Theoretical Insights

Project leadership: A research agenda for a changing world

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A B S T R A C T

Project leadership increasingly occurs in the context of ecological risks, whether from a viral pandemic or an anthropogenically changing climate. It requires adaptability to change, especially as projects grow in complexity, becoming seen as interventions into wider systems. In this paper, we take a socialized perspective, synthesising recent work and proposing a new research agenda in three inter-related areas that need to be addressed by project leadership: 1) *changing technologies*, unpacking the values that technologies represent to achieve desirable outcomes; 2) *organizational complexity*, engaging multiple actors and addressing emerging complexity and uncertainty and 3), *ecological concerns*, addressing the demands for projects to intervene positively to create sustainable, resilient and just futures. Our contribution is to theorize what socialized leadership means for these crucial issues emerging in project studies and set out directions for further research on positive forms of project leadership in a changing world.

1. Introduction

Projects are future-oriented forms of organizing (Nightingale et al., 2011; Whyte et al., 2022). They are used in our complex organizational world to achieve desired ends; for example, to manage response and recovery in the face of disasters (Chang-Richards et al., 2017); to design and deliver vaccines (Tiffay et al., 2015); to reconfigure the nature of civility in social relations (Partis-Jennings, 2017); to save endangered species (Willemsen et al., 2020); to retrofit and maintain built environments (Teo et al., 2021), as well as to adapt transport and deliver new infrastructure (Davies et al., 2019). Projects (and the associated portfolios and programs) are widespread, with some scholars describing the 'projectification' or 'programification' of society (e.g. Maylor et al., 2006; Jensen et al., 2016; Schoper and Ingason, 2019). Achieving desired and desirable outcomes through projects requires ethical decision-making (Helgadóttir, 2008), especially as societies face ecological risks, whether from a viral pandemic or an anthropogenically changing climate.

In the context of the changing world we inhabit, work on projects brings into view new possible, probable and preferred futures (Tutton, 2017); with these, new challenges arise. Although many techniques for managing major projects have their origins in mid-20th century projects (Morris, 2013; Davies, 2017), project organizing is transforming as projects become seen as interventions (Whyte et al., 2019) delivering outcomes in the context of wider technological, societal and ecological contexts. The dynamics across multiple systems and levels lead to

disruptions. Project leadership will increasingly need to attend to changing systems of technologies, a multiplicity of stakeholders, increased organizational complexity and dynamics, all in the context of the challenges of sustainability and resilience. Thus, we argue that contemporary and future projects will demand more than the application of standard project methodologies to familiar tasks; they will require novel forms of project leadership that builds social capital that is transformational, inclusive in how it deals with complexity, as well as sustainable. We refer to this as 'socialized leadership'; leadership of projects attuned not just to project completion on budget, on schedule and scope but also to a commitment to broader based values and purpose in projects (Clegg et al., 2021). It requires adaptability to change, especially as projects grow in complexity (Cooke-Davies et al., 2007; Remington and Pollack, 2008), becoming understood as interventions into wider systems.

Our work critically examines what have been identified as urgent questions for delineating project leadership in today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment (Drouin et al. 2018, 2021; Floris and Cuganesan, 2019). Until recently, the project management literature has largely focused on the project manager as 'leader', a term that has been subject to some aggrandisement in business and management circles and writing during the neoliberal era (Learmonth and Morrell 2021). There is increasing recognition that leadership is not exclusively related to the behaviour of an individual but is relational and connectively team-centred (Müller et al. 2018), potentially spanning divisional and organizational forms. Such recognition is predicated on

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several shifts in understanding of organizing, power and leadership.

There has been a shift in practice to less hierarchical, more adaptive forms of organizing (McChrystal et al., 2015) in which individual and technical competences retain salience (Bolzan de Rezende et al., 2021) but do so in the context of more distributed relations. For example, in military thinking, the bastion of the old command and control models, the focus has been shifting to a notion of power not only conceptualized as command and hierarchy exercising 'power over' but also incorporating 'power to' and 'power with', stressing what Arendt (1972) referred to as 'the capacity to act in concert' (cf. Angstrom and Haldén, 2019). The shift in thinking enables strategic insight for project leadership to be gained from recent work on power (e.g. Haugaard, 2020). In the past, project leadership may normally have striven to deliver projects by deploying imperative command, using 'power over' but increasingly it is using 'power to' by empowering project actors and forging new collaborations premised on sharing 'power with' previously marginalized constituencies of interest. These are differences in scale that matter; moving from 'power over' to 'power to' and 'power with' is accompanied by a shift away from understanding leadership as authoritarian management to a stress on enabling project teams to act effectively (Aga et al., 2016; Ding et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2018), enabling activity across a complex organizational setting, with multiple stakeholders.

