Co-producing leadership in a professional context:

Institutional logics and the problem of power

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Abstract

Traditionally, leadership studies have focused on leaders and their traits, styles or relationships, taking formal hierarchies for granted. Recent approaches to leadership have challenged this view and have contributed to a decentring of the leader (Simpson, Buchan, & Sillince, 2017), focusing on processes whereby leadership is co-produced. Leadership scholars increasingly turn their attention to 'leadership not as a property of individuals and their behaviors, but as a collective phenomenon that is distributed or shared among different people, potentially fluid, and constructed in interaction' (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012, p. 212). Whereas such perspectives have improved our understanding of leadership processes, they have simultaneously neglected the role of power and downplayed that leadership 'is not an organizational quality shared democratically, but a question of contestation and negotiation, depending on power asymmetries' (Alvehus, 2018, p. 17).

Leadership and followership must therefore be approached as contested (Collinson, 2006; Sveningsson, Alvehus, & Alvesson, 2012). Leader identities may be claimed, but without the followers ready to assume a follower identity, leadership will not emerge (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This process, moreover, depends on context – institutionalized 'leadership schemas' (ibid.) are crucial for the legitimacy of leadership claims and grants, and therefore to accomplishing stability in leader–follower relationships. Leadership schemas, however, vary with context and situation and where multiple leadership schemas appear at the same time we can expect conflicting understandings of leader–follower relationships.

In this paper I specifically turn to a context where multiple 'entangled' (Alvehus and Andersson, 2018) institutional logics appear: that of a professional service organization, a context characterized by extensive autonomy and contingent authority (Empson, Muzio, Broschak, & Hinings, 2015). Leadership is often deemed key to success in professional contexts, as professionals are generally show skepticism towards more bureaucratically oriented control initiatives. However, as argued by e.g. Empson (2017), professional organizations have a high degree of institutional complexity, and leadership as well as managerial authority is continuously contested and negotiated. At the same time leadership professional service organizations is understudied (Empson & Langley, 2015). However, the complex institutional context of professional organizations is is particularly well suited to disentangling power relationships and the role of formal and informal power and their relation to leadership processes.

The paper focuses on a principal in a school, and on the contested processes of leadership where actors struggle with the competing logics of bureaucracy and professionalism (Freidson, 2001). The paper builds on interviews, observations and one week of shadowing of 'Jenny', vice principal, and focuses on a particular situation: A development day in the school, where Jenny interacts with several teaching teams and attempts to direct (Crevani, 2018) their work. The understanding of leadership is deeply contextualized and 'embedded in deeper process studies of preceding and succeeding events' (Tourish, 2014, p. 87). Through a close reading of the interactions, the paper illustrates how the impact of Jenny's leadership attempts rely on the enactment of institutional logics, where her bureaucratic leader role is re-established but her professional leader role is continuously undermined.

The paper contributes to two literatures. First, leadership in professional contexts is understudied and needs to be explored further (Empson, 2017; Empson & Langley, 2015). In this paper, the ambiguous nature of leadership in professional contexts is highlighted, but far from the common cliché of 'herding cats,' leadership appears as simultaneously successful and unsuccessful, depending on which leadership schema is attended to. In short, leadership in a professional context may succeed and fail simultaneously, and multiple leader and follower identities are enacted differently in parallel.

Second, the paper contributes to the emerging literatures on distributed leadership by explicitly engaging in discussions on the nature of power and its role in leadership processes. Power strongly depends on the institutional logic enacted. But in this type of organization, several

institutional logics co-exist, and therefore power is simultaneously reproduced and undermined. Paradoxically, then, leader and follower identities may simultaneously be reproduced and undermined, thereby re-establishing bureaucratic power relationships while at the same time sustaining professional autonomy.

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