’. But collaboration takes many forms, and constantly shades (as participants try to make sense of it) into relationships that may be more one-sided,
conflictual, or imbued with power imbalance, even potential exploitation. Thus typically seen in a positive light, it was exhorted as necessary despite (or because of) an inhospitable environment:

“As the climate has changed in the sector, the expectations are that you do work together and you’re there for the service user and you no longer have the resources to work on your own, or try to be able to deal with it all on your own” (VSO D)

“Not one agency can solve the issues themselves and that actually we have to work together. So some of it is driven I think about cuts to services and they are more open to we’ve got to work together” (VSO I).

But collaboration also reflects a core value of civil society actors:

“You can’t do it on your own and sometimes you’re not the best people to do it… its come out of that core value of church with the knowledge that we can’t do it on our own, some people do it better and we want to support other people” (VSO C).

There was also recognition of ‘comparative advantage’ as a motivation for collaboration (Billis and Glennerster, 1998):

“We work closely with a number of organisations; we have to do, because we haven’t got the skills or expertise to support our service users in everything” (VSO A).

Commissioned-funded relationships (and Competitiveness)

Again, the webs of relationships that are based on the receipt of funding (usually referred to as commissioning, or award of grants), creates a particular and rather prevalent kind of relationship within and between sectors (see [link]). Primarily this is a vertical relationship with resources flowing from (local) public sector funders to VSOs, but not always: resource flows also create consequential horizontal relationships within the sector (closely tied to perceived competitive relationships). A key example is ‘social prescribing’ usually funded by the NHS (CCGs), enabling an umbrella organisation to distribute activities and hence funding to other VSOs, and hence “as well as the impact on a) the patient, b) other services it’s also kind of supporting the voluntary sector as well” (VSO E). But viewed by other organisations, this central brokerage role is seen as introducing “an element of competitiveness that’s starting to sneak through the door quite recently” as it means encroaching on the delivery of services that were previously seen as their territory: “there’s only a certain pot of money out there that we’re all fighting to get to” (both VSO B). Crucially, funding relationships are seen to carry tensions and burdens, particularly where they are felt to drive or exacerbate competitive relationships. Supposedly ‘technocratic’ allocation methods like commissioning are in practice conflated with wider funding availability, marked most recently by austerity and contraction:
“With budget cuts certain bodies become somewhat precious. This is my client, nobody else is working with this client” (VSO F).

Even when funding is available, many organisations, justifiably or not, feel it is not a level playing field, reducing trust and the potential for cooperative relationships between VSOs, despite the growing recognition of the potential advantage of collaboration even for accessing funding:

“People do need to understand the benefits of collaboration and working together to get some of the bigger pots” (VSO E).

Informal relationships
A third type of relationships relates to a broad range of more informal and intangible relationships widely seen as crucial to ‘getting things done’:

“There’s a kind of very informal agreement to do it, is actually probably going to stop people from dying of the cold this winter.” (VSO B).

These relationships appear to be based on friendships and longstanding alliances, forming strong trust-based networks:

“It’s those connections that at local level don’t need any funding, just happen cos we’re putting interested parties together.” (VSO E).

These informal relationships sit in the background, often sustaining more concrete and tangible collaborations, though they require personal commitment and sustainment:

“You’ve got to maintain and keep in touch. Staff change. Your name doesn’t get passed on… I’ve got time restraints like everyone else but you do have to keep it up and keep going back.” (VSO B).

Nevertheless, it is notable that such relationships can blend into, or help broker, more instrumental and transactional relationships, and respondents were far from blind to the instrumental utility of such networks: for instance, in bringing together partnerships to bid for resources or deliver services, and ‘gluing together’ relationships into the public sector and to communities. Here, personal relationships are seen as key to underpin stable and lower conflict relationships between organisations and across sectors. Also unsurprisingly, they exhibit similar degrees of inclusion/exclusion, though many respondents were reticent to discuss this, unless framed as ‘competition’ (above). Finally, informal relationships (and knowledge) also underpin and facilitate more substantive, functional networks for meeting community need, seen as efficient, cooperative and appropriate - usually referred to as referrals or signposting:
"If there’s a problem we’ll try and help with it or signpost on to somebody that can help if it’s not something we do. You can’t do everything yourself so we signpost" (VSO B)

Value / Distinctiveness
If local knowledge and relationships are the elements that enable the voluntary sector to mobilise and influence and/or being influenced by other local governance actors (and hence play together a collective place leadership role), this final theme reflects the intrinsic characteristics of the activities, organisations and behaviours within the voluntary sector, and thus a form of legitimacy within their communities. The characteristics that make VSOs distinctive, vis-à-vis other types of organisation, are thus intimately bound up legitimacy with their constituent community (which can include service users, members, beneficiaries and wider communities) (see also Dayson et al., 2018). Ultimately therefore, voluntary sector distinctiveness contributes, alongside the more instrumental ‘assets’ of knowledge and relationships/networks, a moral legitimacy that cements their role in the collective endeavour of place leadership. The first visible element (or sub-theme) in the data was a sense of profound duty and rootedness in the community, which explains the willingness to go ‘above and beyond’ in pursuance of their stated formal mission:

“The bottom line has always been that we’re here to serve the community and work for all the people we can here” (VSO C)

“This isn’t about your jobs, it’s about the people in DISTRICT that need this help, that’s why we’re here.” (VSO B)

“You still feel like it’s your duty” (VSO A).

