Project leadership revisited:
Towards distributed leadership perspectives in project research

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Abstract
While project management research in general has become a rapidly expanding field during past decades, scientific inquiry into project leadership has not been a major issue. Extant literature on project leadership has also not made much use of the current developments of leadership research in general – not even those appearing as suitable, such as distributed leadership perspectives. The aim of the paper is threefold; (1) to review the existing research literature on project leadership, (2) to summarize and discuss this research, and (3) to make some notes towards a new research agenda, built on the current debate in leadership studies on distributed leadership perspectives. Current project leadership research is found to focus
exclusively on individuals, to focus on leadership competencies rather than on leadership practices in project settings, to focus solely on the project level, and to not make full use of perspectives in current leadership research. We then outline a distributed leadership perspective on project leadership research, including practical consequences of such an ideal and basic assumptions for future research.

**Keywords**
Project leadership, research perspectives, research methodology, distributed leadership, shared leadership, leadership practices, social constructionism, critical project studies

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1. Introduction: On the need to (re)visit project leadership studies

Project management is a rapidly expanding discipline in society, both in practical and theoretical terms. The project is an increasingly common form for organizing deliveries, development and change in all sectors of the organized world, and as such it has also become an increasingly common focus for academic research. From an initial interest in operations analysis-based models for planning and control, project research has expanded to cover almost all aspects of project management, drawing upon theoretical inspiration from several academic fields (Packendorff, 1995; Söderlund, 2004). The aims of project research are also becoming increasingly pluralistic as outright normative “how to” studies are challenged and complemented by descriptive and critical approaches (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006). A crucial aspect of this development is the ongoing inclusion of practical, theoretical and methodological perspectives from other fields of science, making the project research frontier a place where general organizational theorizing meet the specifics of the project management field. One such meeting place should be the notion of project leadership, i.e. where the general field of leadership studies meets the established notion of leadership as a crucial aspect in the understanding of project work in practice.

1.1 On the importance of project leadership studies

The ongoing development of project leadership studies is vital for several reasons. First, it is a most frequent leadership assignment for professionals in contemporary organizations, implying a general need for knowledge development. Second, it is a leadership assignment which is often not based in a formal managerial position, but rather a temporary team mission where responsibilities regularly exceed authority – making it a special form of leadership of special interest to both practitioners and scholars alike. Third, this leadership assignment is – unlike many others - rapidly undergoing a formal process of professionalization through the standardization of knowledge bases and the increased importance of individual certification (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2007). Fourth, it is a field which – like most other sub-fields within project research – may lack a substantial critical research debate based in ongoing general theory development outside project research (cf Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006). Fifth, it is also a field suffering from practical inadequacies in the sense that failure rates among projects are high (Cicmil et al, 2009) and that many project leaders express feelings of stress, overload and lack of control (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, 2007, Zika-Viktorsson et al, 2006). Although there are recent research suggesting improvements of project governance structures
in general (Olsson, 2008) as remedies, most of the responsibilities and expectations are still put on the shoulders of the project leader.

Where the stream on project leadership is concerned, it started out in 1959 when Paul O. Gaddis published his seminal article in *Harvard Business Review* that defined the new task of being a project manager and also identified some important characteristics that such an individual needed to have in order to be successful. Among those was the double ability to handle both technological research and business matters simultaneously, and to advance the project process both in relation to the project team and to the external stakeholders. Already from the outset, project leadership thus was described as a new kind of leadership assignment as compared to the existing ones, a kind of assignment requiring special qualifications, methods, skills and behavior. It is therefore not surprising that many of the important research publications on project leadership reported on empirical inquiry into this new field; questioning what qualifications that were needed for someone to become project leader, what methods that would help this leader achieve success, what skills that were most important for the leader to develop, and what behaviors that worked best in communicating with stakeholders and building the team (cf the overview in Turner and Müller, 2005). In order to get answers to these questions without being able to consult any existing body of literature, scholars looked up (allegedly) successful project leaders and simply asked them what they were doing. As the set of tools and methods for the management of projects gradually increased, it also implied that it was possible to ask informants about their use of tools and methods and relate this to project success. During the past decade, the assumption that there are certain qualifications, methods, skills and behaviors – usually referred to as ‘competences’ – that can be seen as predictors to project success has also become embodied into the PMBOK and strict evaluation procedures for project management certifications (Turner and Müller, 2005). Project leadership started out as a practical problem to solve, and it has remained so in the form of the deeply embedded assumption that there are identifiable project leadership competencies that can be directly linked to superior organizational performance (Crawford, 2005). As there are considerable differences between different types of projects (Söderlund, 2004), it is often argued that the continued development of project research should focus on understanding various forms of project organization as empirical phenomena in order to identify differences in desired leadership style in different project forms (Kaulio, 2008).
In parallel to the development of empirically informed research on what constitutes good project leadership, the theoretical development within general leadership research has expanded in all directions. Several different schools of thought has been involved in the research debate, questioning the definitions of leadership, the methodologies of leadership research and the foci of scientific inquiry within the field. As noted by Turner and Müller (2005), many of these schools of thought have indeed been brought into the project management field, even though there are much additional work needed.

