Beyond the Hero–Leader
Leadership by Collectives

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Introduction

Leadership has always been closely associated with unique, strong individuals. Even today, leadership and leaders tend to be equated with each other. But is this association necessarily valid, and is it possible to transcend this vision? Is it possible to move beyond the close association between leadership and single leaders? In line with a growing number of researchers, we suggest that the answer to the second question is a resounding yes. The central aim of the present chapter will therefore be to explore ways to conceive of leadership beyond traditional unitary models.

Recent research has shown a marked interest in plural forms of leadership. Not only has the number of articles on the topic risen in a notable way in the last ten years, but various journals have devoted special issues to it (e.g., The Leadership Quarterly in 2014, Industrial and Organizational Psychology in 2012 and International Journal of Management Reviews in 2011). Yet, such plural forms are not new: Follett (1924), Gibb (1954) and Hogdson, Levinson and Zaleznik (1965), among others, have each discussed shared conceptions of leadership, and made a case in favour of this approach to leadership years before it became more openly and actively debated in academic circles and used more by practitioners. However, despite their seminal contributions, plural forms of leadership have remained an isolated phenomenon, evoked sparingly by researchers or practiced by marginal leaders. The more widespread interest for these forms is thus quite new. Although still limited in its spread, plural forms of leadership have also started to be mentioned in the general business press: for example, the trio of Sergey Brin, Larry Page and Eric Schmidt was at the head of Google for years, before Eric Schmidt stepped down, leaving a duo in place; Deutsche Bank also had, for some years, a duo at its head, just like Whole Foods and the American restaurant chain Chipotle. However, reading the general press on the possibility of having more than one person in charge of a company quickly reveals how such arrangements are seen: when they are not directly presented as bad decisions, they are discussed with caution. Instances where plural forms have benefited the organization are often contrasted in the same article with cases where the results have been more mixed; many of these articles in the popular press conclude with a more than nuanced view of shared leadership roles, especially in the case of CEOs. Having more than one person in a leadership position may be more
openly considered than previously, but it remains a choice and a practice generally seen with a sceptical eye.

Nonetheless, evidence that a single leadership position can be occupied by more than one individual seems to be mounting. Alongside studies that document how such collectives of leaders work, research aimed at documenting the links between these plural forms and various positive benefits for organizations have started to appear. For example, Pearce, Wassenaar and Manz (2014) discuss how shared leadership may enable responsible leadership, linking leadership with corporate social responsibility; other studies are exploring the relationship between plural forms and other benefits for organizations, such as group-level phenomena like caring and solidarity (Houghton, Pearce, Manz, Courtright, & Stewart, 2015), knowledge transfer (Spyridonidis, Hendry, & Barlow, 2015) and management of uncertainty (Jonassen, 2015). More generally, a number of studies published in recent years have attempted to integrate the dispersed literature on forms of plural leadership in order to establish whether there is a link between these forms and team effectiveness or performance (see, for example, the reviews by D’Innocenzo, Mathieu & Kuklenberger, 2014; Drescher, Kosgaard, Welpe, Picot, & Wigand, 2014; Dust & Ziegert, forthcoming; and Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014). In particular, the meta-analysis realized by Nicolaides et al. (2014) shows that there are clear links between shared leadership and team performance. Overall, these studies tend to show that there are positive effects. However, Dust and Ziegert (forthcoming) underline that, up to now, structural dimensions of plural forms of leadership have not been assessed with the required precision when it comes to explaining the benefits. They suggest that the number of co-leaders and how they share their leadership roles and responsibilities have to be taken into account to better understand how these modalities function and perform. They nonetheless conclude with a positive appreciation of plural forms of leadership, in a similar vein to the three other recent meta-analyses.

Yet, in reviewing the literature on plural forms of leadership, one realizes that the question of the structure of these teams of leaders has already been investigated in a number of articles: for example, Gronn’s work has greatly focussed on the unit, or later on, the configuration of distributed leadership (2002, 2009, 2015), just as studies on the governance of inter-organizational collaborations (e.g., Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003; Vangen, Hayes & Cornforth, 2015) have shed light on the importance of structural concerns in their specific context. In fact, the question of structure can be seen as a backdrop to many studies on plural forms of leadership, as in studies on dual leadership (e.g., Reid & Kambayya, 2009, 2015) or on leadership constellations (Hodgson et al., 1965), where the fact that it is a duo or a trio that occupies the leadership position is the key theme driving the reflection on these plural forms. While these studies, and others, do address the notion of structure, what is currently lacking in the literature on plural forms of leadership is an overview of what the collective entities might actually be. Beyond concerns for the internal structuration of these plural forms, can we identify differences that might exist between all of the instances where leadership is practiced by many individuals?

