Accepted for publication in *International Journal of Management Reviews*,
Vol 13, Issue 3, 2011.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS: A REVIEW OF THEORY AND RESEARCH

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review conceptual and empirical literature on the concept of distributed leadership (DL) in order to identify its origins, key arguments, and areas for further work. Consideration is given to the similarities and differences between DL and related concepts including 'shared', 'collective', 'collaborative', 'emergent', 'co-' and 'democratic' leadership. Findings indicate that whilst there are some common theoretical bases, the relative usage of these concepts varies over time, between countries and between sectors. In particular, DL is a notion that has seen a rapid growth in interest since the year 2000 but research remains largely restricted to the field of school education and of proportionally more interest to UK than US-based academics. Several scholars are increasingly going to lengths to indicate that in order to be 'distributed' leadership need not necessarily be widely 'shared' or 'democratic' and in order to be effective there is a need to balance different 'hybrid configurations' of practice. The article highlights a number of areas for further attention, including three factors relating to the context of much work on DL (power and influence; organisational boundaries and context; and ethics and diversity), and three methodological and developmental challenges (ontology; research methods; and leadership development, reward and recognition). It is concluded that descriptive and normative perspectives that dominate the literature should be supplemented by more critical accounts that recognise the rhetorical and discursive significance of DL in (re)constructing leader-follower identities, mobilising collective engagement and challenging or reinforcing traditional forms of organisation.

Distributed Leadership in Organizations: A Review of Theory and Research

Introduction

In an article entitled *'Distributed Properties: A New Architecture for Leadership'*, Peter Gronn (2000) outlined the concept of 'distributed leadership' (DL) as a potential solution to the tendency of leadership thinking to be divided into two opposing camps: those that consider it largely the consequence of individual agency (e.g. Bass, 1985) and those that present it as the result of systems design and role structures (e.g. Jaques, 1989). Over the subsequent decade, as the articles in this Special Issue testify, the concept of DL has gone from strength-to-strength and has made substantial in-roads into particular areas of theory and practice.

DL has become a popular 'post-heroic' (Badaracco, 2001) representation of leadership that has encouraged a shift in focus from the attributes and behaviours of individual 'leaders' (as promoted within traditional trait, situational, style and transformational theories of leadership - see Northouse, 2007 for a review) to a more systemic perspective, whereby 'leadership' is conceived of as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006). From this perspective, it is argued:

> 'Distributed leadership is not something "done" by an individual "to" others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organisation… [it] is a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action.' (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 3)

For Gronn (2002) DL offered the promise of a new 'unit of analysis' through which leadership could be understood in a holistic sense rather than simply as the aggregation of individual contributions. He referred to this dimension of leadership as 'concertive action' (as contrasted with 'numerical action') and illustrated his argument with three alternative forms of engagement ('spontaneous collaboration', 'intuitive working relationships' and 'institutionalised practices') each of which could be considered as a manifestation of 'conjoint agency'. In setting out his argument Gronn called for a fundamental reframing of leadership, suggesting that it 'is more appropriately understood as a fluid and emergent, rather than as a fixed, phenomenon' (Gronn, 2000, p. 324) – a call that has been enthusiastically received by scholars and practitioners alike.

In taking a distributed perspective attention turns from generic accounts of the attributes and/or actions of individual leaders to '*situated leadership practice'* (Spillane, 2006). According to Spillane and Diamond (2007b, p. 7) 'a distributed perspective on leadership involves two aspects – the leader plus aspect and the practice aspect'. The 'leader-plus' aspect 'acknowledges and takes account of the work of all the individuals who have a hand in leadership and management practice' rather than just those in formally designated 'leadership' roles. The 'practice' aspect 'foregrounds the *practice* of leading and managing […and…] frames it as a product of the interactions of school *leaders*, *followers*, and aspects of their *situation*'. According to these authors, together these aspects of leadership offer an analytical framework for 'examining the day-to-day *practice* of leadership and management' rather than dwelling on 'leaders and leadership structures, functions and roles'.

DL, however, is not the only theory or approach to call for such a reframing of how we understand leadership. The notion of 'shared leadership' has also been in use for some time (see Pearce and Conger, 2003a for a review), as have those of 'collective leadership' (e.g. Denis et al., 2001), 'collaborative leadership' (e.g. Rosenthal, 1998), 'co-leadership' (e.g. Heenan and Bennis, 1999) and 'emergent leadership' (e.g. Beck, 1981), to name but a few[1]. Common across all these accounts is the idea that leadership is not the monopoly or responsibility of just one person, with each suggesting a similar need for a more collective and systemic understanding of leadership as a social process (Hosking, 1988, Barker, 2001).

Within this article I will explore the lineage of the concept of DL and its recent rise to prominence. I will explore the emergence of DL as a discrete body of literature, reflecting on its relative usage in relation to alternative conceptions of leadership as a shared process. I will review the main theoretical developments in this field and the manner in which these ideas have been embraced and applied within different sectors and contexts. I will explore the empirical evidence from research into DL within organisations, highlighting some common themes and areas of difference. Finally I will reflect on the direction in which the field seems to be headed and priorities for further investigation[2].

The theoretical origins of distributed leadership

Whilst it is only really since the turn of the millennium that the concept of DL has been widely embraced by scholars and practitioners, the origins of the concept go back quite a bit further. Oduro (2004, p. 4) suggests that accounts of DL date back as far as 1250 BC, making it 'one of the most ancient leadership notions recommended for fulfilling organizational goals through people'. In terms of its theorisation, however, Harris (2009, p. 3) proposes that it 'is an idea that can be traced back as far as the mid 20s and possibly earlier'. Gronn (2000) cites Gibb (1954) as the first author to explicitly refer to DL when proposing that 'leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group' (Gibb, 1954, cited in Gronn, 2000, p. 324). Gibb's distinction between 'two forms of distribution: the overall numerical frequency of the acts contributed by each group member and "the multiplicity or pattern of group functions performed"' (Gronn, 2000, p. 324) form the basis for Gronn's distinction between numerical and concertive action and provide the fundamental building blocks for subsequent theoretical development.

Despite this early interest in the concept, however, as Gronn (2000, p. 324) suggests the idea of DL 'lay dormant until its resurrection by Brown and Hosking (1986)' and is only mentioned in a spattering of articles during the 1980s and 90s (e.g. Beck and Peters, 1981, Barry, 1991, Senge, 1993, Gregory, 1996, Leithwood et al., 1997) - most probably due to the appetite for accounts of 'new leadership', founded on 'transformational' and/or 'charismatic' leadership by senior executives, that dominated scholarly and practitioner literature during this period (see Parry and Bryman, 2006 for further discussion). Prior to and during this period, however, whilst specific references to DL may have been few and far between some significant conceptual developments were achieved which, in many ways, paved the way for later work.