1.2 Developments in general leadership studies
The field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centered, i.e. focused on the individual leader and his traits, abilities and actions. This was a part of the general modernism introduced in the management sciences during the early 20th century, where the best leaders were to be identified and chosen out from their suitability and formal merits rather than from pre-modern bases such as kinship or charisma. The problem was still to determine what constituted a suitable leader, and this question gave rise to a series of different theoretical schools (cf the overview in Parry and Bryman, 2006).

One stream of thought was psychological, trying to identify personality traits that distinguished successful leaders from other people, assuming the effective leadership traits to be unchangeable qualities held by a small number of suitable individuals. Against this, others claimed that leadership was about interaction between leaders and followers, and that different interaction styles (e.g. autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire) implied different group atmospheres and hence different group productivity levels. Another stream of research instead advocated a situational perspective, according to which leaders are only effective if their characteristics can be matched to the situation at hand; very simple or very complicated situations are best handled through task-oriented leadership, while most other situations are better handled through socio-emotional leadership styles. The situational perspective became very influential, but it has also been subject to recent criticism for focusing too much on the leader and not enough on the group interaction.

Under the heading The New Leadership Approach, Parry and Bryman (2006) argue that several current streams of thought present a perspective on leadership as the articulation of visions and management of meaning. It is today often emphasized that the leader is a member of a group, albeit with specific possibilities to influence the group, and that leadership is
actually a series of interaction processes where leaders inspire followers by creating common meaningful images of the future. Central to the argumentation is the distinction between transactional and transformative leadership, i.e. the difference between leadership as a contractual relationship between leaders and followers and as a social relationship where the aspirations of followers are raised to those of the leaders themselves (Bass, 1990). For example, the old concept of charisma has been revisited from this perspective (Conger, 1999), and new concepts such as authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) has been suggested to overcome the risk of manipulation inherent in the transformative ideal.

In the recent developments we also find additional leadership ‘schools’ in emergence, usually evolving around a distinct conceptual perspective conveying new images or metaphors of leaders and leadership. One example is emotional intelligence (Dulewicz and Higgs, 2000, Goleman et al, 2002), where the leader’s personal and social emotional competences are seen as crucial to success as the emotionally intelligent leader has a high degree of awareness of both self and his social setting and the ability to be optimistic, empathetic, inspiring and team-oriented. Another example is post-heroic leadership, built on an ideal where leadership is about taking responsibility and gaining knowledge, encourages innovation and participation even in ambiguous situations, seeking input and aiming for consensus in decision-making, and wanting everybody to grow and learn even at the expense of the formal leader becoming dispensable (cf Eicher, 1997, Fletcher, 2004). There are also recent developments suggesting a combination of several sources of leader attributes into a competence perspective (cf Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Most of these and other suggested theoretical constructs of recent origin still has to undergo a lot of theoretical and empirical work in order to qualify as ‘leadership schools’ along with the traditional ones.

During recent years, there has been an emerging debate in the field of leadership studies on notions of shared and distributed perspectives on leadership (cf Pearce and Conger, 2003; Parry and Bryman, 2006), a debate emphasizing leadership as a collective activity rather than as the doings of formal leaders. This debate emerged from the practical advantages of sharing leadership duties between two of more persons in suitable situations (Pearce, 2004; Sally, 2002; Spillane, 2006), advantages that is increasingly becoming the subject of empirical research (Crevani et al, 2007). This notion of the leadership as a shared phenomenon is also being translated into a de-individualized perspective where leadership is à priori viewed as distributed. Hence, from a scholarly perspective, the distributed leadership perspective thus
points at the need to study leadership in terms of activities rather than individuals – i.e. viewing leadership as something that is co-constructed in a team rather than exercised by one single person (Gronn, 2002, Parry and Bryman, 2006, Smircich and Morgan, 1982, Uhl-Bien, 2006). To advance such a perspective, it is not enough to say that leadership is about interaction between leaders and followers – which is a stance taken by several scholars in the past, a stance actually often maintaining rather than dissolving the leader/follower distinction (Küpers, 2007). If we want to take leadership research beyond the leader-centered tradition, we must also try to redefine leadership into terms of activities in between people in interaction, and study that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think.

1.3 Aim of the paper
Given this rough characterization of the project leadership literature on one hand, and the general leadership literature on the other, it should be of importance to analyze how and to what extent the project leadership literature has benefited from the rapid developments of the general leadership field and what future benefits there are to be exploited. In such an analysis, we hold a special interest in contemporary leadership thoughts that emphasize less traditional views on leadership and therefore should be suitable for research and practice in project-based settings – such as the distributed leadership perspective. The main reasons for this interest is that contemporary projects are often built upon intense teamwork, that project leaders rarely hold formal leader positions and that they often are unable to exercise any traditional authority (Dodgson et al, 2005). Instead, project teams have often been described as the opposites to traditional hierarchical structures, as natural ingredients of the wave of post-bureaucratic organizational forms (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006), and thus as suitable settings for distributed leadership practices.

