# Putting Leadership in its Place: Introduction to the special issue

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## Introduction

This special issue emerges from a call for papers issued following the 18th International Studying Leadership Conference, hosted at the University of the West of England in December 2019, which addressed the theme of 'Putting leadership in its place'. There was a certain playfulness to the topic, which invited contributors to not only look at the role of 'place' within Leadership Studies but also to actively challenge the reverence in which 'leaders' and 'leadership' are often held. In keeping with the purpose of the conference, and the journal *Leadership* that its founders David Collinson and Keith Grint established, we called for a critical reappraisal of assumptions around leadership theory, practice and development. Little did we know at the time of the turbulence and uncertainty that would follow, as the Coronavirus pandemic brought the world to a standstill and laid bare the deep divisions and inequalities within our societies as well as the complex interconnections and interdependencies between the places in which we live and work.

The City of Bristol, where the conference was hosted, hit news headlines around the world just six months later when the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was toppled by a crowd of Black Lives Matter protestors and dumped unceremoniously in the harbour – itself a striking illustration of the need, and potential, to 'put leadership in its place'. Without a detailed understanding of the history and significance of the Colston legacy within Bristol, the social and political issues associated with the statue's removal, the manner in which the city responded, and the complex inter-relationship with a multitude of other places around the world, any attempt to understand or explain what happened or to provide guidance on what should be done next are deeply diminished (for more on this see Bolden, 2020). Events such as this highlight just how blind we can become to the places in which we live and the need to develop an awareness of the social, physical, cultural, historical and symbolic contexts that shape our individual and collective understandings and practices of leadership.

In reviewing, editing and compiling the papers submitted for this special issue we have been delighted to witness the diversity of perspectives and issues that have been covered. Each of the nine papers accepted for publication takes a fundamentally different approach, showing significant originality in terms of conceptual framing, methodology and implications for theory and practice. In

so doing, they each respond to calls from the journal's editor Dennis Tourish to be 'critical' (2015), 'write differently' (2017) and to do research that 'matters' (2019). In this introductory article we set the scene for the discussions that follow by briefly (a) outlining the significance of the 'critical turn' in leadership studies, (b) considering the nature of context and 'place' in leadership theory and research, (c) introducing each of the papers, (d) mapping key themes and issues, and (e) highlighting implications for leadership theory and research. In engaging with this Special Issue we encourage you to read widely and reflect deeply in order to see and understand leadership and place in new ways.

**(Re)Placing Dominant Assumptions about Leadership: The critical turn**

In recent years theorists have made an effort to move away from studies of *leaders* toward examining the underlying, relational, socially constructed process, of leaders*hip* – questioning the foundations of how leadership is conceptualised and instead seeing it as a socially constructed process which is embedded in context and culture (Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Hosking, 1988; Dachler and Hosking; 1995). From this perspective, leadership is understood as an emergent, relational phenomenon that is co-produced and performed by a much wider range of participants than was deemed possible by the broad corpus of extant academic work on leadership within organisations (Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Collinson, 2006). The universalistic propositions and hypotheses set out by mainstream approaches are eschewed here, as the "native's perspectives" take centre stage (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003: 365). Researchers do not seek to locate and uncover the objective truth and/or reality through positivistic inquiry, but rather it is accepted that multiple realities exist simultaneously, which leads to a dialectical and co-constructed approach to understanding of leadership, viewing it as "less the property of individuals and more as the contextualised outcome of interactive, rather than unidirectional [...] processes" (Gronn, 2002: 444). It is at this stage where we can begin to see the importance of understanding how context and place interact with leadership to add a level of complexity, detail and granularity to social and organisational practices.