These shifts problematize simple understandings of value, bringing into view project stakeholders and their diverse and potentially incompatible values. Where all parties operate in a stable social system, value may be relatively unproblematic; in the rapidly changing world, however, value can be defined in many ways, for many different categories of actors. Such broader-based conceptions of value are hard to achieve because uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity and most challengingly, events, can distract, destabilize or destroy value (Clegg et al., 2021). The multiplicity of different underlying knowledge sets, assumptions and procedures for evaluating worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]), lead to tensions and dynamics between value regimes (Levy et al., 2016). In this context, project leadership involves creating justifiable agreement, either through shared purpose or through local truces and compromises, full of situated judgement (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000) working to create outcomes that are valued by many diverse actors, including future as well as current generations.

In this paper, we make a theoretical contribution by considering project leadership in the context of contemporary leadership approaches and setting out a research agenda for project leadership in a changing world. We do this by building on trajectories of work that move away from isolated projects, hierarchical management and the application of standard project methodologies to familiar tasks. Instead, we explicate shared, distributed and participatory forms of leadership that are required to change the world for the better. A socialized perspective sees leadership as a distributed set of practices, enacted in a continuous social flow (Crevani et al., 2010). It recognizes and draws attention to the social structuring of leadership, seeing pre-existing technical expertise and role definition as both vitally important but also insufficient for project leadership in the dynamically changing contexts in which contemporary projects intervene. There is a need for more attention to three inter-related areas of transformation: changing technologies, where the related choices have an ethical dimension, engaging with a multiplicity of values; growing organizational complexity with multiple actors and emerging complexity and uncertainty, together with the demands for projects to intervene positively to create sustainable, resilient and just futures. It is transitions in these three areas that are disrupting and reforming the boundaries around projects, posing questions concerning their value regimes and leadership, posing new opportunities for leadership that orchestrates and values a diversity of knowledge.

In the next section, we begin by outlining what we take to be the essentials of project leadership in the contemporary context. In the following section we then draw out the research insights and directions for further research related to these three transitions, articulating how

projects as interventions, shaped by and shaping wider technological, social and ecological contexts, require leadership through new forms of engagement and collaboration with a range of actors. We discuss possible future research questions that can lead to further insight, concluding by summarizing the contribution and proposing next steps for future research.

2. Project leadership in the context of contemporary leadership approaches

Within the literature on project leadership there is a substantial trajectory of research that is focused on the leader as an individual with specific characteristics (e.g. Zaccaro and Day, 2014; Merrow and Nandurdikar, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). Yet, we argue that the study of project leadership cannot be limited to studying 'the leader', as an individual, with a personality type, leadership style or personal career trajectory. Leadership becomes enacted in practices and interactions (Crevani et al., 2010) that are distributed across interorganizational projects and the contexts in which they deliver. In our changing world, where project contexts are in flux, they are delivered in the context of changing technologies, with the digitalization of delivery and deliverables presenting new challenges; of organizational dynamics, with increasing stakeholder complexity associated with greater inclusivity of interests; and of ecological concerns, with the salience of questions of sustainablity and resilience..

In developing our perspective, we draw on the trajectory of work on projects that has given emphasis to horizontal or distributed forms of leadership (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009; Müller et al., 2018) or examined their relationship and 'balance' with more traditional, hierarchical, vertical forms of leadership (Müller et al., 2017). This work is exploring the nature of leadership in the context of less hierarchical, more adaptive, emergent, forms of organizing. The notion of balanced leadership describes the case in which a project manager gives 'power to' others, empowering team members and using their hierarchical power to allow for distributed forms of leadership to accomplish project tasks (Müller et al., 2017). Rather than use the metaphor of 'balance', which suggests finding a steady state – at least momentarily, within the project team – we instead anticipate differently structured and changing configurations of project leadership.

We use the term 'socialized leadership' to draw attention to how project leadership responsibilities, which may be more distributed or centralized, are always socially situated. The concept of socialized leadership requires an awareness of the diverse understandings of value that arise in complex inter-organizational projects isbecause of the temporal nature of project delivery, as projects move from conception and set-up, to their delivery through conceptual design, detailed design, implementation, testing (Morris, 1983) and then into operations and maintenance. We argue that it is important to study empirically how leadership occurs in the relations and practices inscribed in the actor networks operating in time and place to manage such flows of activity. We consider the multi-level networks of actions, relations, language, practices, configurations and assemblages of actants and technologies that enable informal and formal forms of leadership across interorganizational projects and the contexts in which they deliver to require a socialized perspective on their accomplishment.

