UNIFIED DIVERGENCE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

What is collective leadership and how is it developed? Despite growing interest in collective leadership its definition, and understandings of the contextually situated process through which it develops, are limited. We draw on a five-year longitudinal study to explain how collective leadership develops through ongoing negotiations between strategic ambiguity and reification. We delineate between directed work, collective work, and collective leadership to bring conceptual and definitional clarity to the field. We develop a process model to explain how contextual conditions influence the development of collective leadership. Introducing the concepts of accommodated divergence, directed convergence, and unified divergence we show how interorganizational collaborations can move from collective work to collective leadership. We argue that "unified divergence" enables us to provide a more precise conceptual definition of collective leadership, which we define as: the interaction of strategic ambiguity and inward- and outward-facing reification practices, resulting in agreed collective aims, alignment and coordination of activities, commitment to collective success, and the maintenance of divergent perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Collective leadership; Interorganizational collaboration; Reification; Strategic ambiguity

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations cannot address complex problems by relying on leadership through a formal hierarchy, because addressing complex problems requires the input of diverse stakeholders through collective leadership (Denis, Lamothe, & Langley, 2001; Ospina, 2017). Although a potential panacea for addressing complex problems, two main questions plague our understanding of collective leadership: "what" is collective leadership (Denis et al., 2001; Ospina, Foldy, Fairhurst, & Jackson, 2020) and "how" is collective leadership developed (Cullen, Palus, Chrobot-Mason, & Appaneal, 2012; Eva, Cox, Herman, & Lowe, 2019)?

To date, scholarly attention has largely focused on the question as to "what" collective leadership is (Denis et al., 2001; Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012), with scholars defining it as a socio-relational process, constituted by "multiple individuals assuming (and perhaps divesting themselves) of leadership roles over time in both formal and informal relationships" (Yammarino et al., 2012, p. 382). The plasticity of this definition allows for multiple interpretations of a complex phenomenon (Ospina, 2017), meaning it can be loosely employed to encompass all forms of collective work (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, Smolović Jones, & Grint, 2018). Consequently there is a need for greater definitional clarity as to "what" collective leadership is, and equally important what it is not, thereby delineating between the concepts of collective work and collective leadership (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst, Jackson, Foldy, & Ospina, 2020).

The question as to "how" collective leadership is developed has received less scholarly attention, which has focused on achieving the two key antecedents of collective leadership: the development of a shared understanding of collective work and commitment to the collective (Cullen et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Gronn, 2002). When addressing complex problems,

developing a shared understanding of collective work and a commitment to the collective is challenging due to multiple stakeholders' diverse perspectives and interests (Denis, Dompierre, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011; Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw, 2012; van Marrewijk, Ybema, Smits, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2016). To date scant attention has been focused on understanding the way diverse stakeholders relate to context in different ways, or the potential contextual influences on the success or failure of collective leadership development (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019). Hence, we lack understanding of internal and external contextual influences facilitating, or inhibiting, the simultaneous need to acccommodate group divergence and develop group unity, for the enactment of collective leadership (Cullen et al., 2012; Murphy, Rhodes, Meek, & Denyer, 2017; Ospina et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we have little understanding of the processual dynamics influencing collective leadership development (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019), specifically the process through which members of a collective develop collective leadership, rather than engaging in collective work as aggregated individuals (Gronn, 2002). Relatedly, we also lack insight into: the lived experience of balancing administrative stability and adaptive, innovative responses to complex problems; multiple and varied competing perspectives of the actors involved; and the temporal nature of collective leadership development occuring as an ongoing process through which actors develop a shared understanding of collective work and a commitment to the collective (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2017).

To address the "what" and "how" questions of collective leadership we draw on the concepts of strategic ambiguity and reification practices and explore the tension between them (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Denis et al., 2011). Strategic ambiguity relates to the deliberate use of ambiguity to accommodate competing strategic aims co-existing within a collective. Reification practices encourage collective involvement by attaching explicit symbolic value to collective work. Our interest lies in how the two concepts can explain the underlying dynamics

defining collective leadership, and how they interact to promote or hinder the development of collective leadership over time.

Drawing on a five-year study, involving 210 interviews and 226 hours of observation, we explore how collective leadership developed in a newly established Academic-Practitioner Collaboration (APC). The APC was established to support high-quality applied research focused on patient needs and its translation into practice (Lockett et al., 2014b). The APC holds potentially important insights into contextual influences on collective leadership development (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Ospina, 2017), as APCs are newly established interorganizational collaborations characterized by multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives and strategic priorities (Evans & Scarbrough, 2014; McGivern & Dopson, 2010). Through our research we advance scholarship on collective leadership in three ways.