As we discussed elsewhere (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012; Sergi, Denis & Langley, 2012), we start by noting that the notion of “plural leadership” is in fact an umbrella term useful to unify what is otherwise a scattered literature, in which we can find a plethora of labels to designate leadership roles that are shared. In spite of a similar starting point, the growth of interest in this phenomenon is accompanied by a proliferation of labels to describe it, a proliferation that contributes to the fragmentation of research on this topic. Some of these labels have partially stabilized over the years. For example, studies referring to “shared leadership” tend to adopt a similar line of thinking, inspired by organization psychology and behavior, and those using the term “distributed leadership” are still closely associated with the context of schools and education
management. Yet, despite the bodies of similar studies that have accumulated around some of these labels, the same labels are used in other contexts, without necessarily acknowledging the context from which they emerged. Other labels are also used in an indistinct fashion. Based on an extensive literature review, our previous work (Denis et al., 2012) was an attempt at ordering the variety of forms “plural leadership” can take, starting from the literature itself to see whether streams of distinct traditions could be identified.

In this chapter, we aim to address the question of what the “collectives” we allude to in the title of our chapter could be. We thus review the variety of forms that such collectives can adopt, with the aim of “pluralizing” leadership. With this aim, the question we explore in these pages is how can such a pluralization of leadership be conceptualized? How has leadership been studied and conceived as a collectively practiced phenomenon? In other words, we will turn our attention to some of the reasons that may explain why we can find, both in practice and in research, collective definitions of leadership. The issue at stake here is not the theoretical roots, or the theoretical commonalities between various studies; rather, it is the justifications provided to promote plural forms of leadership, which up to now have rarely been discussed in an all-encompassing way. As we will develop, we propose that collectives in leadership positions can be viewed from three main pluralizing angles: they can result from a structural choice, an ideological commitment and a distinctive theoretical construction. Each of these angles enlarges our understanding of how leadership can be conceived and practiced in or by a collective. We will explore each of these three angles, discussing how they allow us to think about leadership as a phenomenon that is collectively accomplished, and highlight some of the research questions opened up by each angle.

While those studying and investigating plural forms of leadership may be encouraged by the current interest that these forms are attracting, this also opens up another relevant question: why is this interest blossoming now? Could there be changes afoot in today’s organizations that call for renewed ways of practicing leadership? Plural forms of leadership may have been long present in specific contexts, such as pluralistic organizations (such as hospitals and artistic organizations), but, as we will also discuss, some changes in more traditional organizations may signal that these plural forms will be on the rise in coming years. We will thus conclude our chapter by proposing some new lines of inquiry that still remain to be empirically studied.

Before we delve into the topic of plural leadership as we have elsewhere defined it (see Denis et al., 2012; Sergi et al., 2012), we believe it is important to address the question that often follows assertions regarding the possibility of sharing, in any form, leadership: what does such a pluralizing of leadership mean for unitary leadership? Does it dilute its relevance; does it call into question its potential beneficial effects for teams and organizations alike? On this topic as on many others, we should eschew binary, dualistic thinking. Plural forms of leadership do not imply a de facto disappearance of unitary leadership. We suggest that pluralizing leadership should first and foremost be understood as an extension of leadership beyond single leaders, but that such an extension should not be understood to happen necessarily at the expense of unitary leaders. Far from it, we contend that extending leadership “out” from single individuals to different groups of individuals complexifies and nuances the picture. We also consider that such an extension has the potential to rejuvenate both thinking and practice. Finally, we argue that singular and plural forms of leadership can – and, in some instances, should – coexist and be simultaneously practiced, depending on the context and on the persons involved.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows: we first present three distinct perspectives on plural leadership, each of which can be understood as a set of explanations behind the existence of such collective forms. The first set, “pluralizing by choice,” discusses instances where leadership is practiced by collectives for structural reasons, in order to better function in
the face of complexity. This category addresses the challenge posed to leadership by pluralistic contexts, and also those stemming from complex interorganizational collaborations. In these settings, opting for plural forms of leadership may help alleviate tensions that tend to arise, given the complexity of decision making or of collaborating across sectors. The second set, “pluralizing by ideal,” highlights the various cases where plural forms of leadership derive from adherence to democratic ideals, or from a different organizing philosophy. In these settings, individual actors decide, right from the foundation of their organization, to eschew traditional and hierarchical approaches to leadership to adopt a more open and inclusive conception of it (Raelin, 2005, 2011, forthcoming). The third and final set, “pluralizing by ontological framing,” shifts the focus away from organizations and practitioners to researchers. It explores how various researchers, by inscribing their studies in a different ontology than the one commonly found in leadership studies, propose and illustrate a distinct conceptualization of leadership, which in many instances is plural by definition, because of this ontology. Each section starts by presenting the results of studies that belong to the category, and includes a short vignette to illustrate the empirical manifestation of the category.