Not only changing project necessities but also ethical requirements to change the world for the better require 'socialized leadership' that is more shared, distributed and participatory than in the past. Project leadership is essentially both political and ethical (Helgadóttir, 2008), with responsibilities in terms of what it seeks to achieve, for whose benefit, and with high engagement that develops and makes public the ethos and character of its approach. Institutionalized aspects of project leadership, such as roles, professional accreditation, formal organizations and management structures within and across project boundaries, remain important to ensure the appropriate expertise and understanding of responsibilities on projects. How these are organized, what are their

critical concerns, as well as how these relate to broader contexts are not static, however; they are forever changing as projects commonly fail to deliver singular metrics of value (Molloy and Stewart, 2013) and are often 'contested value regimes' (Levy et al., 2016). Socialized leadership steers a course through competing contestations of value; engaging with diverse knowledge-sets and understandings of how to evaluate worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]), within and across organizational boundaries. Such engagement is necessary to build social capital that is transformational, inclusive in how it deals with complexity, as well as sustainable.

As our focus is on leadership rather than leaders, we see the production of 'a leader' as a performative effect (Haugaard, 2010), enabling and constraining the production of different courses of action accomplished by many actors in evolving configurations of relations. The social nature of organizing needs to be given salience, in which individual leadership is shaped by being exercised as a member of multiple teams. Leadership entails followership (Dalcher, 2022a,b) and the relations of these as two aspects of the same process of acting in concert are changing: the language of authority and obedience, of supervisor and subordinate, is giving way to one of partners or allies (Cunha et al., 2020) in search of high-quality relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Leadership and followership, when properly distributed according to temporal and spatial requirements become shared, making hard distinctions between leaders and followers difficult to sustain. Work on 'servant leadership' (van Dierendonck, 2011) may help the individual orient to a more socialized form of leadership, which involves managing the self while attending to, interacting with and both leading and following others, while being committed to project purposes, principles and persons.

Leadership may become the responsibility of the many that work together in partnership in pursuit of value for purpose (By, 2021), working across many different professions, skills and organizations. Foregrounding purpose in collective leadership connects it to consideration of 'who benefits?' The beneficiaries of projects are indeed wide; they can include the owners and users of whatever the project produces; those that invested in it and those that worked in it, as well as those sustained and enriched in various ways, culturally, materially and organizationally, through engagement with the project and the multiple value it creates. A project can be understood as a tool for creating value that constitutes many interstices (Clegg et al., 2021); intersecting dreams and schemes; coupling professions, occupations and trades in the same harness; creating interorganizational relations, dependencies and dilemmas; committing resources, responsibilities and roles; mashing up cultures, coordination and communication between different entities; positioning, prioritizing and practicing power relations over and with others who are doing the same reciprocally.

Leadership increasingly must manage to steer relations with stakeholders that are not just those to whom a formal obligation is owed, such as providers of capital, regulatory agencies and public and private organizations with whom the project is partnered. As Engwall (2003) noted, no project is an island; community groups and social activism, organized through projects and organized against projects, question the purpose of projects (Ang et al., 2016). Communities assert their legitimacy as actors with whom power can be shared as stakeholders interacting with, not just against, project leadership (Teo and Loosemore, 2017). Indeed, the notion of stakeholder exceeds that of formal organization *per se* as broader forms of stakeholder increasingly achieve representation. Indeed, one strand of the literature frames ecology as a stakeholder (Tryggestad et al., 2013; Sage et al., 2016) with whom project leadership must cooperate and collaborate, sharing power by preserving and empowering ecological actors, including not only frogs (Tryggestad et al., 2013) but also other species. Employees, communities, societies and the sustainability of the system that supports all life on Earth jostle for representation as various forms of organization express what are taken to be the social-symbolic rights of these entities. Project leadership must be attuned to these relevancies (Heikkurinen et al., 2019).

Strategic conversations conducted as an evolving part of the processes of the project may well lead to systematic changes to what is to be done. These are not just conversations conducted inside the project, or with supporters of the project; they must also incorporate those that might oppose aspects of the project. Thus, organizations and projects require a learning capacity that is not only intra-organizational. Leadership entails intelligent and self-actualizing people working in a commonly negotiated and constituted process. It should be a mindful process (King and Badham, 2019) in which the structure of status and task hierarchies should overlie a process of democratic deliberation with stakeholders, broadly conceived, about how to deliver value as a key part of the project, where such deliberation is not only mindful of what occurs 'in' the project; it must also be heedful of what the project means to stakeholders both formally recognized and informally challenging. Leadership operates within a frame of project governance and governmentality (Clegg, 2019) managing different stakeholders involved and implicated in project settings. The distinction between involved and implicated is significant. Those stakeholders involved are formally recognized as such by being associated with the projects' governance, participating in its delivery. Those stakeholders implicated in project governance are not necessarily formally and legitimately involved; they may be asserting a stake that is not formally recognized; nonetheless, by implication they are stakeholders if they assert themselves as such either before the project commences or do so after a critical event makes their stakeholding apparent.