First, we address the "what" question by bringing greater conceptual and definitional clarity to collective leadership (Collinson et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Ospina et al., 2020) and the related activities encompassing directed work, collective work and collective leadership. In doing so we demonstrate the need for scholars to engage in a more critical reflection on "what" constitutes collective leadership compared to collective work. We provide a novel definition of collective leadership as "the interaction of strategic ambiguity and inward- and outward-facing reification practices to maintain divergent perspectives alongside agreed collective aims, alignment and coordination of activities, and commitment to collective success."

Second, we address the "how" question by responding to calls for a more contextualized understanding of the way collective leadership develops over time (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020). Employing the concepts of strategic ambiguity and reification practices, we illustrate how contextual conditions influence the development of collective leadership to address complex problems (Denis et al., 2001; Ospina, 2017). In doing so, we highlight the importance of inward-facing and outward-facing contextual influences on

collective leadership development (Collinson et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020), which have received scant scholarly attention to date.

Third, we develop a process model of collective leadership development, outlining both "what" activities were developed and "how" it happened in the APC over time. Initially, the newly established APC started operation with a group of individuals aligning activities to their own aims, with little commitment to ongoing collective success. We call this initial state "accommodated divergence". We then show how strategic use of external cues can change internal processes and move the collective into "directed convergence", where work is directed towards convergent aims without accommodating different perspectives, perpetuating a lack of commitment to the collective. In turn, we show how a frustration with the lack of commitment to the collective may represent an internal cue within the APC which can drive a movement into "unified divergence". Under "unified divergence" the collective developed an agreed direction about its aims, alignment and coordination of activities, and collective commitment to the success of the collective, while maintaining divergent perspectives. This is collective leadership, and our model illuminates its contextualized development over time.

DEVELOPING COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Traditional approaches to leadership are often criticized as romanticizing heroic individual leaders and neglecting complex socio-relational influences characterizing contemporary working environments (Collinson et al., 2018; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987). Consequently, scholars have more recently reconceptualized leadership as a contextually-situated process that is the responsibility of the collective, not just hierarchical leaders (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Denis et al., 2012; Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009).

While such a reconceptualization of leadership is increasingly popular among scholars, our theoretical understandings are limited by a lack of definitional clarity. A range of heuristic

labels are commonly employed, in an interchangeable manner, to make sense of the same phenomenon: i.e. shared, distributed, plural and collective leadership are umbrella terms used in similar ways (Cullen et al., 2012; Denis et al., 2001; Denis et al., 2012; Friedrich et al., 2009). While the plasticity of "collective leadership" allows for multiple interpretations of a complex phenomenon (Ospina, 2017), the lack of definitial clarity often means the term is used to encompass all forms of collective work (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson et al., 2018).

For example, work by Buchanan et al (2007), Denis et al (2001) and Gronn (2002), often drawn upon to support understandings of collective leadership, do not conceptualize the phenomenon in the same way, and struggle to delineate between collective leadership and collective work. Hence, research into collective leadership is open to criticisms levied at traditional conceptualizations; that the label "collective leadership" characterizes every act of coordination as leadership. As a result, there are increasing calls for researchers to bring definitional clarity to what collective leadership is (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020).

In addition to definitional confusion, research is limited by a lack of understanding of the process through which collective leadership develops (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019). Compounded by the lack of conceptual clarity, whilst many scholars advocate the need to understand how to develop collective leadership rather than engaging in collective work as aggregated individuals (Gronn, 2002; Murphy et al., 2017), the process remains opaque.

The limited body of work exploring the process of collective leadership development is largely theoretical, and suggests the realization of collective leadership relies on multiple individuals working together in a joined up manner, and on their ability to synchronize their own actions in line with the priorities of the collective (Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012; Gronn, 2002). The theoretical work, however, tends to offer over-romanticized conceptualizations of collective leadership as a practice of harmonious decision-making and goal-setting, with little consideration of how the development of collective

leadership is influenced by contextual issues (Collinson et al., 2018). Such a decontextualized understanding of collective leadership is problematic because the development of collective leadership is commonly desired when addressing complex problems in contexts characterized by multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives (Ospina, 2017). Accordingly, complexity is not accommodated for in our current understandings of collective leadership meaning that, despite a growing body of literature on the subject, we have little understanding of what collective leadership is and almost no understanding of how it develops in complex organizational environments.