In tracking the theoretical origins of DL a number of key concepts are commonly cited. Spillane et al. (2004), for example, identify 'distributed cognition' and 'activity

theory' as the conceptual foundations of their particular account of DL. The first of these concepts represents human cognition and experience as integrally bound up with the physical, social and cultural context in which it occurs (see, for example, Lave and Wenger, 1991, Leont'ev, 1981, Hutchins, 1995, Resnick, 1991, Latour, 1987, Pea, 1993). The second approach highlights the manner in which human activity is both enabled and constrained by individual, material, cultural and social factors (see, for example, Vygotsky, 1978, Brown and Duguid, 1991, Wertsch, 1991, Giddens, 1979, 1982).

Gronn (2000) likewise recognises distributed cognition and activity theory as key concepts within DL. With regards to activity theory he draws particularly on the work of Engeström (1999) (who, in turn, builds on the work of authors such as Vygotsky, 1978, and Leont'ev, 1978, 1981) which offers a framework for analysing situated activity as the product of reciprocal and mediated interactions between 'instruments', 'subjects', 'objects', 'rules', 'community', and 'division of labour'.

Gronn (2008a) however, also cites the significance of a stream of additional theory and research, such as Mary Parker Follett's (1942/2003) work on reciprocal influence; Benne and Sheats (1948) work on the diffusion of leadership functions within groups; Gibb's (1954) work on leadership; French and Snyder's (1959) and Dahl's (1961) work on the distribution of power and influence; Becker and Useem's (1942) and Etzioni's (1965) work on dual leadership; Kerr and Jermier's (1978) work on substitutes for leadership; Katz and Kahn's (1966, 1978) work on sharing leadership; and Schein (1988) on the functions of leadership.

In addition to these sources Harris (2009) cites the work of Festinger et al. (1950) and Heinicke and Bales' (1953) on informal leadership in groups and teams; Barnard (1968) on the functions of the executive and the informal organisation; Manz and Sims' (1993) social learning theory; Hutchins' (1995) work on distributed cognition and 'lateral agency'; Louis and Marks' (1998) work on professional learning communities; and Wheatley's (1994) work on complexity and systems.

Finally, Leithwood et al. (2009b) highlight the significance of organizational learning theory (Weick and Roberts, 1993, Hutchins, 1995); distributed cognition (Salomon, 1993, Jermier and Kerr, 1997, Perkins, 1993); complexity science (see Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, and Osborn and Hunt, 2007 for a review); and 'high involvement leadership' (see Yukl, 2002).

Together these authors map out a rich and diverse array of theory and research upon which subsequent work on DL can build, which resonates closely with the theoretical origins of shared leadership (SL) theory as outlined by Pearce and Conger (2003b). Despite this lineage, however, it was not until the mid-1990s that 'conditions were finally right for the acceptance of this seemingly radical departure from the traditional view of leadership as something imparted to followers by a leader from above' (Pearce and Conger, 2003b, p. 13). Pearce and Conger offer a number of reasons for this shift, including the rise in cross-functional teams, along with speed of delivery, the availability of information, and greater job complexity. Lipman-Blumen (1996) also cites increasing global interdependence and demands for inclusion and diversity as driving factors that highlight the limitations of more individualistic understandings of leadership. In effect, it is argued, the leader-centric approach which worked well enough and offered a (perhaps illusory) promise of order and control that suited organisations (or their directors and shareholders at least) throughout much of the 20th Century is no longer fit-for-purpose and needs to be revised.

Despite this, the idea of the individual leader remains hard to shed and to a large extent we remain enamoured by the 'romance of leadership' (Meindl et al., 1985, Meindl, 1995) whereby organisational actors and observers tend to over-attribute performance outcomes to the contribution of individual 'leaders', whilst disregarding other equally, if not more, important factors. As O'Toole et al. (2003, p. 251) suggest: 'shared leadership for most people is simply counterintuitive: leadership is obviously and manifestly an individual trait and activity'. They illustrate this paradox through reference to leaders such as Gandhi and Luther King, Jr., proposing that: 'when the facts are fully assembled even the most fabled "solitary" leaders relied on the support of a team of other effective leaders'. Such a deeply entrenched tendency to underestimate the contribution of more than a few key figures, it is argued, 'stems from thousands of years of cultural conditioning' and, as such, remains incredibly difficult to change even if the evidence points elsewhere. Indeed, as Astley (1985, p. 503, cited in Alvesson, 1996, p. 475) suggests, 'theories gain favour because of their conceptual appeal, their logical structure, or their psychological plausibility' rather than their empirical accuracy per se.

Such an observation is helpful when accounting for the initial slow uptake of distributed and shared perspectives on leadership, but also cautionary in encouraging reflection on why these concepts may be gaining quite so much attention nowadays. Do they offer a genuine alternative to earlier conceptualisations or are they simply 'the emperor's new clothes'? Do they offer an accurate account of how leadership actually occurs or simply respond to a current demand within society for a greater sense of equity and purpose?

Distributed leadership: An idea whose time has come?

Despite an initial resistance to the idea of DL, given the changing nature of work and increasing disillusionment with the manner in which 'new leadership' approaches (such as transformational and charismatic leadership) glorify 'heroic' accounts about senior executives, it would, indeed, seem that DL is 'an idea whose time has come' (Gronn, 2000, p. 333) – no longer 'the new kid on the block' (Gronn, 2006, p. 1) but rather 'an area of study in an adolescent stage of development […] experiencing a growth spurt that would do any teenager proud' (Leithwood et al., 2009c, p. 269).

A search of *google.co.uk* on 8th March 2011returned 187,000 hits for the phrase 'distributed leadership' and *books.google.co.uk* revealed 9,220 books referring to the topic. Whilst this is only a small fraction of the overall literature on 'leadership' (201 million web pages and nearly 6 million books on *google.co.uk*) if considered alongside related literatures, such as 'shared', 'collective', 'collaborative', 'co' and 'emergent' leadership, it represents a significant and growing body of material.

Website statistics also suggest, however, that within common usage DL is less prevalent as a concept than shared, collaborative or collective leadership. To this extent it is interesting to explore the domains in which DL has been embraced as a way of describing shared/dispersed forms of leadership and where it has made less headway.