**Instrumental Perspective: Pluralizing by Choice**

When considering the literature on plural forms of leadership, a first distinction that appears between different forms and examples relates to structural concerns. This is especially striking in the case of empirical studies of plural forms of leadership: when considering the context in which it is investigated, one can quickly realize that, in some instances, the plural form considered is inscribed in the organization’s structure, whereas, in other cases, it stems from mundane collective practices, routine behaviors in terms of decision making or the style of an individual leader who is keen on delegating some of his or her power to followers. Therefore, a first reason explaining why we can find instances of plural leadership is linked to organizational choices made in order to institutionalize formally the collective practice of joint leadership.

Based on our previous work, we can distinguish two forms of plural leadership that result from a decision in terms of a team’s structuration. Each of these forms is associated with a different context. The first context is that of pluralistic organizations, where plural leadership is practiced in duos or trios formally defined in the organizational structure, whereas the second refers to interorganizational and cross-sector collaboration, where plural leadership takes the form of a collaborative governance. These two contexts may appear to be quite different, but we see that, in both these situations, organizations have tended to approach leadership in a collective way in order to address the challenges they face, either internally or externally, and have chosen to do so by structuring plural leadership in a formal way. Table 3.1 compares both contexts.

A good example of a pluralistic setting in which collective leadership is often embedded in the structure itself is represented by the performing arts sector: notably, theatres, orchestras, ballet companies (Reid & Karambayya, 2009, 2015). Because the personal qualities needed for high level artistic performance and for strong management are not always compatible, but both are central to these organizations’ reputation, viability and performance, many such organizations find it convenient to create leadership structures with an “artistic director” and a “general manager” both reporting to the board of trustees and working together in collaboration in order to ensure that both artistic merit and fiscal responsibility receive equal (and, it is hoped, synergistic) attention. While such structures may sometimes be characterized by tensions and conflicts, they are nevertheless perceived as necessary and effective in many cases (Bhansing, Leenders & Wijnberg, 2012; Reid & Karambayya, 2009, 2015).
Another example of a setting in which plural leadership structures are common is health care where clinical directors (usually trained physicians) may share leadership roles with others with more management training (Denis, Lamothe & Langley, 2001; Baldwin, Dimunation & Alexander, 2011; Koethe & Kroft, 2013; Zismer, Brueggemann & James, 2010). Again it is the complementarity of skills, training and sources of legitimacy that makes such structures attractive. Indeed, wherever advanced professional skills and managerial skills need to be combined, are given equal status, and are rarely present within the same individual, this form of leadership may be desirable (Empson, Cleaver & Allen, 2013; Fjellvaer, 2010). However, as has been noted by some researchers (e.g., Reid & Karambayya, 2009, 2015), these dual structures can also be surrounded by ambiguity in role definition and can generate tensions and conflicts, ultimately leading to dysfunctions that can have a notable impact on the organization. These risks underline the importance of attending to the conditions of co-leadership (see Gibeau, Reid & Langley, Chapter 16, this volume).

As for interorganizational collaborations, a number of studies have shown that this setting may require a collective form of leadership that is distributed across time and space: in other words, the complexity of these collaborations between multiple organizations or stakeholders may be better tackled by structuring leadership roles as a relay between organizations, over time. As Crosby and Bryson (2005, 2010) have underlined, to achieve their common goal, these interorganizational collaborations need a form of collective and integrated leadership to facilitate and maintain communication across partners. As they discuss, these multi-organization or multi-stakeholder collaborations can be effective to address public issues, where such participation can help in fostering change or in solving multifaceted social problems. However, as described in more detail in their 2010 article, Crosby and Bryson highlight the complexity of such collaborations: not only do practices, processes and a specific governance structure associated with the collaboration have to be put in place, but accountability mechanisms have to be

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<td>Complex structuring of the collaboration that may involve no stabilized leadership role as attributed to one individual or one organization; leadership then takes the form of a team structure, of a relay in time or depending on the issue at hand.</td>
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developed and implemented. In other words, these interorganizational collaborations require a formal structuration of how leadership will be shared and organized over the organizations involved in the collaboration (see also Huxham & Vangen, 2000, for discussion of what such collaborations require).