In short, there is a pressing need for a unified definition of "what" collective leadership is and more understanding of the contextualized process of "how" collective leadership develops (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2017). A socio-relational perspective to collective leadership offers a starting point from which to do so. From a socio-relational perspective collective leadership requires the development of three elements: agreed collective aims; alignment and coordination of activities; and commitment to collective success (Cullen et al., 2012; Gronn, 2002). Precursors to the development of these elements are the construction of shared understandings of collective work and shared commitment to the collective (Eva et al., 2019).

Developing a shared understanding of collective work, and commitment to a collective, is accepted as difficult (Sillince et al., 2012; van Marrewijk et al., 2016), particularly in organizational settings such as healthcare (Buchanan, Addicott, Fitzgerald, Ferlie, & Baeza, 2007; Fitzgerald, Ferlie, McGivern, & Buchanan, 2013) and education (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Heck & Hallinger, 2010). Accommodating multiple perspectives within a collective is reliant on ambiguity around multiple, perhaps contradictory or competing, interpretations of shared strategic priorities (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Denis et al., 2001). Strategic ambiguity promotes collective working by enabling actors to generate their own

interpretations about how to realize shared priorities (Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010).

Strategic ambiguity, however, is a "double edged sword" (Abdallah & Langley, 2014), with potential for confusion and divergence, rather than commitment to the collective (Sonenshein, 2010). Ambiguity can exacerbate pre-existing tensions, undermining rather than developing agreements around collective aims (Denis et al., 2001; McGivern et al., 2018; Sillince et al., 2012). Contextual influences, such as power differentials or divergent political priorities, create the potential for ongoing conflict in which actors attempt to impose their own strategic priorities, rather than developing a shared sense of commitment to the collective (Kaplan, 2008; van Marrewijk et al., 2016).

Commitment to collective work is generated through a process in which an actor becomes bound to a course of action (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001), denoting an emotional attachment to their continued involvement in the collective (Wombacher & Felfe, 2016). Generating commitment occurs through reification practices "aimed at achieving irreversibility by attributing symbolic value, importance, and immutability to the collective project" (Denis et al., 2011, p. 236). While reification practices encourage individuals from diverse backgrounds to develop emotional attachments to collective work, agreement about strategic priorities does not necessarily follow. Hence, strategic ambiguity and reification are inextricably linked, yet may be in ongoing tension, as reification practices enhance commitment to an explicit purpose but also mask actors' divergence created by strategic ambiguity (Denis et al., 2011).

Denis and colleagues' (2011) work, while not explicitly linked to collective leadership, holds the potential to address the three areas where we lack understanding of collective leadership: conceptual clarity, the importance of context, and processual understandings of its development (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Ospina, 2017). Both strategic ambiguity and reification are contextual influences that exist in the pursuit of collective work (Denis et

al., 2011), mirroring the two antecedents of collective leadership development: shared understandings about collective work and a shared commitment to the collective (Cullen et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019). We suggest, therefore, that exploring the contextually-situated process through which tensions between strategic ambiguity and reification are negotiated over time may enhance our understanding of collective leadership development.

DATA AND METHOD

As noted above, understandings of collective leadership are limited by a lack of definitional clarity and decontextualized explanations of the process by which it develops. Arguably, one of the main reasons for this limitation is an over-reliance on a large amount of systematic reviews (Eva et al., 2019), and theoretical frameworks (Contractor et al., 2012; Gronn, 2002) which propose theoretical insights into collective leadership but are unable to demonstrate how those proposals translate into 'real life'. Consequently, there are increasing calls for empirical work which seeks to explain the contextualized influences on collective leadership development, bringing clarity to the questions 'what' is collective leadership and 'how' is it developed (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2017; Ospina, 2017)?

To answer these questions we take an in-depth qualitative approach, aiming to understand the contextual influences on the socio-relational process through which collective leadership develops in complex organizations. Similar methodological approaches have been employed to bring nuanced understanding and clarity to other complex, socially constructed concepts such as 'value' (Wright, Zammuto, & Liesch, 2017) 'identity'(Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) and 'sensemaking' (Lockett, Currie, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2014a), and holds the potential for 'radical theorizing' (Cornelissen, 2017; Nadkarni, Gruber, DeCelles, Connelly, & Baer, 2018).