In order to analyse the comparative growth of the field of DL it was decided to focus on academic articles as an indicator of scholarly activity. Using information from the *Scopus* database (one of the largest abstract and citation databases of its kind) Figure 1 summarises the number of publications on concepts related to DL (based on a

search of title, abstract and keywords for papers classified as 'reviews' or 'articles') between 1980-2009 (www.scopus.com, accessed 26/01/2010).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Whilst I in no way wish to imply that this graph includes everything published on these concepts during this period, it does give an illustration of the relative proportion of articles on each concept over time. From Figure 1 it can clearly be seen that DL has seen a rapid increase in profile since the year 2000, so much so that for the last three years of the analysis period (2007-09) it had overtaken SL as the term of preference for describing such forms of leadership. Interest in DL, however, is a recent phenomenon when compared to SL (which has seen a steady stream of publications since the early 1990's) and 'emergent leadership' (which has seen a small but consistent trickle of articles since 1980). 'Collective' and 'collaborative' leadership are concepts that have received ongoing interest since the mid-1990's (although not to the same extent as either SL or DL) and 'co-leadership' is a concept that mirrored these trends until the mid-2000's and since then has declined. Thus, whilst it is evident that overall interest in shared/dispersed forms of leadership has seen a marked increase since the year 2000 not all variants have achieved the same degree of attention.

To gain a clearer understanding of these dynamics it was decided to conduct two further comparisons on these trends: (1) an analysis by national affiliation of first authors, and (2) an analysis by subject discipline[3].

From the first of these analyses it became apparent that whilst the vast majority of articles are published by US-based authors (230 out of 418 articles; as opposed to 70 from the UK, 34 from Canada, 14 from Australia, 10 from Denmark and all other countries with fewer than 10) there are some important differences in the relative popularity of terms by country. In particular, the proportion of publications on DL is significantly higher in the UK than the US and vice versa for publications on SL (see Table 1). This is an interesting trend and points to a US/UK divide between the two sets of literature.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The second analysis revealed some further interesting trends in terms of the relative prevalence of concepts between academic disciplines. In particular, SL appears to be the concept of preference within nursing and medicine; SL and emergent leadership within psychology; and DL within business, management, and other areas of the social sciences (followed by SL). To elaborate further on these sector differences an analysis of source publications was conducted from which it was identified that:

- 68% of DL articles were published in education/educational management journals, versus only 22% of SL articles. Of these, 26% of the DL articles were published in *School Management and Leadership*, with the remainder spread across a range of sources.
- 39% of SL articles were published in health-related journals (including nursing and medicine) in comparison to no DL articles. Nine out of these 36 articles were published in the Danish nursing magazine *Sygeplejersken*.
- 25% of SL and 19% of DL articles were published in general business, management and leadership journals. Of these the majority (8 articles each on DL and SL) were in the *Leadership Quarterly*.

- Of the remaining articles, these were spread across a range of subjects including public administration, general social science, engineering, computing, and psychology, with some differentiation between DL and SL terminology.

Together these findings indicate that whilst the concept of DL has made substantial headway in the past decade, its popularity remains very much restricted to particular geographic and sector areas. Whilst it may be relatively easy to speculate reasons for these differences (for example the fact that the term DL appears to have been picked-up and promoted within UK education policy and practice through the work of the *National College for School Leadership* thereby giving it greater currency within this context) it does raise a number of questions that merit further attention. Firstly, does this differentiation suggest an unnecessary proliferation of terms (spearheaded by authors who are either unaware of, or who choose to ignore, comparable work from elsewhere) or provide evidence of subtle differences in the ways in which leadership is conceived and enacted in different contexts? What might these differences say about the discursive significance of ways in which leadership is talked about in particular contexts (for example, is there something about schools and/or British people that make them inherently more responsive to the notion of 'distributed' leadership, and healthcare organisations and/or Americans that make them engage with the idea of 'shared' leadership)? And what might be done to consolidate this diversity of terminology in order to offer a basis for greater conceptual clarity and comparison between sectors and locations?

Distributed leadership and related concepts

In drafting this paper for publication it was suggested that it might be useful to compile a comparative table of terms associated with DL that could be used as a source for distinguishing between them. This, however, I feel would be unhelpful due the manner in which authors tend to either use these terms interchangeably, or go to great lengths to distinguish between them. In either case, any attempt at providing a definitive definition would fail to capture the complexity, and inherent paradoxes, of the field and would potentially foreclose a series of ongoing debates and discussions that are both inevitable and desirable within an inchoate field of study such as this. Within this section, however, I will consider a number of different concepts relating to the distribution of leadership within organisations, and the manner in which they tend to be utilised.

Leithwood et al. (2009b, p. 1) suggest that for the majority of authors DL can be considered to incorporate shared, democratic, dispersed, and other related forms of leadership. From this perspective, DL tends to be considered from a *normative* perspective, as a means for enhancing the effectiveness of, and engagement with, leadership processes. For such authors, the key question is *how leadership should be distributed* in order to have the most beneficial effect (usually measured in terms of student learning outcomes for research within schools).

A number of other authors (including Spillane and Gronn), however, take an explicitly *descriptive* approach, in which they argue that DL offers an analytical framework through which we can assess and articulate *the manner in which leadership is (and is not) distributed* throughout organisations. Such authors go to lengths to argue that whilst leadership may be shared and/or democratic in certain situations, this is not a necessary or sufficient requirement for it to be considered as

‘distributed’. Furthermore, they suggest that DL is not an alternative or replacement for individual/focused leadership and that distribution *per se* is not necessarily related to more effective or efficient leadership. As Spillane and Diamond (2007b, p. 11) put it, leaders ‘don’t have to see eye-to-eye or even have to get along with one another to co-perform leadership routines and tasks… Whether two or more leaders seek similar, different, or even opposing goals is just another dimension of the analysis’.

Woods and Gronn (2009) (building on from an earlier article by Woods, 2004) go further to suggest that many current manifestations of DL within schools and other organisations suffer from a ‘democratic deficit’ in that they stop short of advocating the principles of ‘self-governance, protection from arbitrary power, and legitimacy grounded in consent’ (ibid, p. 433) that form the basis of democracy, in favour of a rationale based on measures of efficiency and effectiveness.