In this sense, although positive outcomes may emerge from such interorganizational collaborations, the challenges linked to the practice of this collective form of leadership should not be underestimated. As Vangen, Hayes and Cornforth (2015) have noted, these interorganizational collaborations involve issues related to the “two faces” of their nature: both “collaborative governance” and “governing collaboration” have to be taken into consideration and, more importantly, balanced. Indeed, both terms may refer to the context of complex collaborations, but when considered side by side, the literature on these facets reveals the presence of competing logics that generate tensions. Reflection on how to structure leadership across organizations therefore contributes, among other elements, to alleviating (albeit temporarily) these tensions. Nonetheless, Vangen et al. conclude by underlining the continual challenges of these collaborations:

[the practical implication that we can draw from the conceptualizations and examples presented in this article is that the governance of collaborations is highly resource intensive and requires continuous energy and commitment and a great deal of skill from those who are in charge of them.

(Vangen et al., 2015: 1258)

In sum, both the contexts of pluralistic organizations and interorganizational collaborations may call for plural forms of leadership to better face the complexity of their context and to achieve their goals, but this same complexity may explain why in both cases plural leadership is usually structurally and formally defined. However, plural leadership is not always first and foremost a question of structural choice, as we will now discuss.

I ideological Perspective: Pluralizing by Ideal

Following structural arguments in favor of plural forms of leadership, another line of thinking can be found in the literature: that pluralizing leadership reflects a political or an ideological commitment. In this line of reasoning, we find studies of leadership that approach it from a relational understanding, and others that promote a clear democratizing agenda. One of the most notable contributions in this direction is that of Raelin (e.g., 2005, 2011, forthcoming a), who has been advocating a new approach to leadership that he has called “leaderful.” In this category, we also find a number of organizations that have, from their inception, defined themselves as “leaderless,” such as some orchestras, social movements or organizations that remain hidden such as the hacker collective Anonymous. In these cases, their “leaderlessness” may result from a collective choice, but, fundamentally, this choice proceeds from a strong commitment to specific democratic values and a strong sense of mission. Despite their differences, leaderful and leaderless approaches to leadership all point to a highly pluralized approach to leadership, in which we find groups of individuals who collectively decide, based on ideas, values or philosophies, that leadership roles have to be opened up to all the members of the group or, more radically, have to disappear completely. In these cases, in spite of being reflected in the organization’s structure, turning to plural forms of leadership is not an institutionalized way of facing the inherent challenges posed by the context. It is rather a reflection of a specific mission, or a choice to break away from traditional ways of organizing work.
Raelin (2005, 2011, forthcoming a) has argued in favor of a radical change in terms of conceptions of leadership: to move away from traditional definitions of leadership centered on specific individuals, toward a definition based on a democratic and collaborative understanding. His proposition rests on the recognition that current workplaces have changed, and that these changes extend to the practice of leadership, which should now be conceptualized as plural: in his words, “leaders need to co-exist at the same time and all together” (Raelin, 2005: 18). He defines leaderful practice as concurrent (whereas traditional and conventional understanding of leadership is serial), collective (instead of individual), collaborative (rather than controlling) and compassionate (rather than dispassionate). It should also be noted that Raelin proposes a definition of leadership that rests on practice, therefore linking it to the emergent leadership-as-practice stream of research (see, for example, Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008; Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2010; and Raelin, forthcoming b). However, and in contrast to the leadership-as-practice body of research, Raelin’s leaderful notion rests on a clear and firmly expressed democratic ideal:

Leaderful practice is unrepentant in advocating distinctively democratic values. To explain its derivation, think of a time when a team was humming along almost like a single unit. Working together was a joy. Each team member had a specific functional role but seemed able implicitly to support each other when warranted. Any one of the team members could speak for the entire team. How would one characterize such a community? A common reference is that it is leaderless, that there is no need for a leader (see, e.g., Costigan and Donahue, 2009). But it is hardly leaderless because it is not devoid of leadership, it is full of leadership; in other words, leaderful. Everyone is participating in the leadership of the entity both collectively and concurrently; in other words, not just sequentially, but all together and at the same time (Raelin, 2003).

(Raelin, 2011: 203)

Raelin is therefore not shy in stating not only that leadership can be conceived as collectively practiced, but that this view is inherently desirable on ethical grounds. Here, traditional hierarchies are contested and emancipation of all actors is promoted. Raelin considers that this approach is more suited to a context in which collaboration, creativity, empathy and ethical behavior, among others, are needed – a context that may correspond to the current challenges organizations face.

In a similar line of thinking, a number of studies on distributed leadership, especially as it has been studied and applied to schools (e.g., Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001, 2004) have presented it as a modality of leadership that may foster more integrative, and less hierarchical, approaches. It should be noted that Woods (2004) has noted that distributed and democratic leadership should not be confused, the former, in his analysis, being more instrumental and functional, while the latter is wider in its social and societal implications. For Woods, democratic leadership extends distributed leadership, but shares with it a view of leadership as a dispersed phenomenon. Jones (2014) has also illustrated, through a case study, that distributed leadership does not necessarily come with more democratic decision-making processes. Yet, as Woods and Gronn (2009) have suggested, because distributed leadership rests on a dispersion of leadership among many organizational actors, it still offers the potential to bring more democracy in workplaces:

A value of DL [distributed leadership] conceptually is that in its radical form it raises fundamental issues to do with how we understand the relationship between individual and
community: that is, DL as concertive action, where the combined leadership of many individuals in the grouping or organization is greater than the sum of the parts, asserts the inherent interrelationship of person and social structure.