Our study focuses on an APC designed to facilitate the uptake of promising research into practice through collective leadership (Lockett et al., 2014b), specifically our focal APC is a translational health research initiative in England called "Collaboratives for Leadership in Applied Research in Health and Social Care" (CLAHRCs). The emphasis upon development of collective leadership is apparent in their title. In 2008, nine CLAHRCs were established and awarded £10m funding by a government agency over five years to bring together stakeholders from different organizations (primarily universities and organizations in the wider health system). CLAHRCs' aim was to address the gap between research and practice through collective work between multiple professional groups (such as academics and healthcare practitioners) to address significant challenges in health systems (Cooksey, 2006). While we focus empirically on an APC within healthcare in England, APCs are evident globally, including the United States (Graham & Tetroe, 2009), Canada (Dussault, Davis, Gruman, & Thornton, 2007) and Australia (NHMRC, 2017).

APC translational health research initiatives, such as CLAHRCs, can be characterized as an experiment in collective leadership. They were newly established inter-organizational collectives where members with diverse perspectives and interests had to balance internal and external cues to develop collective leadership. While collective leadership within APCs was referred to in policy, that same policy primarily mandated collective work rather than sought to develop collective leadership, and there was local variation in how collective work or collective leadership was realized depending on contextual influences (Lockett et al., 2014b). Furthermore, APCs have now existed for over a decade, allowing insight into the way the internal and external dynamics of the collective have changed over time. Hence, analysing an APC offers an opportunity to provide insight into the contextually-situated process through which collective leadership develops over time, hitherto neglected in research (Collinson et al., 2018; Fairhurst et al., 2020).

In APCs, actors from multiple professional and organizational backgrounds work on shared projects. In the APC we studied, diverse actors (e.g. derived from their professional backgrounds) came from multiple organizations delivering frontline care (such as hospitals and primary care providers) and a leading university. The need for university-based academic researchers and provider-based clinical practitioners to work together created an internal context in which the development of shared understandings of collective work, and a commitment to the collective, proved challenging (Bartunek, 2007; Evans & Scarbrough, 2014), due to divergent professional priorities and power struggles (McGivern & Dopson, 2010).

The APC external context also provides insight into the contextually-situated nature of collective leadership development. The purpose of the APC was to facilitate the translation of research to their external partners, comprised of health and social care providers implementing the improvement interventions developed through APC collective work. Therefore, as a newly established interorganizational collective, the APC had to learn how to negotiate both a complex external and internal context. In addition, the government agency that funded the APC exerted external performance demands and pressures (Cooksey, 2006). Resource availability and funding was externally determined, and reassessed every five years, meaning the APC had to deal with external cues impacting internal processes within the collective. While these cues are specific conditions that are unique to our case, we suggest the development of collective leadership will always be subject to both internal and external cues due to the complexity of any organizational context requiring collective leadership to solve complex problems.

Research design

The APC structure consisted of two interrelated groups, an executive team and a project team. The executive team was responsible for strategic and operational management, who were

senior people (typically professors) drawn primarily from academic backgrounds and with a reputation in health services research, who were responsible for ensuring administrative stability (through mandated structures, initiatives and workforce appointments) to encourage collective working. The executive team represented what can be considered a hierarchical form of leadership with clearly defined roles (see Table 1). The project team was composed of academic researchers (commonly more junior than their executive team colleagues) and clinical practitioners responsible for leading shared projects designed to translate research into healthcare practice. The project team represented informal leadership focused on collectively solving complex problems (Murphy et al., 2017).

Through our study we examined the multiple and varied competing perspectives of the actors and the temporal nature of collective leadership development (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2017). We stratified our interviews across different groups and at different times. As outlined in Table 2, we interviewed all 12 members of the executive team four times (twice in phase two) across the five-year lifespan of the research (48 interviews). We also interviewed 12 academic researchers and 34 clinical practitioners in the project team at multiple points over the course of the five years as detailed Table 2. In total, we conducted 210 interviews.