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, we will review the existing research on project leadership – i.e. research explicitly relating (1) to the leadership function in project settings, and (2) to theories and perspectives derived from general leadership theory. Second, the problems and insufficiencies of the current research will be summarized and discussed. Third, we will take this critique forward towards a new research agenda, built on the current debate in leadership studies on distributed leadership.
2. Project leadership literature: A brief review and analysis

2.1 The antecedents of project leadership studies

Research specifically aimed at the phenomenon of project leadership has not been a major issue, neither in general project studies nor in general leadership research. In a sense, reflecting over project leadership can even be seen as an unnecessary waste of time:

“Since a temporary system operates over a limited period of time, there is not much motivation to investigate the management problem in itself; instead the focus is on the task problem, so that one learns little about how to manage temporary systems from actually running them, as compared to what one might learn from running a more stable, functionally organized system.” (Goodman and Goodman, 1976: 494)

In the early project literature, the notion of project leadership mainly departed from a task-oriented perspective. Leadership was often seen as a "soft" or "human" phenomenon that was needed in order to make the project team deliver according to plan (Packendorff, 1995). At the same time, it was already from the start acknowledged that the management of projects and temporary systems had its own specific problems and characteristics (Gaddis, 1959, Miles, 1964).

The basis of project management is the need for the rational handling of temporary tasks, tasks that could not be handled through permanent organizational arrangements. Project leadership can thus be seen mainly as a task-oriented phenomenon where relations could (temporarily) be set aside for the efficient execution of the project plan (Bryman et al, 1987, Goodman, 1981). At the same time, both projects and the people in them belong to a surrounding permanent organizational context that must be handled. Consequently, the traditional project leadership literature has focused on leadership as the simultaneous task of project-internal team management of technical specialists and project-external management of business managers and clients, often in the structural setting of matrix organizations. This does not necessarily make project leadership a unique phenomenon as compared to other forms of leadership; it neither implies a distinct set of practical tools or tricks, nor does it imply a special theoretical body clearly separated from general leadership theory. But it is still treated as a special sub-field of leadership, socially constructed as such through the general
differentiation of project management from other managerial fields – not least through the very labeling of certain organizational processes as ‘projects’ and the intense efforts undertaken by associations such as IPMA and PMI to create a project management profession (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2007) and to identify the features of successful project leadership (Turner and Müller, 2006). Consequently, project leadership research is much in demand, and it is treated as a distinct area of knowledge.

When presenting the new leader category - the project manager - to the world, Gaddis (1959) depicted a boundary-crossing Jack-of-all-trades able to handle both advanced technological issues and complicated business matters. It was not expected from this individual to be the best engineer or the best businessman in the organization, but the double abilities and the double set of experiences was. In project leadership literature, this reasoning came to be extended to a specific interest in the individuals that are actually able to perform such a role. A vast stream of empirically based research literature followed, usually based on studies of what real life project managers did and/or said they did.

2.2 Early project leadership research

The main stream of research following Gaddis’ portrayal of the middle man between management and technology thus came to focus on the extraction of success factors on the individual level. Project leaders were interviewed and surveyed, and their perceived characteristics and behaviors were linked to project outcomes in various ways. The empirical setting was usually a functional matrix organization, where project leaders worked with borrowed resources and thus did not entirely control their areas of responsibility (Avots, 1969; Barker et al, 1988; Butler, 1973; Gullett, 1972; Hodgetts, 1968; Jonason, 1971; Middleton, 1967; Reeser, 1969).

General leadership theory was often brought in as a conceptual background in order to explain the empirical patterns discovered. It was thus e.g. suggested that project leaders should employ a participative leadership style and lead through ideas and visions (Barker et al, 1988; Goodman and Goodman, 1976; Jessen, 1992; Silverman, 1987; Thamhain, 1987; Thamhain and Gemmill, 1974). The project manager was supposed to be more task-oriented than the average leader, but at the same time there were studies indicating that increased relational orientation is positively correlated with project effectiveness (Bryman et al, 1987).
There were also a number of competence-focused studies relating project success to various traits and abilities, a tradition still living on in good health (Crawford, 2005; Turner and Müller, 2005; Gehring, 2007). For example, the project leader should have the ability to motivate the team and make people enthusiastic about the project (Fabi and Pettersen, 1992; Jessen, 1992; Owens and Martin, 1986; Roman, 1986), and to create a good organizational climate (Barczak and Wilemon, 1989; Jabri et al, 1986; Jessen, 1992). Project leaders also should be able to facilitate internal communication (Barczak and Wilemon, 1989; Tushman, 1978) as well as handling external contacts and stakeholders (Barczak and Wilemon, 1989; Katz and Tushman, 1981; Slevin, 1983). Other abilities called for was coordinative and integrative skills (Fabi and Pettersen, 1992; Pinto and Prescott, 1988; Silverman, 1987; Thamhain, 1987), information acquisition skills (Roberts and Fusfeld, 1981; Slevin, 1983) and conflict solving skills (Owens and Martin, 1986; Thamhain, 1987). All this while the traditional tasks to plan, make decisions, maintain discipline and control performance remains (Woodward, 1986), albeit unevenly distributed over the project lifecycle (Pinto and Prescott, 1988). A pro-active “firelighter” is what is needed, not a reactive “firefighter” constantly preoccupied with handling chaotic situations (Barber and Warn, 2005).