The 'post-structuralist' approach, that underlies much work from a Critical Leadership Studies (Collinson, 2011, 2014, 2017) orientation, has challenged the very foundations of leader-centric conceptualisations by considering subjectivities (and therefore 'leaders') not as unitary and total, but as dynamically constituted and transformed through social practice (Fischer, 2003; Collinson, 2003, 2006; Biehl et al, 2007). Collinson notes that by rejecting "the essentialist notions of personality [...], post-structuralist perspectives suggest that people's lives are inextricably interwoven with the social world around them" (2003: 527-528). In contrast to mainstream theories therefore, post-

structuralist perspectives allow us to see that because people are constantly embedded and enmeshed in social relations, practices and worlds throughout their lives, 'place' and the 'individual' cannot be clearly separated (Giddens, 1979; Collinson, 2003). In this sense, the subject is decentred, and individuals are seen to be 'social selves' (Burkitt, 1991) who are created historically, culturally and socially (Baynes et al, 1987; Layder, 1994; Kearins, 1996), with subjectivity emerging "as a historical product of sociocultural forces embedded within a specific context" (Fairhust, 2007: 87). Furthermore, where mainstream perspectives argue that individuals have 'one' coherent self, waiting to be discovered, post-structuralists suggest that subjectivity is multiple, fragmented, shifting, ambiguous and "always in a state of flux and reconstruction" (Collinson, 2006: 182), and influenced by a multitude of factors.

Despite a continuing fascination with attempting to understand how permanent and stable leaders lead (Collinson, 2011), it is important to step back and think about how place influences the process of leadership in organisations. Given that it has been argued that beneath our intentional, everyday actions there are deeper understandings, values and norms serving as "background conditions" (Digeser, 1992: 981), studies of leadership may therefore benefit from seeking to investigate not only what happens in the 'foreground' (the personality traits; the tangible; the overt; the directly interpersonal) of an organisation, but also the 'background' (the unspoken rules of formation; the subjective; the non-verbal meaning making; the place-based elements). In doing so, it may be more possible to appreciate the "diversity of different ways in which leadership is performed by a range of leadership actors, but also how organisational alternatives *to* mainstream understandings of leadership might be constituted" (Sutherland et al, 2013: 16).

**Place, What Place? Contextualising leadership theory and research**

Whilst "the context of leadership is the milieu – the physical and social environment – in which leadership is observed" (Liden and Anonakis, 2009, p. 1587) until recently it has received curiously little attention. Porter and McLaughlin (2006), for example, identified that 65% of leadership articles published in major journals from 1990 to 2005 gave 'no emphasis' to context, with the figure rising to 74% for empirical articles. Where context was considered, this was usually as a secondary variable (such as culture/climate, goals/purpose, people/composition, processes, state/condition, structure and time) against which to assess variations in a particular style/theory of leadership. In the desire to create standardised, measurable and/or generalisable theories of leadership it would seem therefore that context and place are frequently framed *out* of the picture. Ironically, however, rather than enhancing the relevance and applicability of concepts and ideas by decontextualising them they are stripped of interest and rendered largely meaningless and irrelevant in the eyes of practitioners (Tourish, 2020).

In a recent systematic review of how contextual factors shape leadership and its outcomes, Oc (2018) used the categorical framework developed by Johns (2006) to distinguish between work that focusses on the *omnibus* context – including broader societal trends, economic conditions, national culture and/or other macro-level factors (framed by Oc as the 'Where', 'Who' and 'When' of leadership) – and the *discrete* context – which includes a narrower set of specific influences, such as task, social, physical and temporal context. It is concluded that, whilst there is a growing body of theory and evidence on both aspects of context there are significant gaps, in particular at the interface between these two aspects of context. Indeed, Oc (2018, p. 231) argues: "Although Johns (2006) positioned the discrete contextual factors in his theoretical model to mediate the effect of contextual factors on leadership, to my knowledge there is no empirical research that examines this". For us this is precisely where place-based leadership theory and research can make a contribution through its situated focus on the interactions between micro and macro aspects of context.