INSERT TABLES I & II ABOUT HERE

Interviews encompassed questions about the dynamics of collective work within the APC (i.e., what helps/hinders you when working with others within the APC?); the development of a sense of belonging (i.e., do you feel part of the APC and why? Do you feel a shared sense of community with others here and why?); tensions between competing strategic priorities (i.e., how do you negotiate times when there are tensions between different teams or competing

aims?); and the influences of external stakeholders on the APC (i.e., how do you engage with colleagues at the local hospital/university, can you give an example of how you work with others outside of the APC?). All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

Interviews were supplemented with notes of field observations detailing participants' interactions. We observed 226 hours of internal meetings, meetings with external partners, training workshops and development events. Over time we gained insight into the interactions between APC members, engaging in informal conversations about collective work.

Data analysis

We began by compiling our interview transcripts and field notes from observations in to NVivo. We employed an abductive approach (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013) by engaging in a fine-grained reading of the data to induce our first order codes, whilst reading and re-reading collective leadership literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our first coding phase set out to identify different ways in which strategic ambiguity and reification practices were experienced by multiple actors in the APC. To do so, we iteratively generated and coded themes according to our working definitions of strategic ambiguity (creating space for multiple interpretations of work) (Abdallah & Langley, 2014) and reification practices (attaching symbolic value to encourage continued involvement with collective work) (Denis et al., 2011). When coding for strategic ambiguity we looked for examples of competing priorities being held by actors within the collective, or of different interpretations of the same collective aim. We also looked for indications for how strategic ambiguity manifested both internally and externally in the APC context, and whether reification practices were inward or outward facing (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019).

When coding for reification we looked for examples of practices Denis and colleagues (2011) identified: requiring signatures on documents; ratification by executive boards;

assigning importance to collective work in public discourse; and idealization. In our data, we did not identify examples of requiring signatures on documents or ratification by executive boards but identified that reification practices of idealization could be discreetly coded as "internal reification practices of idealization" or "external reification practices of idealization". We also identified a novel inward-facing reification practice which did not align with the concept of idealization defined by Denis et al (2011) as "the use of enthusiastic language implying prestige, progress, and technological leadership that added symbolic value to continued involvement and that made it difficult to withdraw without losing face" (p. 238). Instead, we identified references to the importance of developing a sense of family to generate collective commitment. We labelled this novel reification practice familization.

Concurrently, we coded for collective leadership by drawing on the socio-relational understanding that three inter-related elements indicate when collective leadership development has been successful: an agreed direction about what the collective is trying to achieve; alignment and coordination of activities; and commitment to the success of the collective (Cullen et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Gronn, 2002). We realized that these factors were not evident throughout our study, and only seemed particularly evident when coding the data collected in the later stages of data collection.

We then engaged in a second round of coding to delineate between collective leadership and other forms of collective work. We identified examples in data of alignment and coordination of activities but no agreed direction or commtiment to the success of the collective. We coded these activities "collective work". We also identified times when the executive team directed activities to achieve a convergent strategic goal but where these activities remained unaligned or uncoordinated with little collective commitment. We coded these activities "directed work".

After identifying different forms of activity within our data set we set out to identify how the negotiation of strategic ambiguity, internal reification practices of familization, and internal

and external reification practices of idealization aligned with collective or directed activities. Accordingly, we identified examples of three different collective states which are outlined in Tables III-V. First, we observed alignment of collective work but no commitment to the collective, and little direction due to divergent aims. We labelled this state "accommodated divergence" (Table III). Next we observed work directed around a centrally determined strategic goal but no voluntary alignment of work or collective commitment. We call this state "directed convergence" (Table IV). Finally, we observed collective commitment, alignment of activities and shared direction. This met our definitional conditions to suggest collective leadership had been developed. We labelled this third state "unified divergence" (Table V).

We noted that the three states we identified appeared in our data set as discrete but connected phases. In other words, while we were coding our longitudinal data set we observed significant shifts from accommodated divergence, to directed convergence, to unified divergence, over the course of data collection. We then set out to explore how these shifts occurred over time, considering both internal and external contextual influences (Cloutier & Langley, 2020; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). We looked for explanations for the transition between different states and identified two significant points of transition within our data set.

The APC was initially established under conditions of accommodated divergence but frustrations soon arose due to a lack of sense of direction. An external cue (in this case the need to secure refunding) became a strategic resource for the executive team to move the APC from a state of accommodated divergence towards a state of directed convergence. Subsequently, frustrations arose within the APC about a lack of divergence of perspectives within the collective, undermining commitment and threatening the ongoing survival of the collective. This acted as an internal cue to move the APC from a state of directed convergence towards a state of unified divergence, and the development of collective leadership.