One dramatic recent example of a lack of governmentality regarding stakeholders occurred in May 2020 when Rio Tinto blasted a cliff face near its Brockman iron ore mine in the Pilbara, Western Australia, to access iron ore. The blasting destroyed a site of spiritual significance to the traditional owners of the land, the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people who, while being formally recognized but ignored as stakeholders immediately prior to the blasting, could not be dismissed after the event (Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia, 2020; Hopkins and Kemp, 2020; Verrender, 2020). Communication with the top management in the company, situated in the London head office had led to a focus on economic considerations in a bull market for iron ore that overlooked the cultural and traditional significance, a dereliction of project leadership that had deleterious reputational effects.

3. Research insights and directions

For the leadership of projects, there is a renewed need to think about how that value is delivered, whose interests are uppermost or marginalized, what value is created for whom and for what, whose powers have been enhanced or limited by that value. Thus a socialized leadership needs to engage with a consideration of the multiplicity of values at stake: with cultural as well as economic, environmental and technological ways of evaluating project success. Early project management sought to isolate projects from their context to safeguard delivery (e.g. as reported in Morris and Hough, 1987), neglecting the deep entwinement of history and social context (Engwall, 2003). Yet, as indicated here, the recognition that projects are interventions (Whyte et al., 2019) requires a broader view. In essence, leadership is a steering capacity, oriented towards achieving goals and creating value in so doing (Buchannan and Badham, 2021). The question of how value is created for whom and for what is thus a central concern.

We propose a new research agenda on project leadership by extending and framing a socialized perspective to address three interrelated issues of project leadership that become salient: 1) *changing technologies*, the need for project leadership to make technological choices, unpacking the values that technologies represent to achieve desirable outcomes through responsibly incorporating innovation in projects; 2) *organizational complexity*, the need for project leadership to engage multiple actors, addressing emerging complexity and uncertainty within and across projects and 3), *ecological concerns*, the need for

project leadership to address the demands for projects to intervene positively to create sustainable, resilient and just futures. In relation to each of these transitions we draw on our related interests to sketch out the questions that arise for socialized leadership and the priorities for research.

3.1. Changing technologies

Technological change requires project leadership to make ethical choices regarding how to incorporate innovation in projects, integrating generations of technologies developed on different timescales. These include novel technologies, such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, product platforms, embedded sensors and new forms of concrete. Their uptake in an organizational setting requires engaging with the diverse values held by stakeholders in that setting (cf. Garrety et al., 2014). To address the rapid rate of technological change, projects have recently sought to incorporate innovation during delivery, developing innovation programs (Davies et al., 2015) to conduct small scale trials before a wider roll-out; and to use progressive design approaches to manage the differing timelines of developments in the project's different subsystems (Gil and Tether, 2011). Framing questions of technology as questions of choice draws attention to the ethical decisions that are made and how contemporary projects also include technologies rediscovered, reconfigured and revalued in different contexts, with multiple generations of technologies in use (Edgerton, 2011). Integration is a significant challenge, both of technologies and systems across projects, as well as with the wider contexts in which projects intervene. While upfront planning can address the integration of a known set of stable technologies, incorporating technological change requires a flexible and adaptive approach (Whyte and Davies, 2021).

Technological change requires a recognition of the limits of expertise and a degree of humility from those in leadership positions in projects, as new technologies increase the range of knowledge that needs to be mobilized, precipitating wakes of innovation across interorganizational project settings (Boland et al., 2007). Changes such as digitalization bring new industries into the project supply-chain, with new connections to be made across actors and technologies, with transformation of the nature of projects and their deliverables (Whyte, 2019). Changes may challenge professional understandings of future value, which are shaped within a technological trajectory. For example, ongoing changes in transport technologies raise significant questions about the nature of future mobility and what mix of technologies as well as of public, private and personal transportation devices and active transport options might be best (e.g. Wilson and Mitra, 2020), with implications for how society prioritises, conceives of, and sets-up related projects.

