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Leadership in the Eyes of Beholders: Who are City Leaders?

Keywords: cities; city leadership; leaders; Social Network Analysis; identification.

Introduction

Half of the world population lives now in urban areas and this proportion is expected to increase to 68% by 2050 (United Nations, 2018). The importance and the impacts of cities and of urbanization in our current world is widely recognized¹. For example, cities are major contributors to climate change: although they cover less than 2 per cent of the earth's surface, cities consume 78 per cent of the world's energy and produce more than 60% of all carbon dioxide (Acuto, 2016). We could list many other examples in different areas; what it is clear is that some of today's grand societal challenges and wicked problems (Grint, 2010) will depend very much by what is happening in and around cities.

Accordingly, leadership in, of, for and over cities is a crucial element for the future of humanity and for governance (both at the global and local stage) and for any type of organisations. In other words, it is clear today as never before in the human history that city leadership matter, especially in our turbulent (Ansell & Trondal, 2017) and VUCA contexts (van der Wal, 2017). However, cities are an underrepresented object of enquiry for leadership studies. This paper, based on the early analysis of the data collected for an on-going PhD project on City Leadership, aims to contribute to the research on city leadership by attempting to reply to the following question: who are city leaders?

This question may seem basic and rhetorical, but leaders and leadership change over time and across places, and different people may have different perceptions on *who* the leaders of their city are.

Theoretical background

¹ To name just few examples, from an academic point of view universities such as Harvard and the University College London have launched centers on city leadership, respectively 'The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative' and 'The City Leadership Laboratory'; from a policy point of view, the Rockefeller Foundation has launched a network on resilient cities; from a political point of view, Barber (2013) has pointed out the potential role of the Mayors in "ruling the world".

Research on leadership in places and cities has recently bloomed (Beer et al., 2018; Collinge, Gibney, & Mabey, 2010; Grint & Holt, 2011; Jackson & Parry, 2018; Ropo, Sauer, & Salovaara, 2013), but diverse elements and factors of this area of enquiry remains unclear and further investigations is required (Sotarauta, Beer, & Gibney, 2017). Moreover, the debate over the understanding, identification and definition of *leader(ship)* is still open and controversial. It is not a purpose of this paper, at this stage, to review the vast literature on this topic, as more relevant and remarkable works have already been published on this (e.g. Grint, 2000; Jackson & Parry, 2018; Storey, Hartley, Denis, 't Hart, & Ulrich, 2016). The focus here is on the different forms that leadership in cities can take and that, accordingly, bring to the identification of city leaders.

According to the leadership literature, six lenses and approaches to leadership have been mainly identified. The first five lenses resume mainly from the work of Grint (Grint, 2005; Storey et al., 2016) and consider leadership as/through a Person (the who), a Result (the what), a Position (the where), a Purpose (the why), and a Process (the how). To these, a six one can be added, as suggested by Jackson and Parry (2018): leadership as/through Place. These six forms of leadership do not exclude one another, but are complementary and empirical examples of leadership may embody elements of all these forms (Grint, 2005; Jackson & Parry, 2018; Storey et al., 2016).

This paper is based on the latter form of leadership listed above, namely the place-based one, and put an emphasis on cities as crucial place(s) of today glocal scenario. Generally, the idea of city leadership and leaders is linked to the one of political leadership and leaders. Indeed, political actors are usually considered as the figurehead and representatives of cities (e.g. Latham, McCormack, McNamara, & McNeill, 2009; Yager, 1963). City leadership is often largely depicted as in the remit of Great Individuals (e.g. the Mayors, the CEOs of local government, top politicians, and so on) who play a central role in the everyday and future life of cities. However, these *Great Leaders* inevitably struggle to accomplish current complex, tame, wicked, and grand societal challenges (e.g. Acuto, 2016; Grint, 2010) because in cities, given to their complex nature, leadership is actually dispersed through several actors, structures and processes (e.g. Budd & Sancino, 2016), and thus it is inherently collective (Ospina, 2016). Moreover, as pointed out by Hambleton and Howard (2013) and Sotarauta and Beer (2017), from the perspective of a city and/or a place, leadership is inter-relational, multi-sector and exercised by both formal and informal leaders.

Drawing upon the work of Hambleton (2014; 2013) and Budd & Sancino (2016; 2017), four arenas of city leadership can be recognized in each city:

- A political leadership, that democratically represents citizens;
- A managerial leadership, that deals with the delivery of public services;
- An economic/business leadership, that delivers private services and create (private) value; and
- A civic-community leadership, represented by charities, associations, volunteers, active citizens and all other realities/actors that co-create public and social value.

However, leaders and leadership change over time and across places, and different people may have different perceptions on *who* (or *what*) the leaders of their city are. Therefore, the challenges and biases that researchers may meet when studying the identification of leader(ship) in general terms or in organizational settings, can easily increase at the city level.

Methods

This paper is based on a Social Network Analysis (SNA) carried out in 2018 in two medium-sized cities, Peterborough (UK) and Padova (Italy). The aim of the SNA was to identify the city leaders (intended here as the actors who exercise, implement and/or nurture city leadership) through the leaders' perspectives. In other words, we considered leaders as a sort of followers of other leaders (Kellerman, 2012; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Uhl-bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014).