(Woods & Gronn, 2009: 447)

Yet, as Bolden’s review (2011) has revealed, the degree to which distributed leadership is truly democratic is open for debate. Other researchers have also criticized how distributed leadership has spread, mainly in the education sector. For example, Mayrowetz (2008) has discussed that the democratic potential of distributed leadership may be more of a stretch of this approach. For their part, Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2009) contend that distributed leadership corresponds, in the case of the universities they studied, to an effective rhetoric: “Fundamentally, though, we argue that distributed leadership is most influential through its rhetorical value whereby it can be used to shape perceptions of identity, participation and influence but can equally shroud the underlying dynamics of power within universities” (Bolden et al., 2009: 274; on these rhetorical functions, see also Gosling, Bolden & Petrov, 2009). Finally, other researchers go even further, revealing how distributed leadership may in some contexts be closer to a discourse than a real practice, and serve interests that are far from this democratic ideal. For example, as Maxcy and Nguyen (2006) have shown, in some schools distributed leadership has been presented in a way that “employ[s] depoliticized rhetoric that masks an antidemocratic, managerial bias” (p. 188). All of these criticisms – many revealed though empirical studies – point to the importance of recognizing the power issues and the discursive nature of plural forms of leadership that are presented as promoting more democracy in organizations.

Under the opposite label of “leaderlessness” – while sharing with “leaderfulness” a similar ideological commitment – we find studies and organizations that promote plural forms of leadership by refusing completely the idea of having leaders. These organizations include orchestras that choose not to have a conductor (e.g., the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, see Vredenburgh & He, 2003) to completely distributed networks (e.g., the hackers’ collective Anonymous; see Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015, for an exploration of how such a collective can function as an organization). In most instances, we find in these organizations a strong culture based on collegiality and open, non-hierarchical participation by all of its members. But going even further, we find collectives, such as social protest movements – where resistance, empowerment and the quest for social justice are at the core of their activities – which explicitly adhere to a leaderless approach to leadership: in other words, where discussion and decision making are based on direct democracy. Eslen-Ziya and Erhart (2015) explored the post-heroic form of leadership that emerged out of the practices of a number of groups in the context of the Gezi protests, revealing that “[together, these groups] exemplified a form of absent leadership where individuals per se were absent but the ideas or common goals served as the leader” (p. 484). Here, it is thus the ideas and objectives that led the actions of these groups. These ideals can also be found in self-management organizations and workers’ collectives – again, organizations founded on the ideas of autonomy, horizonality and solidarity, such as the ones studied by Kokkinidis (2015a, 2015b). As he describes:

these self-managed projects are primarily driven by the members’ political aspiration to create a space that is open and experimental; a space that would not only challenge the existing forms of work but also put into practice other possibilities that place emphasis on reciprocal relationships and prioritize collective working, egalitarianism and autonomy. […] [When considering the organizations showcased in the article] one of the main features of autonomy is the recognition that individuals are capable of creating their own rules
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and of governing their affairs as they see fit, which in turn requires a different definition of democracy. One that supports more inclusive models of participation and encourages the construction of rule-creating rather than rule-following individuals, allowing them to determine both the ends and the means, collectively.

(Kokkinidis, 2015b: 868)

As such, these organizations appear as sites where new practices in terms of organizing, decision making and leading are experimented with, all with the aims of fostering social change. Yet, “leaderlessness” is not without issues, as Western (2014) underlines: in protest groups, the discourse (or fantasy, as he calls it) of the absence of leaders can create tensions with the actual practices where leaders emerge out of action. This leads him to recommend to these group to move beyond this anti-leadership discourse, and to talk of autonomist leadership, which he describes as follows: “Autonomist Leadership is a form of individualised collective leadership, i.e. it is embedded in networks and enacted by autonomous individuals and groups” (p. 693). As a form of leadership based on autonomy and mutualism, this conception tries to reconcile leadership with the democratic principles at the heart of these groups.

In sum, these organizations may be relevant sites to explore for researchers aiming at challenging capitalist organizations and management practices, and in exploring alternative workplaces and their transformative potential. Given their will to propose strong and radical alternatives to traditional, hierarchical leadership, they therefore represent an interesting site to study leadership practiced by collectives and to deepen our understanding of it. As Sutherland, Land and Böhmm (2014) have noted, “just because an organization is leaderless, it does not necessarily mean that it is also leadershipless” (p. 759) – a provocative statement that can be read as an invitation to conduct more empirical work on these alternative forms of organizing. In sum, while “leaderlessness” may sound as if it is the polar opposite of “leaderfulness,” both are in fact more closely related than they may appear, both resting on a strong ideological commitment to equality and democracy.