The range of ethical questions for project leadership regarding technological futures spans traditional project-based industries, including engineering and medical projects, as well as across more recent and emerging project-based industries, such as software and new energy. Sensemaking is highly distributed as technological futures entail collaborations where previously there were none; work across contemporary project ecologies (Davies, 2017) is undertaken in standards committees, professional institutions, technology suppliers and project-based firms, as well as in the conception, set-up and delivery of individual projects. Questions arise across these levels; for example, the emergence of product platforms is shifting the focus of innovation to portfolios of projects leading to the promotion of manufacturing approaches in sectors such as construction (Whyte et al., 2022). Such choices are political and social as well as technological in nature (e.g. Winner, 1980).

Questions of how project leadership should address technological change are particularly pertinent as pervasive digitalization is transforming how projects are organized (Whyte, 2019). Whyte and Levitt (2011) discuss the close connection between project management techniques and the digital technologies that enable them, suggesting that new forms of digitally enabled organizing produce more agility,

rather than solely the tracking of changes from baseline plans. New questions are arising about when, how or whether to use project analytics, incorporating new developments in data science into delivery (Niederman, 2021). The ethical questions posed to project leadership, as well as the socialized nature of project leadership itself, are changed as the shareable, accessible remotely, searchable and updateable characteristics of digital information lead to more extensive new forms of integration across supply-chains and with owners, operators and users (Whyte, 2019).

Project leadership not only has to engage with technological change but is also fundamentally transformed in the process. The social practices of leadership co-evolve with technological practices, as project practices become digitally mediated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the video conference and other digitally mediated collaboration technologies gained renewed salience in all forms of project organizing, despite virtual teams facing increased risk of communication breakdown (Daim et al., 2012). Such change raises issues of responsible leadership, as new forms of exclusion may arise using online future making (Whyte et al., 2022); remedial actions may be necessary to ensure the participation of relevant people, places and materials. New empirical questions arise, with a need for research on how project leadership adapts to navigating changing and potentially changing forms of delivery, while safeguarding opportunities for 'power with' and 'power to' in the negotiation of associated values, across a range of stakeholders in order to ensure better project delivery.

3.2. Organizational complexity: dynamics of projects

Temporal and organizational complexity is increasing as projects engage multiple actors in their present and their futures. Projects are crucibles of complex processes and practices in a continues development process, shaped as actors strive to solve tasks and assign meaning to doing so (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Consequently, projects and all aspects of how they are implemented can best be understood by following how the people involved interact, what kind of technology, tools and devices affect this interaction and how interaction patterns are shaped by procedures, governance structures, routines and culture. Practice, how individuals act in a specific setting, is the key (Hällgren et al., 2011). From a practice perspective one would expect project practices to be increasingly entangled and intertwined, affecting each other to an extent greater than conventional orientations to linearity suggest. Project practices are accomplished by actors or actants, material artefacts or devices such as software, building information modelling, three dimensional models or plans. Material and other artefacts are major actants with consequences for projects.

Projects unfold in polyphonic, plural and constrained contexts (Kornberger et al., 2006; Clegg et al., 2021). They and their underlying processes are relational, evolving over time (Brunet et al., 2021). Projects consist of practices that are always coming-into-being, constituting and reconstituting: they are always 'becoming' *per se* (Bjørkeng et al., 2009, p. 156). Projects are social processes incorporating the complexities of organizational and social life (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006). They operate in an organizational reality that "is often messy, ambiguous, fragmented and political in character" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). In part this is because each profession and occupation engaged in a project has its own ways of coding knowledge and these do not always translate effortlessly. The classic examples have to do with the different trades and professions' capacity and propensity to read the same set of 3D plans or BIM models differently, with different relevancies. Small matters of interpretation can blow out into big matters of lost opportunity or cost, time, design and function, in terms of digital interpretation (Coldevin et al., 2019). Where project knowledges are challenged by social science, ecological, community, political, and economic expertise, the opportunities for conflictual power relations between people secure in their own knowledge areas but unfamiliar with that of those with whom they are obliged to collaborate escalates the potential for conflictual relations

(Cuppen, 2018; Hossain and Fuller, 2021). Where these conditions exist, it may well be wise to practice a collectively more 'fluid' form of leadership in which the network of leadership actors do not occupy permanent leadership roles but shift from being in one leadership role for a period to another, acting as champions for disciplinary practices that are not their own, as a form of organization learning and expansion of disciplinary horizons designed to broaden inter-disciplinary project understanding (Pitsis et al., 2003).

Projects can be seen as 'a space whose boundaries and possibilities for action are marked by subjectivity, meanings, perceptions, and emotions, as opposed to the external imperatives coming from the "objective" system' (Passy and Giugni, 2000). Sensemaking, defined by Weick (1993) as 'the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing', is always in play, not just retrospectively (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Moreover, sensemaking is also a material as well as cognitive practice (Naar and Clegg, 2018), one in which digital future sensemaking (Luna-Reyes et al., 2021; Dalcher, 2022a,b) has become increasingly important. Making sensemaking common is no easy matter as differentially interested actors in project processes may well have differential interests in distinct aspects of the sensemaking associated with the project.