What is particularly notable in each of these instances is the explicit or implicit appeal to the importance of place - their core stakeholders are located in DISTRICT, and this reinforces their legitimacy and moral urgency of their activity, even if they may have other stakeholders outside the area (e.g. funders). In terms of their distinctive contribution to the community (and more broadly to the place), the key sub-themes we identify are: empowerment (of individuals and collectivities), help & support, prevention/early intervention (e.g. reducing social isolation) and their ability to recognise and meet community needs. Although potentially a diffuse concept, the idea of empowerment is widely invoked by voluntary sector respondents:

“We’re constantly trying to empower service users to lead themselves and for workers to have initiative and to kind of create something that's totally in touch with the local community” (VSO D).

This is very akin to the related concept of recovery, or moving on:

“Every individual that comes in we want to get them to move on, to get them to move on through our services and we’ll do that how best we can.” (VSO A)
This approach is opposite to creating dependency, but interestingly it is rarely politicised. Similarly, the essential content of much work in the welfare/social needs part of the voluntary sector is providing (relatively) time unrestricted and relational social support:

“What we won’t do is veer from that mission because I think everybody within that service knows that if we don’t fight tooth and nail for those families nobody else will and if we’re not there those families haven’t got anything else.” (VSO G).

Interestingly, commitment to people, and people rooted in place is very clear. Adopting a preventive approach to welfare provision (as opposed to responsive/dependent) across a wide range of domains also seems to be characteristic, or particularly valued within the voluntary sector. Yet it is difficult to measure, hence is very often framed in the negative:

“DISTRICT generally has got so used to VSO A being here… you just expect it to be there and expect it to carry on and I don’t think people would realise the impact until you’re not there. I think it would be horrendous.” (VSO A)

“And the knock-on effect, in terms of someone in debt and getting stressed or mental health problems as a result, the impact on their family, it would be a massive, massive impact, a massive loss to community, to society, economically as well, I think it would be devastating” (PSO 3).

Finally, and just as reflective of the underlying motivation and an ethos is the commitment to meet new needs, this VSO:

“Bridges the gap where statutory services are being cut or redesigned. Whether that’s health, local authority, we plug the gaps sometimes. Not we as in VSO E, but us as a sector.” (VSO E).

Discussion
In returning to our research questions and the aims of this Special Issue, we suggest that our findings offer some interesting insights from at least three points of view. First, voluntary sector actors play a key role in constituting what a place is, exercising a leadership role in being the network and the glue of a place. As one place leader argued:

“When I talk about us being the network and the glue, there’s a patchwork throughout DISTRICT of people who are doing things, the sports clubs, the uniformed organisations, the book clubs etc etc so the awareness of them has enriched the picture, enriched the offer.” (VSO E)

The locale of a place, i.e. the settings in which social relations are constituted (Agnew, 1987), is thus constituted by the key actions of voluntary organisations which fill the gap left by the
increasing fragmentation and individualisation of communities (e.g. Bauman, 2013). It is indeed interesting to note that it is through voluntary sector action that place is experienced and constituted in all its three components of location, locale and sense of place (Agnew, 1987). Some neighbourhoods or communities of people are off-limits for both traditional public and business actors. A voluntary sector perspective seems therefore indispensable to make a full experience and account of what a place is. Put simply, they are undoubtedly a key set of collective actors in a place, and constituent of place leadership, even if their role isn’t ‘high profile’, widely accepted as (traditional) leadership, nor even, as always visible to the public and citizens. One respondent described this as having “a seat at the table”, while another stressed that the sector’s contribution to place leadership was through:

“forcing others to actually stop and look I think at what’s gone on I think they’re also informing policy and strategic decisions… I think they’re also a test bed for service provision and very creative in developing stuff and they’re probably the social conscience of the statutory organisations” (VSO B, emphasis added).

As the title of our paper tries to communicate, local knowledge cannot be understood through traditional channels (“you can’t google everything”). At the same time, the place could be a jumble of different communities within a geographical and/or cultural community (location), with sometimes cooperative and sometimes conflicting attitudes; with communities that can open up the place through external connections and contribute to building a “common community”, but with communities that can sometimes too close the place up being identitarian and divisive.