2.3 The research frontiers: Project leadership studies today

As a third part of our brief review of project leadership literature, we have looked into the publication activities of the leading in-field research periodicals *International Journal of Project Management* and *Project Management Journal* during the past two decades. The aim of this reading was to analyze the extent to which project leadership is a current topic within the project research community and also to identify any current themes and/or trends in this research. It appeared that the number of articles explicitly dealing with theoretical aspects of project leadership was actually very small1, and intra-field authors such as Sotirlou &

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1 The article search was made in November, 2008. Using ‘leadership’ as a keyword in a search at the *International Journal of Project Management* homepage in ScienceDirect, we obtained a total of 48 articles during the lifetime of the journal. Of these, 25 explicitly dealt with aspects of leadership that could be related to leadership theory. 18 of these articles were published after the year 1999, indicating a growing interest in project leadership research. Given that the journal has published about 1.300 articles since its start, it seems to us that the leadership aspect is under-researched. A similar conclusion can be made where the *Project Management Journal* is concerned; our search
Wittmer (2001) indicate dissatisfaction with the tendency to rely on early studies such as Thamhain & Gemmill (1974) and Hodgetts (1968). Kangis and Lee-Kelley (2000) make a similar observation:

“Despite the plethora of leadership studies in diverse situations, relatively little attention seems to have been given to examining the variables involved in the context of managing the operations of temporary, small groups […]. Project management is a powerful tool for operational management as well as for strategic change. It is also useful for the implementation of initiatives such as business process re-engineering and total quality management, hence its increasing use. Projects are goal-oriented, budget-driven, timeline specific and generally operate outside the conventional organization structure of a firm. Such characteristics can create interesting challenges for the project manager, who has to cut across established lines of control. However, despite its increased adoption, not much is known on the relationship between leadership behaviour and managing these structures.” (Kangis and Lee-Kelley, 2007: 393f).

In our sample of articles, the main stream of research on project leadership deals with the relation between the project manager’s leadership style and the situational requirements of specific types of projects. Most of this research draws upon the tradition that started out by the seminal work by Fiedler (1967), which became the foundation of the well-known situational/contingency approach to leadership. In short, this approach states that team effectiveness are dependent upon the leader’s personality as related to the perceived environment. In very difficult or very simple situations, task-oriented leaders are preferable, while relationship-oriented leaders are better at handing situations with moderate degrees of complexity and urgency. Over the past years, this has been studied in IT services projects (Thite, 2000, Lee-Kelley and Leong Loong, 2003), construction projects in Thailand (Ogunlana et al, 2002), design consulting projects (Cheung et al, 2001) and in clinical research projects (Kangis and Lee-Kelley, 2000). In general, the research supports Fiedler’s hypotheses and identifies certain leadership abilities and traits that are recommendable given the project situation at hand.
There are also related research (departing from other conceptual sources) generalizing similar findings to all project managers from a certain national culture (Mäkilouko, 2004), to project managers in relation to line managers (Keegan and Den Hartog, 2004), to project managers in the specific sector of construction (Toor and Ofori, 2008) and to the relation between project managers and project types in general (Müller and Turner, 2007). Common for this research is the assumption that different individuals represent different leadership styles and that they are consequently suitable for different project tasks, types or environments. In almost all cases, this was investigated by means of quantitative analyses of survey data.

In addition, there are also some minor streams of research related to project leadership, again investigating individual leaders. El-Sabaa (2001) investigated the relation between skill profiles and career paths of project managers, concluding that the continuous broadening of functional and technical skills was necessary for a project management career. Aitken and Crawford (2007) investigated stress coping strategies of project managers, and Gällstedt (2003) made a qualitative study on critical incidents in projects and their relation to perceptions of motivation and stress. Based on a large survey, Dolfi and Andrews (2007) concluded that project leaders were better to be optimists in order to be able to handle the sometimes hard working conditions. None of these texts did explicitly relate to the general body of leadership research, however. Kaulio’s (2008) suggestion to develop leadership theories within project management by departing from observations of the handling of critical incidents rather than from detailed theoretical constructs represents a widely held inductive predilection within project leadership studies.

A few of the articles explicitly used new conceptual developments in general leadership research. Toor and Ofori (2008) proposed the emerging concept of *authentic leadership* for the study of construction project management, against the background of recent scientific debates within leadership research in general (cf Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Authentic project leaders are presented as individuals with positive energy and moral integrity, motivated by the well-being of people around them, supporting their followers into taking responsibilities themselves. Wang et al (2005) provide a most similar view on the general term *charismatic leadership* (cf Conger, 1999), using a survey to conclude the positive effects of a charismatic leadership style on the performance of ERP implementation projects. Similar results are presented by Prabhakar (2005) in his international study relating *transformational leadership* practices to project success, while Neuhauser (2007) find that the female project
manager in her data set rather tend to employ transactional leadership behaviors. Müller and Turner (2007) and Turner and Müller (2005, 2006) relate their studies to a proposed *competency school* of leadership – integrating several results from previous schools and presenting them as competencies that can be learnt and related to different project situations and types (see also Crawford, 2005).

3. Project leadership studies: A critique

Given the brief review above, we will now turn to what issues we see as problematic and in need for critical debate in the field of project leadership. We will also briefly relate these issues to the distributed leadership perspective developed in section 4.