Each project-focused organization is unique in the degree of its tightly integrated orientation and demands for intense collaboration and synchronization among the actors involved. It is because different rituals and norms shape organizational practices and structures that project organizations are institutionally pluralistic, especially in the alignment of different time reckoning systems (Dille et al., 2018). Differences can range across professional codes (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001), time horizons (Judge and Speitzfaden, 1995), language communities and spatial separation (van Marrewijk et al., 2016), institutional logics (Matinheikki et al., 2021) or identity, such as demographic diversity (Baker et al., 2021).

Projects take many forms; they are complex and interchangeable, which means that we cannot approach them as if they were uniform. In other words, projects have different characteristics and relationships (Svejvig and Andersen, 2015) reflected in their overall management framework, albeit that some things are constant. For one thing, project processes are not enduring, they do not proceed into the infinity of the future because they are matters to be accomplished; there is or will be some finite time in which it is possible to say that the project is accomplished. Often this is represented by saying that projects are 'temporary' organizations as opposed to permanent organizations. The distinction is not well thought through (Clegg et al., 2021). For one thing, the notion of permanent denotes an entity lasting or intended to last or remain unchanged indefinitely, if only because "All organizations may be temporary in the long term" (Clegg et al., 2021). The juxtaposition of the 'permanent' organization as an unchanging entity is clearly erroneous; even Lewin (1947), progenitor of the metaphor of 'freezing' in organization and management theory, realized that organizations changed and were 're-frozen'; the stasis was at least dynamic even as it froze process. Projects throw forward a design, an ambition, a dream or a vision, they unfold over time in processes that are emergent.

3.3. Projects for sustainable and resilient futures

In pragmatically minded project discourses, sustainability is commonly treated in terms of welfare preservation of communities or societies and resilience is generally defined in terms of project processes and outcomes performing in the face of shocks and adverse events (Aarseth et al., 2017; Naderpajouh et al., 2020). The common core idea across these two concepts relates to the expansion of leadership attention beyond the timescale and scope of the immediate project outputs to longer-term considerations at the societal level. Long-term vision is essential both for sustainable and resilient futures and leaders may at times need to sacrifice immediate project performance metrics for the sake of larger and longer-lasting project outcomes. Importantly, the

concepts of sustainability and resilience diverge in their intersection of leadership with the dynamics of the external environments. Leadership structures and processes that contribute to sustainability under relatively stable external conditions, may prove completely fragile under external shocks, such as disasters. In a highly interconnected world, a case of zoonosis, for example, can rapidly paralyse entire nations around the planet, regardless of sustainable leadership efforts in limiting climate change. Similarly, project leadership designed to transform energy systems to net zero goals does not necessarily increase the systems' resilience towards disasters.

When dealing with shocks and stressors, the role of projects can be discussed across multiple levels, including individual, team, project, organisation, industry and societal levels (Naderpajouh et al., 2020). Project leadership can maximize resilient project outcomes for the future within and across the boundaries of teams and organizations. In parallel, project functioning needs to be sustained or recovered when disturbed by what are known in the management literature as 'environmental jolts' (Meyer, 1982; Deroy and Clegg, 2011; Hussenot, 2021). For project scholars, examining the role of leaders in sustaining and restoring project performance by responding to such unanticipated jolts is a promising area of research.

System perspectives highlight the need to future-proof our societies in the face of global threats and increasingly frequent large-scale, interconnected, technological, societal and environmental disruptions. Systems that appear to be sustainable may be stable only until external conditions change towards tipping points, unless they allow for rapid response, restructuring, and acceptance of new equilibria (Ayub et al., 2020), which is where vanguard projects can play a leadership role (Hällgren et al., 2018). Projects can act as (1) transition vehicles out of unsustainable system arrangements and (2), as response vehicles to system shocks such as social unrests, climate disasters, political instabilities, or economic and financial collapses (Naderpajouh et al., 2020). The explicitly temporary nature of projects is suitable to drive necessary system shifts from one system equilibrium to another (Hällgren et al., 2018), when originally sustainable conditions prove fragile and vulnerable to looming challenges requiring societal adaptation and transformation or are found to sustain social inequalities and injustice. Of course, the world will keep changing even during the project course and therefore an essential question remains: How to lead projects for a world that will be different from the world they were planned in?