Ontological Perspective: Pluralizing by Definition

The first two perspectives we explored were first and foremost based on empirical observations: the actual existence of leadership practiced by several individuals, stemming from a formally and a priori defined structuration – be it in terms of duos, trios or relays – or from a strong commitment to democratic ideals. In both cases, pluralizing leadership is commanded either by the context (plural forms of leadership as means to manage pluralistic organizations and to collaborate across organizations), or by the principles to which members adhere (plural forms of leadership as a way to embody ideals in daily functioning). With this third angle, we shift from an empirical starting point to a more theoretical one. When surveying the literature, we find a number of studies that develop a plural view of leadership by ontologically and theoretically framing this phenomenon in a different way. While all studies on plural leadership have theoretical grounding, not all stem from a commitment to a particular understanding of reality. Yet, a number of qualitative inquiries, mainly originating from management and organization studies, arrive at a plural conception of leadership, not by counting leaders, but by anchoring their work in a strong process ontology.

Process ontologies postulate that the world is fundamentally in movement, and that change is constant (Rescher, 2012; Helin, Hernes, Hjorth & Holt, 2014; Hernes, 2014). This basic tenet reverses completely the traditional ontological positioning of most research in management and organization studies, which rests on stability, rather than change, as a central and defining
characteristic of phenomena. Studies adopting a process ontology place action at the fore of their empirical investigations, as phenomena are reconceptualized as being continually elaborated through action and through social processes, hence the name of this ontological position, situated in a context and happening over time, rather than being “fixed” and established (Chia, 1997). Also, by placing change – and not stability – at their core, studies adopting a process ontology reveal how organizational phenomena, such as leadership, continually require a form of work: seen from this light, leadership continually emerges out of action, and is always being performed. In a process ontology, human phenomena such as leadership are therefore conceptualized not as “possessed” by individuals, but as being constantly elaborated, as actors are acting in a context that is continually evolving: leadership becomes viewed as a question of movement (Wood, 2005), as a process of becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

In studies of leadership, this ontological positioning is far from being the norm. But in recent years, organization studies have seen a growing interest in strong process views on phenomena, and a number of researchers have explored leadership using this processual definition. Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff (2010) have suggested that conceiving leadership as a process facilitates decentering it from individuals – the same move that is at the heart of plural views of leadership. As mentioned previously, a process ontology places action and social processes at the heart of the empirical inquiry. More specifically, when applied to leadership, it has led a number of researchers to propose that leadership is a consequence of social processes and interactions unfolding over time, in which a variety of actors participate (as in most organizational processes). Leadership is therefore constructed as emerging from these interactions.

This third perspective on plural leadership can be understood as a lens through which leadership can be viewed, a lens that produces by definition a pluralized conceptualization of leadership. Leadership may or may not, in the settings in which these studies are conducted, be formally defined and consciously practiced by local actors in a collective way. It is rather the way the researcher approaches the phenomenon that leads to them seeing it in a collective way. In this sense, we can place in this third perspective both studies in which the researchers have explicitly stated that their work is anchored in a process ontology, and those in which, while not necessarily making such strong ontological statements, researchers have developed and proposed views of leadership that show a proximity with process ontology. We therefore include in this third perspective all studies on leadership that define leadership as emerging out of joint action, interactions and relationships between actors. We emphasize the verb “emerging,” as it signals one of the main differences from plural leadership that these studies project: in line with a general process ontology, they all see leadership as produced by the relations and interactions between actors, as they are involved in their daily activities. In this sense, leadership is both collective and processual. This represents a clear difference from the two previous perspectives: in these two perspectives, leadership is defined by practitioners as plural, and the reasons behind this choice are either instrumental or structural, and ideological. From this point, it is a plurality of persons occupying the leadership position – from a structural duo to a leaderless group – that “does” leadership in different circumstances, producing various results. Leadership is still conceived as something that produces effects, results, decisions, etc. – in other words, as a cause. The ontological perspective reverses this way of thinking about leadership. Starting from the social processes in organizational settings, in which a plurality of actors is de facto present, it proposes to identify from all of these interactions those that perform or produce leadership, which then become a resource for pursuing action.