*Individual focus.* Almost all empirical and theoretical studies of project leadership implicitly assumes a perspective of leadership as synonymous with a single individual, a leader. There is a tradition in the project management field of viewing the project manager as an individual, a tradition which is strengthened by the current wave of individual project management certifications sweeping over the world. At the same time, current developments in leadership research emphasize teamwork and views of team leaders as facilitators, implying that important knowledge on leadership are to be found in the relation between team members rather than in the leader as an individual. Although the importance of teamwork is well recognized in the literature, the leadership debate is focused on the single project leader – based on the (often) unsubstantiated assumption that the single project leader make a distinct and significant contribution to the outcomes of a project. From a distributed leadership perspective, project leadership would instead be studied as activities emerging in the social interaction in the project team, acknowledging the leadership work done also by other team members.

*Blurred notion of competencies.* If a project is led by one person, and that person is of vital importance to project success, then it is of course most interesting to find out what individuals that are suited for such a task – or at least to find out ways how to find them out. Individuals are therefore mostly treated as if they possessed certain traits, and some of the newer research does also explicitly use established psychometric tools to investigate traits in successful project managers (Turner and Müller, 2005). There are also several examples of “pseudo-
traits” – what good project managers should be able to do, or even what good project managers are supposed to do (cf Barber and Warn, 2005) – presented in the form of requirements on the individuals considered for project leadership assignments. The danger of an un-reflexive “pseudo-traits” approach is of course that people are seen as bearers of a simplified set of unchangeable qualities rather than as active and developing actors, and that the use (or non-use) of project management tools become a part of these unchangeable qualities. If not based on clear theoretical constructs, there is always a risk that the empirical inquiry into project leaders’ behavior results in a confusion of personality traits, competencies, actions and familiarity with the PM toolbox (cf Zimmerer and Yasin, 1998; Thamhain, 2004; Strang, 2007). Such confusion may seem as an attractive way of merging theoretical insights on a practical level, but it may still be problematic as it combines incommensurable ontologies and epistemologies taken from different schools in leadership research. When developing our notion of distributed project leadership, we find it most important to base the perspective on a coherent set of scientific basic assumptions.

Focus on competencies rather than practices. A problem related to the interest in individual project managers and their personalities is the absence of practice-oriented studies, i.e. research on what actually happens at project sites and how leadership is practiced in everyday interactions. Project leadership is studied in terms of characteristics that individual leaders bring into these interactions, not in terms of how these interactions unfold and how they are interpreted by the inter-actors. By not studying leadership practices, project leadership research fails to theorize upon interaction patterns, the everyday activities that constitute leadership, relational and emotional aspects of project work, how project management tools are actually put to use, perceived importance and contradictions in leadership discourses, and so forth. It also implies the risk of neglecting mundane, collective and ambiguous aspects of leadership, instead becoming preoccupied with heroic actions and linear relationships between intentions, interventions and performance. This is indeed not a problem of project leadership only – the focus on competencies rather than practices is currently the subject of debate within general leadership research (cf Bolden and Gosling, 2006, Carroll et al, 2008) – but it should nevertheless be addressed in project leadership research alike (Nilsson, 2008). A distributed leadership perspective explicitly presupposes a practice orientation, as it views leadership as constructed in social interaction rather than being exercised by single individuals.
Project focus. While one of the most important trends in the project management field is the moving of focus from single projects to multi-project management and project portfolio management (Engwall, 2003) project leadership research mostly remains focused on the single project as if that was still the most important unit to lead. Today, both project managers and project team members often work in several projects in parallel, implying that the single project is no longer the only relevant level of analysis (Söderlund, 2004, Zika-Viktorsson et al, 2006). Moreover, an increasing amount of leadership work is instead taking place in project management offices or among project sponsors. The continued focus on single projects may also have dysfunctional consequences, such as conserving old autonomous ideas about project leadership that are not suited to modern portfolio thinking, maintaining the traditional group dynamics view of a project team as working together face-to-face throughout the project duration (in spite of the increased use of short-term specialists and virtual teams, cf Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999), or over-emphasizing the importance and impact of the individual project leader. A distributed leadership perspective – with its focus on actual interactions – will naturally incorporate leadership activities also over project boundaries.

To conclude this discussion, there is a need for more practice-oriented empirical studies on project leadership, based on thorough and well-founded theoretical reasoning. The range of theoretical schools within leadership research that can be applied to project leadership is also far wider than the current preoccupation with various aspects of contingency theory, leadership style and competencies. Moreover, a widened view and explicit discussions on the foundations of project leadership research can also contribute to a re-formulation of the heroic project leadership ideals that fills the literature today, ideals that rather serve to re-masculinize work life than promoting new ways of working and living (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006).

Our proposed alternative is the emerging distributed leadership perspective, a perspective based in explicit scientific assumptions on social constructionism and alternative leadership values (Crevani et al, 2007a). It is also a critical agenda in that the construction of power relations, resistance, contradictions and gender is of interest (cf Collinson, 2005, Koivunen, 2007).

4. A distributed leadership perspective
As mentioned in the introductory section of this paper, there has been an emerging debate on what has been called distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002, Parry and Bryman, 2006). Metaphorically, the perspective emphasize collaboration and relational processes of co-construction as the bases of leadership, pointing at the relational, collectivist and non-authoritarian nature of leadership practices in contemporary organizations (Bolden and Gosling, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Thereby it seeks to challenge the individualist focus inherent in leadership research, a focus that has actually – and paradoxically – been strengthened in contemporary leadership literature (Parry and Bryman, 2006). Below, we will discuss the conceptual roots of this perspective, and investigate both practical and theoretical consequences for project research.