One strategy facilitating our way forward is to foster project leaders' capacity to work with increasingly wider ranges of scenarios of possible futures and dynamically explore potential ways in which a project may address changing needs across those scenarios (Pich et al., 2002). Project leadership needs to nourish visions of possible futures that accommodate a variety of radically different possibilities. The project management field, as one long based on a perspective on project efficiency and effectiveness in terms of time, cost and quality, needs to supplement an economistic conception of efficiency with one that is socially and ecologically fair and just, oriented to enhancing sustainability rather than threatening it by the focus on exploiting means to efficiency and effectiveness. Being efficient and effective requires recasting project leadership in terms of ecological not economistic primacy.

4. Discussion

The challenges we identify demand novel forms of socialized leadership constantly confronting diverse interpretations and evolving states of affairs and knowledge. We have unpacked how the dynamics in each area–technological, organizational and ecological– choices and demand decisions from project leadership that are ethical as well as political (Helgadóttir, 2008). Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) suggest alternative forms of justifiable agreement across stakeholder groups. As well as domination, an often default setting, these entail: power with, where worth is negotiated in local arrangements creating truces around

specific decisions and compromise, aimed at a more durable agreement based on power to construct *dispositifs* creating a common justification between different interests. Those narratives that project leadership develops and evolves frame the context for the local truces and compromises necessary to work across multiple understandings of value. Addressing the dynamics in these areas requires adaptability to change, as well as a willingness to revisit sets of knowledge, assumptions and evaluation procedures.

The extension of a socialized approach to leadership in the context of projects is epitomized by these transitions in technological, organizational and ecological contexts, with leadership making ethical choices in relation to their dynamics. While our proposed agenda is not exclusive, we suggest some areas for future exploration in each area, for example digitalization and data driven approaches, complexity of temporary organizing in view of involved established organizations as well as the need for sustainable and resilient futures. While projects need to have control systems and clarity of management and responsibilities, it will increasingly be socialized leadership that enables shared purpose to be co-created across complex interorganizational projects. Here, project leadership is understood to be responsible not only for leading project members but also oriented to leading upwards to influential external stakeholders, such as sponsors, clients and regulators, as well as *leading outwards*, to communities, ecologies and diverse stakeholders that speak for themselves as well as for others lacking a voice (cf. Morris, 1990). Research is needed to understand how such leadership is structured, situated and organized to create value and motivate 'shared purpose', particularly in distributed and participatory forms of organizing that may be more complex and more fragile.

Project leadership involves acting in the face of diverse activities, actors and events by not only making sense of communications coming from project teams and stakeholders but also buffering, sorting and disseminating this sense. The goal is creating meaning and direction for significant others, establishing informed relationships with key actors while being oriented to innovative task solutions. Research into project leadership needs to advance transitional knowledge of how to achieve collective future objectives. While we see such an agenda as potentially complementary to the work on individual leaders, through the notion of 'socialized leadership' we advocate a situated understanding of agency, against strong assumptions of methodological individualism (Udehn, 2002). Such an agenda raises new questions, with related work beginning to explore, for example, how financial modelling in projects can recognize, incentivise and broaden understanding of stakeholder value (Fu and Gil, 2021) as well as exploring potential new directions that build on work on situated senses of what is just and appeals to the common good (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000). The agenda also suggests a different, more socialized approach to how the organization and the individual interact. From the perspective of socialized leadership, recognized leadership roles such as being the 'project manager' are a 'precarious achievement' (Tryggestad, 2007), with limits to individual agency, attracting unbounded accolades when the project performs well and blame when it encounter difficulties. In projects, leadership accountability and responsibilities can be and in many cases should be formally invested in individuals that do not act alone but who have to navigate tasks with and through others. Without the formal designation of responsibilities, everyone can argue that it is 'not my job.' The post-Grenfell inquiry in the UK shows that in industries such as construction there needs to be clear risk ownership, with designation of roles and responsibilities and capabilities frameworks to ensure that skilled people accept these roles and responsibilities in a 'spirit of collaboration and partnership' creating organizational capability for sharing emerging understanding across organizational boundaries (Hackitt, 2018: 2). The socialized perspective on leadership has critical implications for individuals, with different, more collaborative acting implied (Ancona et al., 2007); there are also implications for the education of the next generation of project managers, replacing passive and individualistic learning with practices that are active and collaborative (Ang et al., 2021).