Thus, whilst there are clear parallels between many of these ideas, and a fair degree of similarity in their theoretical and historical origins, like much else in the field of leadership they remain ‘essentially contested concepts’ (Grint, 2005). In a review of the literature on DL (including the associated concepts of ‘delegated’, ‘democratic’, and ‘dispersed’ leadership), though, Bennett et al. (2003, p. 7) did manage to identify three premises that seem to be shared by most authors:

> (1) ‘Leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals’;
>
> (2) ‘There is openness to the boundaries of leadership’; and
>
> (3) ‘Varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few’.

Such criteria are common across much recent theorising on leadership as a relational process (see Uhl-Bien, 2006 for a review), as well as shared leadership theory (Pearce et al., 2008). In the introduction to their book *Shared Leadership*, for example, Pearce and Conger (2003b, p. 1) define SL as:

> ‘… a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence.’

Similar distinctions between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ leadership are made by researchers within the field of DL (e.g. Bolden et al., 2009, Collinson and Collinson, 2009, Gronn, 2009) and both sets of literature draw attention to the need to recognise informal, emergent and collective acts of influence as well as those instigated by people in formal positions of authority.

The perceived need for both DL and SL theory, likewise, arise in response to a similar set of practical challenges as summarised by Leithwood et al. (2009a, p. xvii) in the preface to their book *Distributed Leadership According to the Evidence*, where they suggest that DL responds to the ‘decidedly unheroic’ leadership experienced by many within schools, as well as the ‘more complex mission facing schools’ and a growing appreciation of the importance of ‘informal’ leadership. Harris (2009) concludes that DL has been well received within schools because it has *normative*, *representational* and *empirical* power within this context - both describing leadership as it is and as it should be.

However, whilst the commonalities between DL and SL perspectives are evident, and may add strength to the argument against leader-centric representations, there are some potential dangers of assuming too close a similarity. As Leithwood et al. (2006) suggest, although there is clearly a degree of overlap between concepts of shared, collaborative, democratic and participative leadership this does not mean that all forms are equal and/or equivalent, or that everybody is a leader. Indeed, a tendency to conflate and/or group together similar perspectives leads to the possibility that DL may become a label for all attempts to share or devolve leadership to others which may, in turn, undermine its conceptual rigour and subsequent utility as a framework for investigating leadership practice (Harris, 2005).

In an attempt to set the record straight Spillane and Diamond (2007a, p. 149-152) dispel four common 'myths of distributed leadership', as follows: 1) that DL is a blueprint for leadership and management; 2) that DL negates the role of school principals (or CEOs elsewhere); 3) that from a distributed perspective, everyone is a leader; and 4) that DL is only about collaborative situations. Such assumptions, they argue, are fundamentally flawed and diminish our ability to get behind the dynamics of leadership practice. In the same way as leader-centric perspectives reduce our ability to recognise factors beyond the individual, a poorly defined concept of DL may render it difficult to differentiate the specific contributions of particular actors and/or aspects of the situation.

Patterns and outcomes of distributed leadership

From the account above, it would seem that one of the main distinctions between DL and more traditional approaches is its attempt to offer a *systemic perspective* on leadership rather than positioning itself as a distinct theory *per se*. Within any given situation, DL may comprise a number of different (and possibly competing) 'configurations'[4] (Gronn, 2009) of leadership practice - the cumulative interaction of which, give rise to outcomes. As Spillane (2006, p. 102-103) suggests:

> 'More important, what is likely to be most salient is not the fact that leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed […] A distributed perspective on leadership can coexist with and be used beneficially to explore hierarchical and top-down leadership approaches.'

In order to more clearly articulate the various ways in which DL can occur, a number of authors have developed taxonomies, four of which are summarised in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Although each of these frameworks is derived from research in schools, it is possible to consider how they might be applied in other contexts. Those suggested by Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006), for example, focus on the interpersonal dynamics of DL and the various ways in which people can collaborate to achieve shared outcomes (processes that are likely to occur in most organisations). Those by MacBeath et al. (2004) and Leithwood et al. (2006) focus more explicitly on different forms of DL and, whilst perhaps more specific to a school context, may well be observable elsewhere. Each of these frameworks indicates a degree of variation in the extent to which DL is 'institutionalised' within working practices as part of the overall 'culture' of the organisation, and the extent to which this may be instigated deliberately in a coordinated manner. Whilst neither Gronn, Spillane nor MacBeath suggest that one or more forms of distribution is more effective or desirable than the others – in that

they each constitute part of the overall landscape of leadership practice – Leithwood and colleagues suggest that certain forms are more likely to contribute towards organisational productivity, as follows:

- Planful and spontaneous alignment are most likely to contribute towards short-term organizational productivity;
- Planful alignment is most likely to contribute towards long-term organizational productivity; and
- Spontaneous misalignment and anarchic alignment are likely to have a negative effect on short- and long-term organizational productivity.

It is also suggested that organisational members associated with the fourth configuration 'anarchic misalignment' are likely to be far more resistant to the implementation of 'planful alignment' than would those in contexts of spontaneous alignment or misalignment.

The work by Leithwood and colleagues, cited above, gives some indication of the potential benefit of a carefully implemented approach to DL, as well as the dangers of a poorly conceived approach. It is interesting in that it indicates that 'distributing' leadership per se is not necessarily beneficial but that what is important is *how* leadership is distributed. This may help account for the somewhat inconsistent evidence on the impact of DL on organisational performance as illustrated in a recent review by Harris (2009). Whilst she identified a number of studies indicating a positive relationship between DL and organisational change (e.g. Iandoli and Zollo, 2008, Graetz, 2000), teacher leadership (e.g. Little, 1990, Rosenholtz, 1989) and professional learning communities (e.g. Louis and Marks, 1998, Morrisey, 2000, Stoll and Louis, 2007); there was equally evidence to suggest that distribution of leadership can have a negative effect on team performance, including a 'dispersion' of responsibility (Heinicke and Bales, 1953, Festinger et al., 1950), a reduced sense of stability and security (Melnick, 1982) and boundary management issues (Storey, 2004, Timperley, 2005).

Within the field of school leadership, where the majority of DL research has been conducted, Mayrowetz (2008, p. 424) proposes 'there is no strong link between distributed leadership and two primary goals of the educational leadership field: school improvement and leadership development'. Similarly York-Barr (2004) concludes that there is little evidence of a direct impact of DL on student learning outcomes.