4.1 Distributed leadership – conceptual antecedents

In general leadership research, the distributed leadership perspective has been advanced in several ways during recent years. Parry and Bryman (2006) identify five strands in the recent literature that they summarize under the heading ‘distributed leadership’; (1) the notion of SuperLeadership, i.e. leading others to lead themselves (Sims and Lorenzi, 1992), (2) the notion that leaders can develop leadership capacities in others (Kouzes and Posner, 1998), (3) the perspective on leadership as an activity of organizing (Hosking, 1988, 1991), (4) the discursive differences between dispersed and traditional leadership ideals (Gordon, 2002), and (5) dispersed leadership as a technologically-based necessity in e-commerce and virtual teamwork (Brown and Gioia, 2002). While noting several differences related both to the view of leadership and basic scientific assumptions, Parry and Bryman are still able to “see an alternative perspective that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the need for leadership to be viewed as a widely dispersed activity which is not necessarily lodged in formally designated leaders, especially the heroic leader who is a feature of much New Leadership writing” (p. 455).

In this article, we departed from a perspective on leadership as co-constructed by several persons, a perspective closely related to perspective (3) above. This perspective has been advanced during recent years through the introduction of new conceptualizations of leadership intended to capture a distributed view of the phenomenon. For example, there is a growing literature focusing on shared leadership, i.e. empirical cases where people actually share leadership duties and responsibilities rather than allocating them to a single person (Bradford and Cohen, 1998; Lambert, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Sally, 2002; Wilhelmson, 2006).
Collaborative leadership (Collinson, 2007) is a similar conceptualization, focusing on collaboration rather than competition. Moreover, the taken-for-granted idea of unitary command has been questioned (Crevani et al, 2007a, 2007b) and the dissolvement of the leader-follower dichotomy has been suggested (Küpers, 2007; Reicher et al, 2005; Vanderslice, 1988). Gronn (2002) explicitly refers to distributed leadership in his plea for leadership studies that focus on collective interaction processes rather than on single leaders (cf also Spillane, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The question is, naturally, how this can be of relevance to project leadership studies.

4.2 Practical relevance: Distributed leadership as a source of project leadership norms

One way of applying a distributed leadership perspective to the study of project work is to use it prescriptively, as a source for new and better leadership practices where people share leadership tasks in projects. Some assumed examples of such prescriptions are summarized in Table 1, where we derive project-related aspects from the general literature on distributed leadership. The special leadership problems inherent in modern decentralized ways of organizing – through high-performing teams rather than through bureaucratic command structures – are most visible in project work (Lambert, 2002, Pearce, 2004), and the observation that an increasingly complex world requires competence profiles broader than what can possibly be expected to be found in one single person needs to be acknowledged also in project-based work (O’Toole et al, 2003, Waldensee and Ealgeron, 2002, Pearce, 2004). By reference to established theories on group composition and role complementarity it is also usual to describe managerial tasks as requiring several different individual roles at one and the same time (Yang and Shao, 1997, Denis et al, 2001).

The distributed leadership perspective may also be used to acknowledge and discuss the often inhumane workload of individual project leaders and the need to enable him (and sometimes also her) to live a balanced life (Sally, 2002, Pearce and Manz, 2005). Distributed leadership can also be related to the general legitimacy of project leadership, such as that organizational and societal change processes may be facilitated by having several different perspectives.
and/or stakeholders represented in the managerial function at the same time (Denis et al, 2001, Sally, 2002, Ensley et al, 2003).

4.3 Theoretical relevance: Distributed leadership as a source of a new research agenda

One problem of the practical aspects of distributed leadership is that it views distributed leadership as an exception to “usual” leadership, an exception to be practiced in extraordinary situations or in extraordinary organizational arrangements (Pearce, 2004). Our suggestion is thus not only to view distributed leadership as a source of practical solutions to leadership problems, but also to apply a basic perspective on leadership as something that individuals construct together in social interaction (Gronn, 2002, Collinson, 2005).

In the general leadership literature we find a number of theoretical ingredients of such a perspective. Gronn (2002) discuss this in terms of level of analysis, i.e. that the level of analysis should be the exercised leadership rather than the single individual leader. Meindl (1995) and Reicher et al (2005) claim that traditional leadership models contribute to the institutionalization of a dualism of identity between leaders and followers in society – a dualism that may be challenged through studies of leadership identity construction and empirical work on practices rather than competencies. Following Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), Carroll et al (2008: 372f) holds that leadership “has more power as a discourse and identity, giving practitioners enhanced self-esteem, significance and ‘positive cultural valence’ […], rather than a specific or distinctive set of practices or interventions in organizational life.” A distributed leadership perspective on project work shall thus not only focus on observable interactive practices, but also on how competing and conflicting discourses on project work and leadership appear in project settings, including the importance of ‘project leadership’ as a basis for identity work among project professionals (Hodgson, 2005, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007).