In methodological terms, after extensive desk analysis, the researchers selected several formal leaders or key city players in the two cities and asked them to name at least three (if possible) important leaders in each of the four arenas of city leadership identified by the literature (Budd et al., 2017; Hambleton, 2015): political, managerial, economic/business, and civic/community. The question asked for each sub-arena of city leadership was: Who do you think are the most important leaders in the city?

Participants could answer whatever they wanted (name, role, organization, group...), with the only request of being specific and clear so that the researchers could easily identify the named leaders and, possibly, involve also them in the study. Data has been collected through an online questionnaire and face-to-face and phone interviews, for a total of 66 participants (29 in Peterborough and 37 in Padova).

Findings & Discussion

To identify city leaders, the replies collected through the Social Network Analysis have been classified in base of the type of name generated (see Table 1 below). At the city level, hence without considering the sub-arenas of city leadership, in both Peterborough (UK) and Padova (Italy), participants mainly named organizations as leaders (98 times out of 428 in Peterborough, 167 times out of 519 in Padova). However, the most intriguing findings refer to the differences in the identification of leaders among sub-arenas of city leadership and between places (see Tables from 2 to 5²).

Very briefly, as a deeper discussion will be presented with the final version of the paper, in the identification of political leaders, the name (person) of leaders seem to play the most important role, in both the investigated cities, together with the position of leaders. This is in line with the literature and the fact that political leaders need to be charismatic to be elected and re-elected. Accordingly, participants named specific leaders because of the characteristic of those individuals (cited by name). In the identification of managerial leaders, participants mostly cited Positions, in Peterborough, and Organizations, in Padova. Hence, it seems to be a shift from the specific person/leader to the formal position held, in the UK case, and in the organization that deliver public services, in the Italian case. For what concerns the business leadership and the civic-community leadership, participants mostly cited Organizations. In part, findings are in line with the literature, namely that there are different forms of leadership and that the “who” (and “where” – using Grint’s framework) of leadership may lie in Persons (here referred to as Name) and Positions (Grint, 2005; Jackson & Parry, 2018). But where does leadership really lie when Organizations or Groups are identified as city leaders?

The data collected cannot give an answer to this as the questionnaire wasn’t designed to collect also this kind of information. It is only possible to make preposition. For instance, it is possible that participants couldn’t remember specific names in the organizations or that specific persons or positions were not considered as important as the whole organizational system/reality. Also, it is possible that participants mainly named organization because it is the processes and the performance (or impact) that the organization has on the city that makes participants consider it as a city leader.

² In Tables from 2 to 4, researcher have not included leaders with multiple roles (16 for Peterborough and 7 for Padova) because these items need further consideration. Tables will be updated for the final version of the paper.

In any case, except for political leadership, at the city level, organizations in different sectors and with different aims and functions (i.e. the delivery of public services, the delivery of private services or the voluntary sector) are considered key actors in and for the city life.

Contribution

The findings described above are far from conclusive and cannot be generalized. However, the cross-comparative nature and the way in which data have been collected as well as the perspective used for the analysis are an interesting contribution to widen the research methodologies for studying cities. In terms of contribution to theory and practice, our findings shed a light on the leadership role of organizations in and for cities and on how this role is recognized and considered by the people inside and outside these organizations. Moreover, this paper contributes to foster a more inter-disciplinary understanding of cities as a site for organizing and for organizational action and to develop a more socially constructed and relational of view of leadership (see Uhl-Bien, 2011).

Appendix

Table 1. Classification of names generated.

Label	Definition
N	Name (First Name and/or Surname)
P	Position
O	Organization (e.g. company, charity...)
B	Body (organized group of people – e.g. Cabinet, Council)
G	Group (unstructured or semi-structured group of people/organization)
C	Category (or Class) – group of positions
S	Sector
+ all possible combinations of the types above	

Table 2. Classification of names generated – Political leadership

Political leadership			
<i>Peterborough (UK)</i>		<i>Padova (Italy)</i>	
N	29	N+P	60
N+P	17	N	28
P+B	11	P	20
Other combination	Value <10	Other combination	Value <10
Total	108	Total	148

Table 3. Classification of names generated – Managerial leadership

Managerial leadership			
<i>Peterborough (UK)</i>		<i>Padova (Italy)</i>	
P	22	O	58
N+P+O	14	N+P+O	32

C	12	P+O	30
Other combination	Value <12	Other combination	Value <10
Total	102	Total	152

Table 4. Classification of names generated – Business leadership

Business leadership			
<i>Peterborough (UK)</i>		<i>Padova (Italy)</i>	
O	48	O	46
N	9	N+P+O	18
N+P+O	9	N+O	14
Other combination	Value <9	Other combination	Value <10
Total	98	Total	101

Table 5. Classification of names generated – Civic-community leadership

Civic-community leadership			
<i>Peterborough (UK)</i>		<i>Padova (Italy)</i>	
O	32	O	55
G	30	N+P+O	11
Other combination	Value <10	Other combination	Value <10
Total	104	Total	111

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