*Place* is not just another variable to consider, it is constitutive of leadership theory and practice in that it actively shapes how leaders and followers interact and relate to one another. From this perspective, place can be understood as *extra*subjective: it provides the ground and larger frame of reference upon which leadership actors can work from and frame in relation to; it makes social worlds meaningful; and offers an implicit set of guidelines for action, thought and behaviour. Drawing parallels with Foucault's writing on discourse, we can even conceptualise place as general systems of thought which are located socio-historically and which provide the implicit codes of a culture that shape underlying values, beliefs, rules, principles, practices and conventions, impacting on the way people think and behave, and influencing the everyday assumptions of organisational actors (Rouse, 2001). Understood in this way, we can see that it is impossible to separate 'leadership' and 'place', given that they both are constructed by, and impact on, each other. Islam (2013) continues with this line of thought, noting that although meaning making may most visibly and obviously occur on an interpersonal and intersubjective level (through framing, for example), we should also pay attention to the extrasubjective discourses which influence this; those which generate certain rules, principles and conventions that render meanings to be intelligible and actionable within specific communities and organisations. In this sense, place is doing a form of 'leading' itself, by defining the possibilities and limits for organisational functioning.

**Four Places of Leadership: Introducing the articles in this Special Issue**

So far, we have emphasised the importance of *place* in contemporary leadership research agendas. We are not alone in this. Indeed, for the past decade there have been increasing calls for greater

attention to be given to the concept of place in leadership theory and practice (see Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Collinge et al., 2010; Mabey and Freeman, 2010), where place is seen as: ". . . the relational ground upon which the interpreting 'activities' of leadership unfold at a variety of levels . . . and across a variety of boundaries. . ." (Collinge and Gibney, 2010: 388).

However: what does the concept of 'place' itself actually mean and what are the implications for leadership? At best we have seen that it can help us to view leadership in a different guise, but at worst could be a catch-all term that means everything and nothing; an 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 1996). Throughout this Special Issue you will read about a multitude of ways in which the concept of 'place' can be conceived and operationalised: from physical location and geography; to values and beliefs; history, culture and identity; structure; power and politics; discourse; language; materiality and more. As we will see, whilst there is no absolute, fixed and stable definition of the concept of 'place', what is common amongst all is that is goes beyond the simple leader-centric approach and instead starts to bring in other layers of detail, nuance and complexity.

To unpick these questions further we will now give a brief introduction to each of the articles in the Special Issue. These have been grouped according to their relative focus on 'place' within workplaces and organisations, cities and communities, countries and societies, and virtual and imagined environments. Like most classifications there are interconnections and overlaps between these categories but as a loose organising structure it provides a broad rationale for the sequence of articles. Within this section you will see a number of words that have been highlighted in italics, we pick up on these in the following section to provide a summary of themes and contributions from this Special Issue that help put PLACE(S) into leadership studies.

### Placing leadership within workplaces and organisations

The opening article, by Jennifer Robinson and Phil Renshaw, provides a highly original approach to researching leadership-*as-practice* (Carroll et al., 2008) through an in-depth case study of teams working within an industrial technology company. Using a combination of video ethnography, interviews and recursive group discussions the authors illustrate a spectrum of *collaborative agency* (Raelin, 2016) from 'Ba', through 'business as usual' to 'collapse'. The analogy of weaving is used to illustrate the nature of interactions within specific group meetings, situating leadership at a trans-subjective level located 'across and around the group'.

The next article explores the role of the Officers' Mess in constructing the *social identities* of military leaders. Through a historiographical approach Edward Gosling illustrates the ways in which history, *socio-materiality*, *community* and *locality* converge to make the Officer's Mess a significant physical

and *symbolic* place in which military leaders develop their sense of what it means to lead. Whilst traditionally this may have reinforced notions of leadership framed by masculinity and whiteness, it is argued, it may be possible to reposition the Officer's Mess as a place of diversity and inclusivity and, in so doing, promote wider cultural change within the military.