Fletcher (2004) takes this line of reasoning one step further in her discussion of distributed leadership in terms of collective, interactive learning processes. She does think that such a theoretical development will run into difficulties, difficulties that may better be understood from a gender perspective. The traditional heroic images of leadership are strongly masculinized, she says, and the femininization that is inherent in alternative stances will challenge several deeply rooted notions of leadership (cf Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006).
Among these Fletcher find the taken-for-granted individualization of society (reinforcing unitary command as the only viable solution), and also the contemporary idea that problems of gender inequality are finally being solved (implying that any basic redefinition of leadership would be unnecessary since we have already found the most suitable forms) (cf Vecchio, 2002). A social constructionist research agenda where project leadership, project leader identities and masculinization/feminization as constantly constructed and re-constructed in project work should thus be central to advance both project leadership theory and project leadership practices in the direction of distributed leadership (cf Carroll et al, 2008).

In a distributed leadership approach, leading and following will thus be seen as “two sides of the same set of relational skills that everyone in an organisation needs in order to work in a context of interdependence” (Fletcher, 2004: 648). This means that, even if formal positions remain unaltered, project leadership roles depends on the situation and individuals are required to move fluidly between the two roles.

Following this reasoning, the main assumptions of a distributed leadership approach to project studies are stated in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

There are several important research implications from the distributed leadership perspective. First, new research questions may be stated when we shift focus from individual competencies to socially constructed practices. One such issue may be the actual leadership ideals as they are constructed in contemporary project-based organizations; i.e. what project leadership is and what it is not, and what constitutes good leadership, bad leadership, and absence of leadership. Another important question is the emergence of power structures in leadership and projects. Especially interesting could be to see how informal power structures emerge in highly structured project-based settings when you have a planned schedule for the task.
Established ways of doing empirical fieldwork will also have to be adapted to alternative scientific assumptions. Instead of focusing on individuals it will be more suitable to follow teams, meetings and other forms of interactions between people in project-based settings (Nilsson, 2008). If we study how project leadership processes unfold we will focus on what happens between people instead on formal leaders’ individual behavior. We will therefore prefer qualitative field studies and research methods inspired by anthropology and ethnography - methodologies that has been almost absent within project leadership research.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we started out by arguing that the current developments within general leadership theory have not had enough impact on the existing research on project leadership. Moreover, project leadership has only been a marginal stream within project management research. Based on these points of departure, the aim of this paper was threefold. First, we reviewed the existing research on project leadership. Second, the problems and insufficiencies of the current research were summarized and discussed. Third, we made some notes towards a new research agenda, built on the current debate in leadership studies on distributed leadership.

Based on our review, we find that project leadership should be a most promising field of research in the future – both in terms of intra-field knowledge development and of providing general leadership theory with new empirical settings. Project leadership certainly deserves much more scholarly attention, both in terms of theory development and applied work, as it is an increasingly important and widespread phenomenon in the global economy. As this paper has mainly focused on theory development, we find that current project leadership theory is far from making full use of the current developments in the general leadership field. Our proposed distributed leadership perspective is just one of these recent theoretical constructs with potential to contribute to project leadership theory and practice. In this future development, it should be of special interest to challenge the current dominating focus on project leadership competencies – which has close links to the ongoing professionalisation and ‘PMBOK-ification’ of project management as it is used to support certification programmes for individual project managers.
As stated in the beginning of this paper, our main aim with the distributed leadership perspective is not to propose a new model of how to do project leadership (even though the perspective may be a source of new project leadership practices and ideals, as suggested above), but mainly a new perspective on the inquiry into existing project leadership practices. When putting the assumptions outlined in Table 2 into empirical work, we will be able to analyze project leadership activities in terms of ambiguous construction processes where the contents and boundaries of organization, projects, responsibilities, issues, identities and leadership as a (performative) concept is constantly articulated, discussed and changed. Theoretically, this indicates possibilities for new theoretical developments within project leadership studies concerning how project leadership can be understood as practices and as social interaction.

One such development could be a more detailed understanding of the practices by which masculinities and femininities in project-based settings are constructed and re-constructed. The performativity of traditional patriarchal norms is strong enough to be present even in a flat decentralized project team. Leadership interactions are not taking place in a vacuum as most projects are embedded in organizational settings, which mean that teams can hardly avoid bringing the surrounding managerial culture into projects. When studying how project leadership is done in interactions it is therefore important not to forget interactions crossing project and organizational boundaries.

Another related theoretical development is the notion of the complex processes of power in project organizations. If focus is only on the formal single project leader, it usually implies simplified notions of power relations, either overstating or understating the importance of the leader, either dichotomizing leaders from followers or treating them as a harmonic collective. Instead, we need to take perspective that leadership – and thus also power relations – are constructed in social interaction, and embedded in enduring institutionalized norm systems conveying taken-for-granted views of what is desirable and what is not.

To study project leadership from a distributed perspective does not necessarily mean to study a more democratic form of leadership (as might be the case in some studies of shared or distributed leadership, cf Fletcher, 2004). Organizational settings characterized by such leadership ideals are suitable for empirical inquiry as the consequences of applying new perspectives may become more welcome and manifest. What is important is to study what is
going on ‘in between’ people and to ‘de-grandiosize’ leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) by describing how it is done in everyday interactions at work including more people than a single formal or informal leader. To study interactions rather than individual leaders also means to take seriously the complexity of what is going on in organizations. Rather than reducing leadership to leaders influencing others, to a quite uni-dimensional phenomenon, we want to study multidimensional interactions where boundary-, responsibility- and identity-work are central elements to be critically analyzed and where the dichotomization between leaders and followers can be left behind. As noted by Gunter (2001), dichotomies and binaries tend to separate what should be integrated, to marginalise what should actually be recognized.