A number of other studies (e.g. Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000, Silins and Mulford, 2002, Harris and Muijs, 2004, Hulpia and Devos, 2009), however, do indicate a positive relationship between DL and significant aspects of school performance. Day et al. (2007, p. 17) concluded that 'substantial leadership distribution was very important to a school's success in improving pupil outcomes', albeit that this was a mediated relationship, whereby DL 'was positively correlated to the conditions within the organisation, including staff morale, which in turn impacted positively upon student behaviour and student learning outcomes' (Day et al. 2009, cited in Harris, 2009, p. 15). Harris concludes:

> 'The empirical evidence about distributed leadership and organizational development is encouraging but far from conclusive. We need to know much more about the barriers, unintended consequences and limitations of

> distributed leadership before offering any advice or prescription. We also need to know the limitations and pitfalls as well as the opportunities and potential of this model of leadership practice.' (Harris, 2009, p. 18)

A very similar conclusion is reached by Leithwood et al. (2009c) and leads them to suggest that without the 'more nuanced appreciation of the anatomy of distributed leadership' (ibid, p. 280) that has developed only recently it would be unrealistic to expect to find a significant relationship between DL and performance outcomes.

Together these authors, and the work they draw upon, suggest that a key focus for future research is exploring how particular configurations of DL contribute towards, or inhibit, organisational performance. A focus on the *how* of leadership distribution, however, is only part of the story. Other important questions include *why* leadership is distributed, *who* controls this distribution and *what* (if anything) is being distributed? Day et al. (2009, p. 14) suggest that in schools, for example:

> 'It is often some form of external pressure that prompts efforts to distribute leadership more broadly, for example, pressure to improve disappointing school performance, introduction of new policies and programmes requiring new teaching and learning capacities. Greater "distribution of leadership" outside of those in formally established roles usually depends on quite intentional intervention on the part of those in formal leadership roles.'

From this perspective, the implementation of DL cannot be considered as politically neutral. It is motivated by a series of expectations, assumptions and agendas that, whilst at face value may appear reasonable enough, may actually serve to legitimise and reinforce the domination of particular individuals and groups over others.

Furthermore, by assuming that leadership *is* something that can be distributed and mapped in various ways we risk reinforcing an essentialist understanding of the concept that is one of the very things that DL offers the potential of overcoming (i.e. the transition from an individualistic to a social process view of leadership).

These are ideas that will be explored further in the next section.

What might we still be missing?

The notion of DL, as illustrated in this article, has clearly been influential in shaping how leadership has been conceived and investigated over the past decade. As Harris and Spillane (2008, p. 33) propose: 'it is a way of getting under the skin of leadership practice, of seeing leadership practice differently and illuminating the possibilities for organisational transformation'. Whilst drawing our attention to some previously neglected aspects of leadership practice, however, it is possible that the concept of DL has obscured other important aspects of organisational life. In this section I will consider a number of areas worthy of further consideration, beginning with three aspects of the context of leadership that tend to be under theorised and/or explored in accounts of DL, followed by three methodological/developmental challenges that demand further attention.

The context of distributed leadership

<u>1. Power and influence</u>

A number of authors (e.g. Gronn, 2009, Hartley, 2009, Hatcher, 2005, Brown et al., 2000, Gordon, 2010) have suggested that much current theory and research on DL

takes insufficient consideration of the dynamics of power and influence in which it is situated. Within schools, for example, Hatcher (2005) concludes that whilst leadership may be 'distributed', power often is not. The notion of DL may be invoked by senior managers to encourage engagement and participation in organisational activities whilst masking substantial imbalances in access to resources and sources of power. Gunter and Rayner (2007b), likewise propose that 'that the labelling of Headteachers as managing directors, chief executives, and more recently as school leaders, combined with training and a requirement to implement reforms, is central to a form of modernization that is reworking professionality as generic and business orientated'. Such shifts are common across much public sector reform and require the merging of managerial and professional identities in ways that may prove problematic for some occupations (see Gosling et al., 2009 for a similar argument in higher education).

The significance of 'leadership' as a vehicle for public sector reform is now relatively widely recognised (see, for example, Brooks, 2000, Hartley and Allison, 2000, Currie et al., 2005, Deem et al., 2007, Gleeson and Knights, 2008) yet is not always acknowledged within research on DL in these contexts. Where it has been (e.g. Torrance, 2009, Hargreaves and Fink, 2008, Gunter and Rayner, 2007a, Day, 2005, Hartley and Allison, 2000) authors have highlighted a number of challenges and inconsistencies in how the notion of DL is framed by such bodies. In a recent study within schools, for example, Currie et al. (2009, p. 1735) illustrate how 'competing institutional forces simultaneously foster and stymie the adoption of distributed leadership' such that 'school principals find themselves in a classic Catch-22 situation, which they resolve by enacting a weak form of distributed leadership'. 'Ironically', they argue, 'the implementation of distributed leadership is the most difficult in the schools located in socially deprived areas, that is, the very context where policy-makers expect distributed leadership to make the most impact'.

To appreciate why organisations (and other social groups) operate in the ways they do it is important to remain alert to the dynamics of power and influence, and how they enable or constrain particular forms of engagement in leadership practice. Gordon (2010) provides a graphic illustration of how this can be done in his analysis of the implementation of a 'dispersed leadership' initiative within an Australian police department. Through the application of a framework of antecedent forms of power (taken for granted realities, historical delineation of relationships, historical decision legitimacy, the ordering of statements, and boundaries of discursive actions) he demonstrates how 'rather than dispersing power and enhancing democracy, antecedent forms of power continue to legitimize domination on behalf of those groups and individuals (senior officers and detectives) who previously held formal positions of power' (ibid, p. 283). By way of conclusion he suggests that 'leadership implies power as much as power implies leadership, and thus leadership innocent of power is leadership ignorantly normalized: Power is always implicated with the discourse and practices of leadership'. According to Gordon such analyses are woefully absent within the literature on dispersed leadership (including DL and SL), which 'adopts a normative, apolitical approach to power' (ibid, p. 281-2).

To truly acknowledge the dynamics of power and influence that permeate our organisations and societies we need to pay more attention to issues such as competition between leaders (Storey, 2004), micropolitics (Bjork and Blase, 2009) and the rhetoric of partnerships (Lumby, 2009).

2. Organisational boundaries and context

A further limitation within much work on DL is the tendency to confine studies within organisational boundaries. Thus, for example, studies of school leadership tend to explore the contributions of various actors within the school and, perhaps, the influence of particular stakeholders such as pupils, parents and school governors. They rarely, if ever, consider however how leadership practices within one school may impact upon those within another and/or how their effects may ripple through the community to impact upon local business, healthcare, policing, etc. Furthermore, the temporal dimensions of how leadership patterns experienced at school frame and shape expectations of leadership in colleges, universities and workplaces remain well beyond the scope of current enquiries.