Projects are infused with symbolic processes, ranging from the technical and material to the ideational and promissory. Hence, project work operates in a field traversed by different values and ways to evaluate or understand worth. For Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) these orders of worth–or spheres of signification of value–are framed as displays of inspiration, capabilities of organization, achievements of fame, contributions to civil society, success in the market and innovation in industry. Determining outcomes of worth intersects with the practices of power used to reconcile competing contested orders or value regimes. There are related questions about how project leadership interacts with different understandings of value, where questions might include the following. *How does project leadership inspire transcendent project outcomes?* For example, in the Guggenheim museum in Bilbaoa creative use of new technologies, including virtual digital and data driven tools such as CATIA (Computer Aided Three-Dimensional Interactive Application), produced better project organizational outcomes through an exciting iconic building that transformed understanding of the city. *How does project leadership achieve positive recognitions for its projects of material transformation?* As well as the preceding example, Paris' La Bourse by Tadao Ando is another example of producing civic value, addressing this through generating social capital by regenerating architecture. *How does project leadership produce projects with both market efficient and sustainable futures?* For example, Tesla's battery powered autos are seeking to innovate economically and ecologically beneficial futures through developing GMG batteries based on graphene with Robert Bosch industries in a new plant in Australia (Taylor, 2021).

Socialized leadership involves working across such multiple understandings of value, with their different underlying knowledge-sets, assumptions and evaluation procedures. A wider, more open conception of value would align with purpose conceived not in terms of singular metrics such as "profitable shareholders, satisfied stakeholders, virtuous ethics or the creation of positive social value" but "a balance between different value objectives. No single goal can be privileged as being maximized" (Clegg et al., 2021, p. 15). As depicted in Table 1, the themes we identify, as proposed examples of research directions pose a range of research questions about the ethical questions associated with socialized leadership.

These questions suggest present issues and necessary transitions that project leadership will have to deal with. However, many such questions cut across the three research directions, going beyond the example research questions in Table 1. Such cross-cutting challenges can be addressed with better understanding of any or all three directions: technological innovation, organizational dynamics and/or sustainability and resilience. Leadership practice and research in a changing world requires attention across the dominant contextual problems elaborated on in this framework, where specific projects might target emerging areas for research that investigated issues that address several questions arising from this framework, for example, with a focus on topics such as project analytics and global software; protest, power and projects; project leadership towards net zero and new forms of energy and projects for disaster management and preparedness.

5. Conclusions

The risks that we face as a society raise new questions for project leadership and were an initial motivation of this work. We contributed to theorizing by framing what socialized leadership means for not only ecologically crucial but also inter-related and associated issues emerging in project studies, outlining directions for further research on positive forms of project leadership in a changing world. We highlight research directed towards a socialized perspective on project leadership that treats the notion of leadership as a project capable of being refined for new futures; we suggest extending it through investigating three different transitions in practice, using a generative research framework to develop theoretically sourced and coherent questions that can address

Table 1

Research Direction	Issues	Example Research Questions
Socialized leadership and *technological change*	*Ethical question about technological choice: Questions of who when and how to innovate in project delivery and across project ecologies.*	These relate to socio-material practices and changing technologies in use, e.g., pervasive digital information - How do project analytics reveal the values of diverse stakeholders and how can these be negotiated to improve project delivery and outcomes? - How can online future making become inclusive by involving and representing people, places and materials?
Socialized leadership and *organizational complexity*	*Ethical questions about inclusion: Questions of how to involve and give power to associated groups.*	These relate to social and cultural practices, e.g., regarding growing stakeholder complexity - How do we understand evolving project boundaries, framing who is inside/outside the project? - How do we engage stakeholders (owners, operators, future generations and environments?) and deliver outcomes? - What forms of governmentality are needed to enable effective project leadership?
Socialized leadership and *ecological concerns*	*Ethical questions about our use of resources and relationship with the natural environment.*	These relate to socio-ecological concerns, making sustainable, just and resilient futures - Can we lead transparency of supply-chains and tracking resources to achieve net zero? - How can projects and their production systems be organized to make a positive impact? - How can project leaders integrate requirements of a resilient, just and sustainable future within the intervention plan?

urgent and practical issues in the contemporary world of projects. The organizing themes are: 1) *changing technologies*, responsibly incorporating innovation in projects, and integrating across generations of technologies developed on different timescales; 2) *organizational complexity*, engaging multiple actors and addressing emerging complexity and uncertainty within and across projects, and 3) *ecological concerns*, addressing the demands for projects to intervene positively to create sustainable, resilient and just futures. Our ambition is that this paper can instigate inquiry into establishing what are the socialized project leadership practices working to build a better future. A better future will involve the creation of new powers of project leadership shifting from modes of directing, of power over actors organizationally engaged, to increasingly incorporating power with others engaged both intra-organizationally as well as inter-organizationally in novel project collaborations, striving to create and channel not only collaborative but also empowered power to conquer critical challenges, doing so ethically.

Declaration of competing interest

There are no known conflicts of interest.

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