In this line of thinking, the relational theory of leadership has focussed on the situated relational dynamics from which leadership emerges, in many instances proposing a view of leadership as a co-construction. As such, and as discussed by Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012), process ontology
is one of the ontological underpinnings of researchers developing a relational view of leadership. For example, belonging to this perspective, Uhl-Bien (2006) has proposed that these relational dynamics are indeed processual, happening over time, but without identifying the specific ontological roots of her work. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) have also developed a relational view of leadership, as produced by many actors, much in line with process thinking.

Working in a different tradition, i.e., by attending to what is being said in interactions, Vine, Holmes, Marra, Pfeifer and Jackson (2008) have shown that leadership entails a daily production, in which interpersonal communication plays a key role. Pushing this idea further, researchers influenced by the communicative constitution of organization (otherwise known as CCO, a stream of research at the interaction of communication studies and organization studies that posits that organizational phenomena are produced and emerge in and out of communication) have also approached leadership from a processual and plural fashion. But the main contribution of these researchers, as well as that of others that are working in other lines of inquiry, has not been to give a central role to human and interpersonal communication in processes that create leadership: it has rather been in the extension of who – or what – takes part in this process. Recent studies such as those of Hawkins (2015), Mailhot, Gagnon, Langley and Binette (forthcoming) and Sergi (forthcoming) show how leadership is also materially produced. These researchers tend to view leadership as an assemblage made up of social and material elements, and it is in this sense that leadership is understood as collective.

Finally, as we have discussed elsewhere (Denis et al., 2012), the main risk associated with such a fluid, processual and fully decentered conception of leadership is to dilute it to the point where it can be difficult to conceptually and empirically distinguish it from other social processes happening in organizational settings. Researchers investigating plural forms of leadership in this line of thinking should therefore be fully aware of this potential risk, and be clear in their definition of what does (and does not) constitute leadership.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The overview we have proposed in this chapter is not exhaustive, and justifications other than the one we identified, both in research and in practice, could be found. What we want to suggest here is that it is fruitful not only to consider the “who” and “how” of plural forms of leadership – the configuration of individuals involved in plural leadership and the daily functioning of such configurations – but also to consider and to question the “why,” the justifications from which these more collective forms may emerge. Our chapter was based on the idea that, by interrogating the ideas and the reasons behind this organizational phenomenon, we could start developing a different typology of forms of plural leadership. In a general context where these plural forms are attracting more and more interest and are increasingly deployed in a variety of organizations, we believe that it is important to have in hand an overview of what this phenomenon involves. Our previous work (Denis et al., 2012) was a first attempt at ordering a body of research that tends to be scattered into a multitude of related concepts, and this chapter should be seen as an extension of that work. As we have revealed with the three categories we presented in these pages, it is possible to see leadership practiced by collectives in a different light, when we consider the reasons advanced for pluralizing leadership. These reasons can have instrumental, ideological or ontological roots, based respectively on organizations that require plural forms of leadership to function more effectively, on groups who share a strong commitment to a democratic ideal or on researchers themselves who wish to conceptualize leadership from a different ontological starting point. It is important to consider these reasons, as we suggest that they will impact how plural leadership is practiced and what
it creates. Table 3.2 summarizes these implications. We have also included in this table a few issues we see as associated with each perspective. These issues can be seen as opportunities for future research, as they represent challenges – both empirical and conceptual.

As we discussed, the third perspective on plural forms of leadership that we identified stems from researchers themselves, who begin from a different definition of leadership. For their part, the first two perspectives refer to empirical contexts in which plural forms of leadership can be seen. As a first item in an agenda for future research, we propose that the processual understanding of plural leadership that researchers working in the ontological perspective are developing could be applied to the empirical contexts described in the other two perspectives. In organizational settings in which unitary leadership positions are already occupied by more than one actor, how is this plural leadership performed on a daily basis? What are the social processes and the specific patterns of interactions that compose plural leadership in these contexts? We hence suggest that a first extension of research on plural forms of leadership might come from combining the perspectives we identified in this chapter.

As we have demonstrated in this chapter, there are a variety of reasons behind the phenomenon of plural leadership. Rendering these reasons explicit helps us understand why and how the tasks of leadership can be undertaken by a collective rather than a single individual. Moreover, considering the reasons or the justifications behind plural forms of leadership may also help us understand and better apprehend current changes in the workplace. For example,

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<th>Table 3.2 Three Perspectives on Plural Leadership</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Instrumental perspective</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Why pluralize leadership</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How plural leadership is practiced</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Who participates in plural leadership</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Key issues</strong></td>
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projects and project management have now clearly spread outside their traditional settings (engineering, construction, IT development, to name a few). Given their temporary nature and their often-interdisciplinary constitution, project teams may represent a relevant context to mobilize plural forms of leadership. Also, it is not unusual for projects to be led by individuals who are not otherwise in a superior hierarchical position compared to other project members. This situation may favor the emergence of a more collaborative approach to decision making, coordination and leadership.