The third article in this section explores the role of *antagonism* and *struggle* in crafting and shaping place-based leadership. Through a 'workers inquiry' (Woodcock, 2014) approach Owen Smolović Jones, George Briley and Jamie Woodcock highlight the importance of engaging with the *lived experience* of workers in order to expose the limitations of official accounts of leadership and to provide mechanisms for subverting and replacing dominant narratives and understandings of leadership within the physical and geographical spaces in which we live and work.

*Placing leadership within cities and communities*

The article by Robin Hambleton, David Sweeting and Thom Oliver shifts the focus to leadership at a city level. Drawing on a longitudinal, mixed methods study of the impact of mayoral governance in Bristol they highlight the importance of 'place' for expressing identity, strengthening democracy and enhancing the effectiveness of city governance. Building on Hambleton's (2015) Civic Leadership Framework, attention is given to the collaborative, boundary spanning nature of leadership and the interfaces between political, public sector and non-state leaders. This work demonstrates the importance of *power*, *politics* and *people* in determining the nature and outcomes of leadership within cities.

James Rees' [and co-authors?] study complements the previous paper by exploring the contribution of the voluntary sector to leadership within a local authority in another part of the UK. Rather than focussing on elected and formal leaders, attention is given to the role of voluntary sector leaders in building and sustaining effective *communities* of place. Through their access to local knowledge, a dense web of relationships, and the intrinsic value that they bring to local governance networks, it is argued that the voluntary sector is an essential, yet often overlooked, part of *collective leadership* that carries *legitimacy* within specific *locales and localities*.

*Placing leadership within countries and societies*

The broadening of focus from cities and communities to countries and societies as the 'place' in which leadership is enacted and experienced is marked by the fifth article in the Special Issue, in which Leo McCann and Simon Mollan present a historical analysis of the impact of the 'Hickory Hill Seminars' from 1961-4 on the conceptualisation, practice and development of presidential leadership within the USA. The linking of geographic, *symbolic* and mythic aspects of place highlights

the way(s) in which the *legacy* of leaders, such as John F. Kennedy, is *socially constructed* and can have a lasting impact on the perceived nature and *purpose* of leadership.

The paper by Dara Kelly and Amber Nicholson takes us across the Pacific to consider the role of *ancestral wisdom* in shaping place-based intergenerational leadership amongst Mãori communities in New Zealand. Through a methodology that draws on indigenous oral histories and ethnography with the descendants of Hine-ã-maru, the authors illustrate the ways in which structures of *accountability* are passed across generations. This paper skilfully demonstrates the importance of *language* and story in developing an *emotional attachment* to place that provides a foundation for *ethical* leadership.

The third paper in this group, written by Parisa Gilani, Caroline Rook, Yasamin Razeghi and Melissa Carr, explores the experiences of female leaders working at an oil and gas refinery in Iran. The intersections between gender, religion, profession and national *culture* are investigated to reveal the significance of social, organisational and physical aspects of place on expectations and experiences for/of leadership. The physical and social *environment* is brought vividly to light through accounts of what it means to work in temperatures of over 45 degrees whilst still being expected to follow a strict Islamic dress code.

### *Placing leadership within virtual and imagined environments*

The final paper, by Gordon Schmidt and Stephanie Van Dellen, shifts attention from physical to virtual and imagined places. This paper outlines the *affordances* that virtual environments provide for political leaders, social media influencers, algorithmic leadership, and shared leadership in the gig economy. They consider, in particular, the *socio-materiality* of virtual *spaces* and how the ways in which they are conceived and constructed impact on leadership practice. This is a particularly timely article given the ubiquity on online and virtual environments in work and leisure and the relative lack of attention given to this topic within leadership theory and research to date.

### New PLACE(S) for Leadership Research

Together the articles in this Special Issue capture the breadth and depth of insights that can be brought through a place-based agenda for leadership research. There are a number of important ways in which this collection differs from typical leadership and management scholarship, including:

1. *Interdisciplinarity* – rather than focussing solely on leadership, management and organisation studies, this special issue incorporates insights and contributions from fields including political science, public management, history, urban studies and anthropology.