There is also a tendency for most research on DL to focus on the holders of formal positions. For example, each of the six cases of 'distributed leadership' presented in Spillane and Diamond (2007a) focus particularly on the role of the principal, as do most of those in Leithwood et al. (2009a). Such a situation severely limits opportunities for recognising the contribution of informal leaders and the manner in which situational factors (physical, social and cultural) impact upon leadership.

McCrimmon (2005) proposes, for example, that 'thought leadership' within networks and partnerships is a significant and relatively unexplored dimension of DL that deserves investigation. Pye and Knight (2005) go further to suggest that the network itself offers an important level of analysis that often goes neglected yet is essential to our understanding of how leadership occurs within and between organisations.

Furthermore, whilst there is some literature exploring DL outside of the education sector (e.g. Mehra et al., 2006, Ensley et al., 2006, Nonaka and Toyama, 2002) this remains rare, and in order to test the validity and utility of a distributed perspective more widely further research is required. In particular work that enables comparison of the relative desirability and/or appropriateness of terms such as 'distributed', 'shared' or 'dispersed' leadership in different contexts could be helpful in clarifying whether differences in terminology are purely rhetorical or if they point to more fundamental differences in how leadership is accomplished.

3. Ethics and diversity

I have already discussed the warning by Woods and Gronn (2009) that important debates about the value of democracy are often skirted over in accounts of DL, yet other authors draw highlight a number of additional challenges. Sugrue (2009), for example, argues that in focusing on the collective aspects of leadership we may 'short change' and 'emasculate' the 'everyday heroes and heroines' whose essential contribution may go unnoticed. Rippin (2007) takes a feminist informed perspective to suggest the contributions of individuals (particularly females) may remain largely invisible through the manner in which gendered work is constructed and interpreted. Grint (2010) suggests that DL ignores the inherently 'sacred' nature of leadership work, and the importance of separation, sacrifice and silencing of and by 'leaders'. And Sinclair (1992) highlights the potentially hegemonic nature of a team-based ideology. Together these sources indicate that the shift to a more collective or distributed representation of leadership does not necessarily have a beneficial effect for those people involved with it.

With regards to the issue of diversity, whilst DL offers the promise of a more inclusive perspective on leadership that incorporates a range of views and

contributions, much of the work fails to take a cross/multi-cultural perspective (for an exception see Yeung et al., 2006, McIntyre, 2003) and how to truly recognise and respond to the needs and expectations of end-users – e.g. student voice in schools (see Mitra, 2005, Menon, 2005) or even cultural preferences for top-down leadership (Goldstein, 2004).

Methodological and developmental challenges

1. Ontology

A further important issue that may well be elided by the current focus on DL is the ontological status of leadership itself. Whilst DL rejects the notion that leadership resides within individuals in preference for a relational ontology, it stops short of challenging the underlying building blocks of leadership theory or whether, indeed, leadership can (or should) be conceived of as a distinct concept at all. With regards to the first of these issues, Drath et al. (2008, p. 635) propose that the vast majority of leadership theory, including DL, is 'unified and framed by an underlying ontology that is virtually beyond question within this field'. This ontology, they propose, is one of the 'tripod': 'an expression of commitment to the entities (leaders, followers, common goals) that are essential and indispensable to leadership and about which any theory of leadership must therefore speak' (ibid, p. 635). These elements are clearly evident with DL theories such as that proposed by Spillane et al. (2004) and, whilst they offer an explanation as to why they retain the terminology of 'leaders' and 'followers' (see, for example, Spillane and Diamond, 2007b, p. 8-9) this distinction remains problematic for any representation that endeavours to escape assigning ontological primacy to individual agents (Hartley, 2009).

With regards to the second issue, DL theory tends not to question the existence of leadership as a distinct concept, despite the growing literature on the social construction of leadership (see Fairhurst and Grant, 2010 for a recent review) and recognition that 'leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals' (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 7). Authors from a more critical perspective suggest that 'thinking about leadership needs to take seriously the possibility of the non-existence of leadership as a distinct phenomenon' (2003, p. 359) and that we may well end up interpreting other factors as leadership (e.g. Washbush, 2005, Lakomski, 2008). From this perspective, searching for the 'essence' of leadership and/or direct evidence of the impact of leadership, 'distributed' or otherwise, is meaningless. Instead, we should focus our attention on the processes by which certain things, and not others, are categorised as leadership (Kelly, 2008, Pondy, 1978). Such a perspective would give a fuller appreciation of the role of language in the accomplishment of leadership (Fairhurst, 2007, Grint, 2005, Gronn, 1983), as well as the importance of rhetoric and discourse in shaping leadership expectations (Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2007, Hatcher, 2005, Maxcy and Nguyen, 2006).

2. Research methods

Following on from the account given above about the need for increased recognition of the primacy of contextual factors in shaping both how leadership practice occurs and is understood, considerable care needs to be given to the manner in which DL research is conducted and interpreted. As mentioned previously, much current research focuses predominantly on the testimonies of key institutional actors in formal leadership/management roles. Whilst such people clearly play an important role in the enactment and interpretation of leadership their perspectives may differ in

significant ways from those elsewhere within and/or outside the organisation. Understanding and exploring these apparent tensions and contradictions may well shed light on the discursive processes through which leadership occurs and the importance of different 'social identities' (Haslam et al., 2003) in shaping attitudes and behaviours.

Other authors suggest that studies should focus more directly on the impact of DL practices on key organisational outcomes. Within schools, for example, Timperley (2005) and Robinson (2009) suggest that student learning is the key variable and that we should endeavour to capture the ways in which different forms of leadership contribute towards this.

Youngs (2009) suggests that the field of DL is drifting towards a somewhat uncritical position and highlights four key areas of concern: 1) a lack of critique against policy, 2) an under-emphasis of historical precedents, 3) ignorance of parallel developments, and 4) a lack of attention to power relations. He calls for the development of a *critical* perspective to complement and challenge the *descriptive* and *normative* approaches that dominate the literature (Harris, 2005).

Methodologically, the evidence from this review supports a shift in focus from simply studying how leadership is 'distributed' to a contextually situated exploration of how distributed and focused forms of leadership interact with one another within a 'hybrid configuration' of practice (Gronn, 2008b, 2009, 2010). Such an approach would require detailed ethnographic studies of leadership practices and discourses in situ, as well as a multi-level approach to research (Yammarino and Dansereau, 2008). Greater use of critical discourse analysis could also be important in shedding light on underlying dynamics of power and influence and the rhetorical significance of DL terminology (Gordon, 2010, Gosling et al., 2009).