References


Utilization, Task Effectiveness, and Innovation, New York, Praeger.


Hall.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Project-related arguments</th>
<th>References (examples) from general leadership literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Individual perspective (distributed leadership practices as a way of enhancing the lives of those who work in project leadership positions) | • Solo leadership consumes people, and there is a risk for high level of stress and anxiety.  
• Enhanced balance of work requirements and personal responsibilities/private life.  
• Better sense of security and stability in decision making and implementation.  
• Enhanced possibility to learn having the co-leader as a role model and provider of feedback.  
• More enjoyable work. | Fletcher (2004); Sally (2002); Wilhelmson (2006); Crevani et al (2007a) |
| Co-worker perspective (distributed leadership ideals as a source of enhancing the correspondence between employee expectations and actual project leadership practices) | • Young people are used to working in teams with some degree of shared leadership. When they rise to higher organizational levels, they are more likely to want to continue sharing leadership and resist traditional solo command.  
• Expectation for co-leadership created by the experience of living in modern (at least Western) family models where both parents participate in decision making, reinforced by experiences of working in teams.  
• Young employees expect more democratic leadership in modern organizations. | Bradford and Cohen (1998); Lambert (2002); Pearce (2004); Sally (2002); Walker (2001) |
| Organizational perspective (distributed leadership as a way of enhancing project effectiveness) | • Single-person leadership cannot reflect and handle the environmental complexity facing many projects. Several different competences, skills, and roles are required.  
• Cross-functional communication can be enhanced through shared leadership as several departments, functions and stakeholders can be represented at the same time at a managerial level. One consequence can be facilitation of change processes.  
• Both control and improvisation can be represented by a dual leadership, thereby facilitating organizational change.  
• Lower risk for sub-optimal solutions if the leadership of an organization is truly shared by the management team.  
• Less vulnerability in case of project leader absence or resignation.  
• Co-leaders can have a larger span of control together and more time for their coworkers and for reflecting on the strategy and the basic values for their unit.  
• Organizations can avoid losing project leadership talent because of stress associated with leader posts.  
• Projects can benefit from the cognitive and behavioral capabilities of a larger number of individuals. | Bradford and Cohen (1998); Denis et al. (2001); Miles and Watkins (2007); O’Toole et al. (2003); Pearce (2004); Pearce and Conger (2003); Pearce and Sims (2002); Sally (2002); Waldnersee and Eagleson (2002); Wilhelmson (2006); Yang and Shao (1996) |
| Societal perspective (distributed leadership ideals as a way of maintaining and increasing the legitimacy of leadership and management) | • When power is too concentrated, it may result in immoral and/or illegal actions taken by individual leaders struck by hubris.  
• Shared leadership increases the possibility of including minorities into managerial positions, thereby increasing the legitimacy of leadership. | Lambert-Olsson (2004) |

Table 1. Possible prescriptive arguments for distributed leadership practices in project work (adapted from Crevani et al, 2007a, 2007b).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontology/ Epistemology/ Axiology</th>
<th>Projects and leadership as socially constructed phenomena. Project leadership theory as based in understanding of leadership practices. Projects and leadership as potentially both good and evil, both moral and immoral.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aim of research</td>
<td>Create understandings of leadership processes in project settings, in terms of activities, themes, discourses, identity work and teamwork practices. The normative claims of competence-focused leadership research, and the consequences of labeling activities as projects and/or leadership, are problematized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of analysis</td>
<td>Leadership activities, i.e. social interaction around issues related to governance, coordination, policy-making and change in projects. Also focus on the identity construction and discourses of involved inter-actors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical foundation</td>
<td>Constructionist and relational leadership approaches (e.g. shared, dispersed, collaborative and distributed leadership). The leader-follower dichotomy is dissolved. Practice orientation. Project leadership theory is seen as a performative input into the life worlds of practitioners. Dominating leadership norms contribute to a re-construction of traditional masculinities in work life and society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project leadership</td>
<td>Processes of social interaction where people interact around issues related to governance, coordination, policy-making and change in projects. Project leadership is not a higher moral function reserved for leaders. Team members do not necessarily need a leader in order to be able to be worthy. Project leadership research has a moral duty to question and pave the way for emancipation from traditional conceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project leader</td>
<td>Project leadership exists outside the individual leader. Formal leaders are (powerful) co-constructors of leadership activities in everyday interactions and seen as relating subjects. Everybody has potential to be part of constructions of project leadership activities. Rejection of heroic images of project leadership as being about loneliness, hard work, being tough and rational, making sacrifices and doing the right thing despite the consequences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empirical settings</td>
<td>Projects, project portfolios, project management offices, project-based organizations (labeled as such by inter-actors).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research methodology</td>
<td>Participative observation, in-depth interviews, stories, ethnographies, narrative analysis, deconstruction, discourse analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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