2. *Methodology* – whilst each of the authors takes a social constructivist approach to leadership, with a primary focus on qualitative methods, there is a richness of innovative methods including video ethnography, historical analysis, longitudinal case studies, workers inquiry and reflexive analysis, alongside the ubiquitous semi-structured interview approach.

3. *Research context* – of the nine papers in this Special Issue, only two are based on research in private-sector corporations. The remaining seven papers explore leadership in a diverse range of contexts from the military and voluntary sectors to local and national politics, indigenous communities, workers collectives, and virtual/online communities.

4. *Level of analysis* – whilst the majority of leadership theory and research still focusses on individual leaders, all of the articles in this collection view leadership as a collective process, that must be explored and understood at team, organisational, community and/or societal levels.

The insights revealed through this diversity of approaches bring to bear a range of concepts and perspectives that are largely absent within mainstream studies of leadership (as outlined earlier in this article). To aid the presentation of these issues we use the mnemonic PLACE(S) that builds on the points highlighted in italics in the previous section, as illustrated in Figure 1. We will not discuss these points further here, other than to encourage you to read the related articles and to draw your own conclusions on the relative value and application of these concepts within your own work.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

**Conclusion**

So, what do the articles and insights from this Special Issue tell us about the opportunities and potentialities of a place-based leadership research agenda? We propose five potential answers.

Firstly, a place-based approach to leadership enables us to move away from the wild goose chase of mainstream approaches, that seek to find a 'one best way' of doing leadership. By considering 'place' we must recognise that leadership is inherently context-dependent and ultimately beyond the scope of any particular discipline or approach to fully explain (Goethals et al., 2006; Ladkin, 2010).

This may in turn lead to a greater appreciation for 'alternative' styles of leadership. Indeed, in casting our gaze beyond the conventional singular heroic individual, we may observe that this dominant narrative may become challenged by currently marginalised alternatives. That is, more

compassionate, collective and inclusive configurations of leadership may receive more attention and gain traction as actionable and practical alternatives to the ideal-type individual leader (see, for example Bolden et al., 2019).

A place-based approach can also promote a general appreciation of continual reflection and organisational learning. In situating place as central on the research agenda, we acknowledge that flux is inevitable and situations are in constant transformation. A significant part of leadership effectiveness is being able to keep up and respond positively to such changes, whilst also retaining a strong sense of continuity (Hughes, 2010). Through accepting reflection and being open to learning, leadership may become more socially responsible and sustainable.

A place-based approach could be central in fostering connections within and between communities. Rather than seeing organisations as separate from their environment, Hambleton (2015: 5) remarks that this perspective can allow leadership to 'play a significant role in advancing social justice, promoting care for the environment and bolstering community empowerment', challenging the legitimacy of 'placeless' leaders who have no vested commitment to the places in which they do business.

Finally, we may be encouraged to consider the place of leadership educators and researchers in promoting and developing more ethical, inclusive, sustainable and effective forms of leadership. Many of the contributors to this special issue highlight the need for leadership scholars to acknowledge their own responsibilities for perpetuating or challenging unequal and/or harmful leadership practices and to play a role as activists and change makers. Through a focus on place we may be better able to situate ourselves and our contribution to the people and communities we engage with through our work.

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**Figure 1 – PLACE(S) of leadership**

| P | L | A | C | E | (S) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| People<br>Politics<br>Power<br>Purpose | Language<br>Legacy<br>Legitimacy<br>Lived experience<br>Locale/locality | Accountability<br>Affordances<br>Ancestral<br>wisdom<br>Antagonism<br>As-practice | Collaborative<br>agency<br>Collective l'ship<br>Community<br>Complexity<br>Culture | Emotional<br>attachment<br>Environment<br>(physical/natural)<br>Ethics | Socio-materiality<br>Social<br>construction<br>Social identity<br>Space<br>Struggle<br>Symbolism |

Virtual & imagined

Countries & societies

Cities & communities

Workplaces & organisations