3. Development, reward and recognition of leaders

Finally this review illustrates the manner in which, from a distributed perspective, the practice of leadership is integrally bound up with the wider system in which it occurs. To this extent structural and situational factors are 'constitutive' elements of leadership practice (Spillane et al., 2004), as are the contributions of multiple actors, not just those in formal managerial roles. Such insights have important implications for the manner in which leadership is recognised, rewarded and developed within organisations yet fail to have seriously impacted upon much practice in this area.

James et al. (2007) and Ross et al. (2005a, 2005b) outline the need for a more systemic approach to leadership development that situates this activity as part of a wider change process. Busher (2005), Loder and Spillane (2005) and others draw attention to the importance of 'identity work' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) in enabling people to work through potentially competing identities in relation to leadership work. Louis et al. (2009) and Simkins (2005) highlight the importance of collective sensemaking and the establishment of trust in developing effective models of DL.

Together this literature poses some serious challenges to traditional management and leadership development processes and calls for far greater investment in the development of interpersonal networks and shared understandings both within and beyond organisations (what Day (2000) refers to as *leadership development* as opposed to *leader development*). Elaboration on how this might be done effectively remains an important area for further research.

Conclusions

In this paper I have given an overview of the field of distributed leadership, how it has developed and areas for further consideration. It has been demonstrated that the concept of DL bears many similarities to notions such as 'shared', 'collective', 'collaborative', 'emergent' and 'co-' leadership and has some common theoretical and practical origins. Despite this, there remain some significant differences in how these concepts are utilised and their relative prevalence within different parts of the literature. There are also some key areas of debate, such as the extent to which DL is necessarily inclusive or democratic; the degree to which it should be taken as a framework for improving leadership practice or simply describing it; and the degree to which the concept of DL is part of a wider socio-political movement aimed to reform public services and produce efficiency savings (Hartley, 2007, Hargreaves and Fink, 2008).

From a review of DL literature in schools Mayrowetz (2008, p. 424) proposes that 'there are four common usages of the term distributed leadership, which include the original descriptive theoretical lens and three prescriptions for how sharing leadership in schools can improve practice'. He suggests that 'each usage has its strengths and weaknesses, though two of the prescriptive usages are actually contradicted by empirical research'. He concludes that 'while not dismissing any particular definition, the author encourages those who use the descriptive definition to focus more on making connections to school improvement and leadership development [… and…] those who use the prescriptive definitions to use theoretically and empirically grounded research frames and offer suggestions about how to link research on distributed leadership to the practical concerns of the field'. From the evidence in the current paper I would endorse these views to suggest that a purely *descriptive* approach is of limited use in enhancing leadership practice, whist a *normative* approach may inadvertently end up promoting inappropriate, ineffective and potentially unethical practices. Like Youngs (2009) and Gordon (2010) I would advocate a more *critical* perspective that facilitates reflection on the purpose(s) and discursive mechanisms of leadership and an awareness of the dynamics of power and influence in shaping what happens within and outside organisations. Furthermore, the *rhetorical* significance of DL in (re)constructing leader identities and mobilising collective engagement should not be underestimated as well as the inherent paradoxes and tensions of much leadership practice (Bolden et al., 2008, Gosling et al., 2009).

Gronn's notion of 'hybrid configurations' of leadership (Gronn, 2010, 2009, 2008b) offers a promising approach to moving beyond overly simplistic or aspirational views of DL that may help shed light on the important balance between individual, collective and situational aspects of leadership practice and, importantly, when and why particular configurations are more effective and/or desirable than others. As Pearce (2004, p. 55) suggests:

> 'The issue is not vertical leadership or shared leadership. Rather the issues are: (1) when is leadership most appropriately shared? (2) How does one develop shared leadership? And (3) how does one utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers?'

The key contribution of DL, it would seem, is not in offering a replacement for other accounts, but in enabling the recognition of a variety of forms of leadership in a more integrated and systemic manner. The potential ability of DL to achieve this, however, is somewhat limited by its restriction to particular contexts and locations which leaves

it somewhat detached from the wider leadership literature[5], with the apparent juxtaposition with 'shared leadership' a particular area for concern.

To conclude, however, to be truly successful and to achieve the impact that it promises the concept of DL really needs to connect in a meaningful way with the experiences and aspirations of leadership practitioners (Harris and Spillane, 2008), as well as explicitly recognising the inherently political nature of leadership within organisations and imbalances in the distribution of power and influence (Woods and Gronn, 2009, Gordon, 2010). Only then will it be able to move beyond adolescence to maturity.

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Concept Affiliation of 1st author	Shared leadership	Distributed leadership
US	103 articles	35 articles
UK	9 articles	47 articles

(Chi^2 = 55.99, p<=0.01)

Table 1: Articles on shared and distributed leadership by national affiliation of first author (source: Scopus.com, for period 1980-2009)

Gronn (2002)	**Leithwood et al. (2006)**	**MacBeath et al. (2004)**	**Spillane (2006)**
• *Spontaneous collaboration*: where groups of individuals with differing skills, knowledge and/or capabilities come together to complete a particular task/project and then disband. • *Intuitive working relations*: where two or more individuals develop close working relations over time until ‘‘leadership is manifest in the shared role space encompassed by their relationship’’ (ibid: p. 657). • *Institutionalized practice*: where enduring organisational structures (e.g. committees and teams) are put in place to facilitate collaboration between individuals.	• *Planful alignmen*t: where, following consultation, resources and responsibilities are deliberately distributed to those individuals and/or groups best placed to lead a particular function or task. • *Spontaneous alignment*: where leadership tasks and functions are distributed in an unplanned way yet, “tacit and intuitive decisions about who should perform which leadership functions result in a fortuitous alignment of functions across leadership sources” (Harris et al., 2007, p. 344). • *Spontaneous misalignment*: where, as above, leadership is distributed in an unplanned manner, yet in this case the outcome is less fortuitous and there is a misalignment of leadership activities. • *Anarchic misalignment*: where leaders pursue their own goals independently of one another and there is “active rejection, on the part of some or many organizational leaders, of influence from others about what they should be doing in their own sphere of influence” (ibid, p. 344).	• *Formal distribution*: where leadership is intentionally delegated or devolved. • *Pragmatic distribution*: where leadership roles and responsibilities are negotiated and divided between different actors. • *Strategic distribution*: where new people, with particular skills, knowledge and/or access to resources, are brought in to meet a particular leadership need. • *Incremental distribution*: where people acquire leadership responsibilities progressively as they gain experience. • *Opportunistic distribution*: where people willingly take on additional responsibilities over and above those typically required for their job in a relatively ad hoc manner. • *Cultural distribution*: where leadership is naturally assumed by members of an organisation/group and shared organically between individuals.	• *Collaborated distribution*: where two or more individuals work together in time and place to execute the same leadership routine. • *Collective distribution*: where two or more individuals work separately but interdependently to enact a leadership routine. • *Coordinated distribution*: where two or more individuals work in sequence in order to complete a leadership routine.