However, while the field of project management has long considered questions pertaining to leadership (see, for example, Gaddis (1959), who was among the first to discuss the characteristics that the project manager must display to effectively manage projects), inquiries into project leadership have mostly been conducted from a unitary view of leadership. Indeed, studies on the leadership of projects or in the context of projects often revolve around the style of leadership (e.g., Müller & Turner, 2007) or the effectiveness and performance of leadership for project success (e.g., Müller, Geraldi & Turner, 2012; for an overview of leadership in the context of projects, see Clarke, 2012a), focusing on elements such as traits, behaviors or competences such as the emotional intelligence of project leaders. Yet, although some studies have noted that the particularities of projects may require adaptations or developments in terms of leadership (Tyssen, Wald & Spieth, 2013), studies on leadership in such contexts tend to remain centered on unitary leaders. It is only recently that a few scholars have started to propose that more collective approaches to leadership might be relevant and appropriate for projects (Clarke, 2012b and Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009), but these ideas still need to be explored empirically. Relevant questions would concern, for example, how projects, as temporary organizations, differ from more permanent organizations, with regards to plural forms of leadership? Does their temporary nature facilitate or hinder plural forms of leadership? Does this limited nature influence how plural leadership is implemented and practiced? Many questions remain to be considered.

Another area in which plural forms of leadership may already be experimented with is virtual work settings. The de facto distributed work setting, where issues of communication, knowledge sharing and alignment are at the forefront, may also offer a fruitful context in which to consider the role of plural forms of leadership. We see in this specific context parallels with interorganizational collaborations that require a structuration of leadership in the form of relays over time and space. Also, when virtual teams are global teams composed of people coming from different cultures, it might also be appropriate to formally implement a collective approach to leadership to better understand the differences that might arise from these differences, again in order to facilitate collaboration. Some studies have addressed plural forms of leadership in virtual settings (e.g., Al-Ani, Horspool & Bligh, 2011; Shuffler, Wiese, Salas & Burke, 2010), discussing how it can be beneficial for team dynamics and what the team achieves. A review of this literature has led Miloslavic, Wildman and Thayer (2015) to recommend combining both shared and vertical leadership in virtual and global teams. These studies are firmly anchored in the first perspective we identified, the instrumental perspective, referring to how leadership is structured in these teams. However, it might be interesting to approach plural leadership in these contexts from the third perspective, whereby plural leadership is defined as emerging from social interactions and communication between actors in the course of their work. How do people taking part in these virtual and sometimes global teams enact a collective form of leadership, through their technology-mediated interactions? Working from this ontological anchoring would offer a different view of plural leadership in this context, which could in turn inspire researchers and practitioners who locate themselves in the instrumental perspective.
Finally, and more broadly, a number of researchers are underlining that work and workplaces are experiencing a wave of change, including changes toward more collaborative workplaces. These new collaborative practices are supported by more general trends that can be witnessed currently in organizations. These trends may or may not be sustained over time; nonetheless, they are feeding a renewed interest in collaboration, collaborative practices and collaboration tools—an interest which in turn may spill over towards more collaborative approaches to leadership. In this sense, this enlarged interest in collaboration may represent a fertile ground for plural forms of leadership, both in terms of empirical experimentations led by practitioners and of research interest. Two issues seem to be arising around this trend. First, we see that, inside traditional organizations, new office spaces are designed and set up for collaboration. These new office spaces are more open, and aim at removing walls (both material and immaterial) inside organizations. Do these spaces create new opportunities for plural forms of leadership? A recent article by De Paoli and Ropo (2015) hints at a positive answer to this question, although much empirical work is still needed. Also, organizational boundaries are increasingly questioned, becoming in some cases more fluid and more porous. Not only are we seeing more collaborations between organizations, but organizations are also developing new relationships with customers and clients. For example, once limited to specific, often design-oriented firms, co-creation practices are becoming more popular. If the involvement of customers, clients or patients do change how new products or services are developed and deployed, this involvement may also give rise to plural forms of leadership in these development activities. Is it happening in practice? And, if so, are these forms different from the ones we already know about, given that they involve actors from both inside and outside the organization? If the scattered evidence we see here and there towards more collaborative practices materializes into a more durable trend in terms of work organization, we believe that plural forms of leadership may also become more than a marginal phenomenon.

Note

1 A quick search on the web with the keywords “companies with multiple CEOs” generates links to articles with titles such as: “With co-CEOs, companies flirt with disaster” (Fortune, September 20, 2014) or “With CEOs, two heads aren’t better than one” (Wall Street Journal, June 8, 2015). But the same search also uncovered links to articles that have a more positive tone towards plural forms of leadership.

References


Beyond the Hero–Leader