Second, in terms of investigating structure, power and politics as ‘existing social relationships, roles and responsibilities, hierarchical assumptions and reporting relationships’ (Sutherland et al., 2020), our findings shed light on the complexity and multiplexity of leading in the collective and on the importance of informal structures of collective leadership co-existing with formal traditional structures. Two quotes highlight neatly these elements:

“We have a DISTRICT public third sector partnership of which the CCG is a member and I’m on that, that’s a body that brings together locally the district council, ourselves, voluntary sector, the college, police, fire, DWP, it’s not a forum to discuss everything that all of us are doing, it was specifically to hone in on the things we could better do together” (PSO 4).

“All the ministries in [DISTRICT’s town] meet with the MP and the councillors every 2 months so that gives information of what the generic need is in the area” (VSO C).

The role of informal leadership as a governance asset (e.g. Ayres, 2019) seems therefore an interesting issue to explore, with a decentred approach (e.g. Bevir, 2013) as a particularly appropriate perspective for this endeavour. Moreover, if we want to truly understand place leadership, a focus on “actually existing” local governmental practice is paramount (e.g. Barnett et al., 2020). As Sotarauta illustrates, since ‘governance structures both constrain and enable leadership processes, place leadership cannot be examined as a separate entity’ (Sotarauta,
In that respect, while we acknowledge that place governmental practices can be enacted by different sectoral actors, we believe that the role of public authority and thus of public institutions is of fundamental importance for understanding place leadership. We argue—and in someways we hope—for a more explicit integration between scholars on leadership and organisation studies and scholars on public governance (including public administration and third sector).

Third, from our findings, it emerges consistently a tension between structural macro-dynamics (e.g. austerity, capitalism, economies of scale, digitalisation) and voluntary sector action at a micro-level. Here a focus on voluntary sector highlights the structures of domination by the neoliberal order, even if it also shows the possibility of micro-emancipation through logics of informal and hidden and/or alternative leadership. This was plain to see in the way VSOs repeatedly highlighted how they struggled against, resisted, but ultimately felt impelled to work within the grain of structures imposed from above, particularly the competitive allocation of funding under the policy of commissioning (Rees, 2014). Nevertheless, a more nuanced and situated reading also suggests that competitive-collaborative dynamics might always exist in tension within the sector, for instance in the way organisations criticise public sector funding allocation (whether austerity-inspired retrenchment or competitive allocation) while alluding to micro-struggles over status, enduring hierarchical leadership, local spatial ‘turfs’, and the right to continued existence. On a more positive note, these tensions seem to be subsumed within a broader collective commitment to place:

“For us the bottom line has always been that we’re here to serve the community and work for all the people we can here. 10 years on that has never altered” (VSO C).

Place, and the feelings of attachment people have to their place, are an important resource for those seeking to strengthen the co-production and co-creation of new solutions to public policy challenges (Hambleton, 2019: 276). However, it seems more necessary rediscovering the political and collective advocacy rather than just public services delivery, through being “interested in revealing the things that people actually do to influence other people in these very particular types of settings both formally and informally – openly as well opaquey – and how they go about doing what they do. It is also about revealing the types of social processes involved in ‘making things happen’ and in ‘getting things done’ (or not getting things done) (Sotarauta et al., 2017: 188).

Conclusion

Adopting a voluntary sector perspective on place leadership has enabled us to identify how relational and local knowledge resources contribute to the social processes through which people influence one another to constitute place and get things done. In addition, our research highlights how the distinctiveness of VSOs is the source of their legitimacy as actors in the collective leadership endeavour. It suggests that voluntary sector organisations (or actors) are not simply disempowered followers in a system dominated by public agencies but rather active agents in the constitution of collective place leadership.
In terms of our theoretical contribution, we suggest this centres on the understanding of place leadership as including a multiplexity of actors within, broadly, the ‘civil society’ space. Our data focuses more on the relatively formalised voluntary sector, with important insights from the public agencies that inter-relate with them in complex ways to create a dispersed and highly collective place leadership. Nevertheless, it is clear that not only do VSOs and related civil society actors draw on the ‘assets’ of knowledge and relationships in order to have legitimacy in the collective construction of place leadership, it is clear that they also act as ‘conduits’ - in limited, contingent and sometimes unequal ways - for community and citizen actors to play a part in place leadership, as proposed by [null].

In this respect, we argue that place and purpose should not just be added to the Grint framework as stated by Jackson, Nicoll and Roy (2018). Rather, they should be considered as supra-ordinated elements for observing, understanding and assessing leadership as a situated and context-dependent practice. In other words, we argue that it is by putting place and purpose first that leadership can be fully understood and the power of place for leadership fully realised (Jackson, 2019).

A limitation of our study is that we have only in part addressed how the micro social processes identified here influence and are influenced by the macro structures of the political and economic context. A focus on the voluntary sector shows the possibility of micro-emancipation through logics of informal and hidden leadership but also highlights the structures of domination by the neo-liberal order. This needs further research to explore the boundaries of what can be achieved through without more overt challenge to the system through the voluntary sector’s role as advocate and disrupter. In this respect, longitudinal studies might be particularly important to map out the evolving relationships amongst multiple sectoral actors involved in the collective enactment of place leadership.

References


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