Table 2: Frameworks of Distributed Leadership

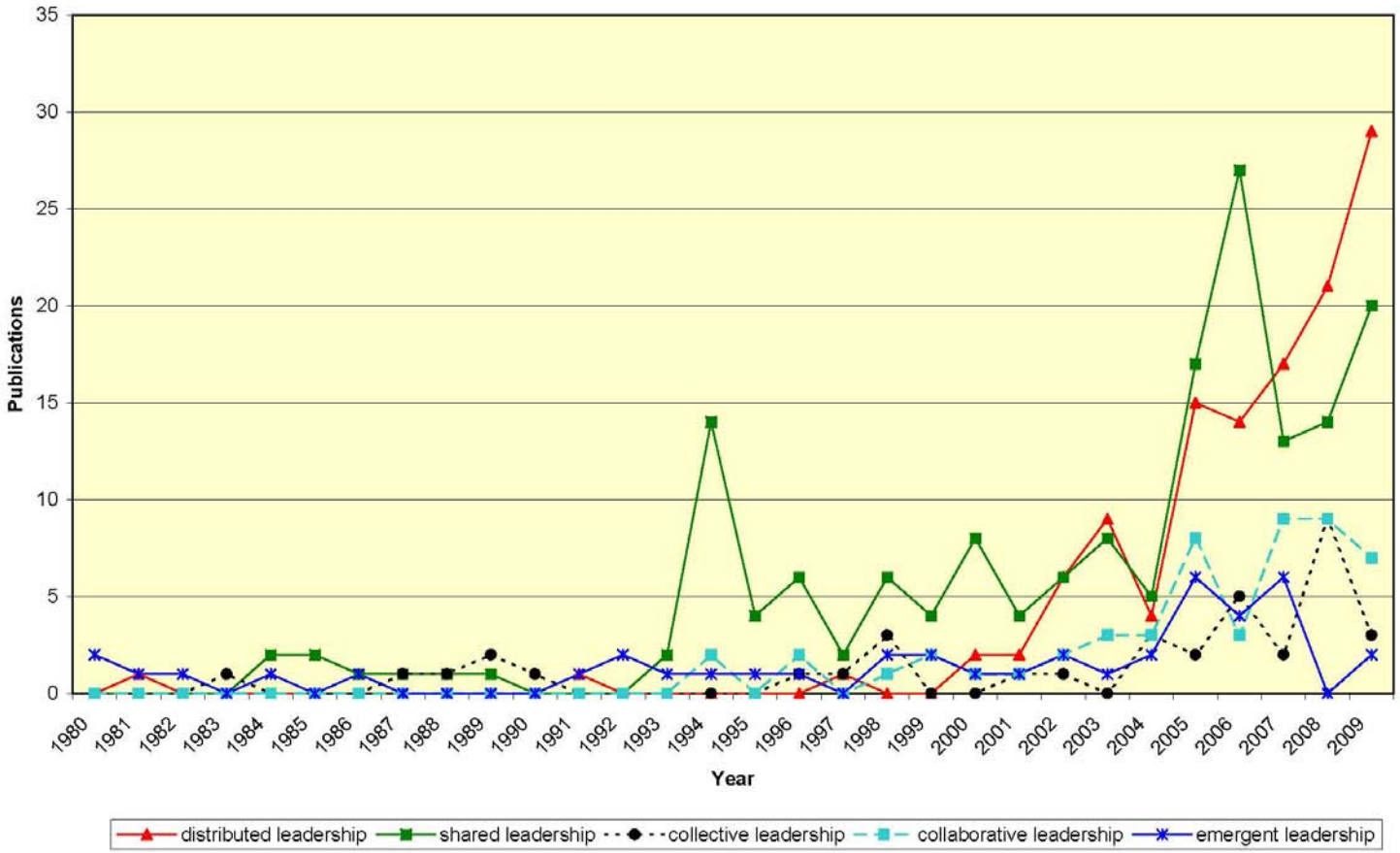

Figure 1: Publications on Scopus database

Notes

[1] Additional terms include 'dispersed' leadership' (e.g. Gordon, 2002, 2010; Ray et al., 2003) and 'distributive leadership' (e.g. Brown and Gioia, 2002), although in each case these are used far less widely than those terms selected for investigation in this paper.

[2] The literature for this article was identified from a comprehensive search of bibliographic databases (including Business Source Complete, EBSCO, JSTOR and Scopus) as well as analysis of a number of recent reviews (including Harris, 2009; Spillane and Diamond, 2007; and Leithwood et al., 2009). As indicated in the title, the primary focus of the article is on DL in organisations rather than, for example, in communities or other groups.

[3] Due to space constraints graphs of these analyses are not presented here, although can be obtained from the author on request.

[4] Gronn (2009a) proposes the idea of 'leadership configuration' - "a pattern or an arrangement of practice" (ibid, p. 383) - in an attempt to overcome the tendency to define DL in normative or ideological terms. From this perspective, he argues "in any organization in which there may be evidence of persons and units leading, that configuration is simply one of 'leadership', unqualified and unembellished, the practice of which happens to be shaped in contextualized ways" (ibid, p. 390). Taking such a perspective on leadership, he suggests, carries two major implications: firstly, that researchers would be advised to identify and map the multiple hybrid forms of leadership that occur within a particular organisation/context longitudinally over time (rather than decontextualising them and focusing only on particular forms); and secondly, that we should avoid labelling different forms of leadership in a way that invokes normative comparisons between them (focusing instead on the underlying bases upon which leadership is founded).

[5] Youngs (2009, p. 385), for example remarks "as far as I can ascertain the works of Peter Gronn, and to a lesser extent Kenneth Leithwood, usually incorporate links to the wider leadership field. The generic leadership journal, *Leadership Quarterly*, on the other hand, only tends to highlight Gronn's theorising of distributed leadership."