INSERT TABLE III - V ABOUT HERE

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Period 1: Accommodated divergence

Our data collection began shortly after the APC had been formally established. During this initial period APC members referred to the diversity of their colleagues' professional backgrounds as "*exciting because it's not just one type of world view, it's the clinicians, it's the frontline healthcare providers, it's the managers, it's the academics"* (R22 – Academic Researcher), where *"it's exciting to do something that's quite so broad and varied*" (R23 – Academic Researcher). For some, however, the diversity created a sense that the APC was *"a really ambiguous space*" (R13 –Academic Researcher), where *"there is no black and white, there's no yes or no, there is only grey"* (R58 – Clinical Practitioner),

The ambiguity held the potential to create conflict between professional groups. For example, when observing internal meetings, we noted tensions between APC members from academic backgrounds aiming "*to focus on publishing our work in top academic journals in our field*" (Academic Researcher - R20, observation of internal meeting, 2009), and APC members from clinical backgrounds aiming to prioritize "*improvements in services we deliver to our patients*" (Clinical Practitioner – R45, observation of internal meeting, 2009). Consequently, there were concerns that competing priorities might undermine shared understandings of collective work, making it difficult to accommodate multiple perspectives because "*the complexity of the separation between the academic world and research findings and the clinical world and clinical practice … [is] not just a gap in translation, it's an entire minefield"* (R48 – Clinical Practitioner).

Awareness of the potentially challenging conditions created by ambiguity led to an emphasis on APC members *"establishing a feeling of being a team"* (R1 – Quality

Improvement Manager). Establishing a feeling of being a team was seen primarily as an inward-facing process encouraging individuals to work together *"despite your differences, despite your problems, come together for the common good"* (R19 – Academic Researcher). In particular, we observed recurring references to the need to develop a sense of "family". The trend began during a two-day residential training event designed for APC members to develop a sense of belonging to the collective. Using a round-table format and external consultants, activities encouraged APC members to define a shared mission and purpose, foster internal relationships, within which it was emphasized APC would become a "family".

During the first years of our study we identified reification practices of familization through repeated references to the *"APC family"* (R28 – Clinical Practitioner) and the need to develop a collective sense of *"APC-ness"* (R11 – Programme Director), through which APC members could *"develop a shared language and a shared identity … to try and get people to come on this journey with us"* (R12 – Head of Operations). The need to develop a sense of family also underpinned further training workshops for APC members, where actors made frequent references to "*how important it is that the APC family continues to grow"* (Programme Administrator - R3, observation of training workshop, 2010), to accommodate for multiple perspectives because *"if everyone felt like part of the family they wouldn't mind the ambiguity and complexity in the APC"* (R12 – Head of Operations). Developing a sense of family, however, was challenging and undermined by the enduring influence of ongoing competing priorities.

> *"It has been really challenging… taking very diverse individuals into one team is very complex, the work is ambiguous by its nature, we know we don't know all the answers, and I wouldn't say there's a real sense of family yet." (R11 – Programme Director)*

Developing belonging through reification practices of familization were only observed as an inward process. We observed little indication of other reification practices such as outward processes to attach symbolic value to the collective work (Denis et al., 2011). Instead, APC members suggested the main priority was "*to develop the collaboration within the APC"* (R24 – Academic Researcher), *"looking within the APC to get that collective leadership going, develop a critical mass of successful projects and then showcase our success externally"* (R56 – Clinical Practitioner).

During this first period we observed administrative stability through the APC executive team, but struggled to identify complex problem solving in the project team. We observed significant amounts of collective work, in which actors accommodated for the divergence of their professional backgrounds by sharing experiences. For example, we observed one workshop where APC members came together to discuss barriers to the successful implementation of a quality improvement tool. Each APC member shared their experiences of implementation before collating discussion points around complex problem solving, which focused the remainder of the workshop.

During the period, however, we did not identify a shared understanding of what the collective was trying to achieve or a commitment to the success of the collective (Cullen et al., 2012; Gronn, 2002). Rather, the APC was characterized by "*a traditional hierarchical leadership approach, through which the projects work collectively in the way we would like them to"* (R7 - Head of Learning and Development). Ambiguity drove inward facing reification practices of familization, creating conditions for the development of accommodated divergence within the APC, in which members' different perspectives and backgrounds were accommodated to align collective work, but there was no sense of convergence around collective aims.

By the beginning of year 3 there was a significant degree of frustration amongst members of the APC in relation to the lack of convergence around collective aims. APC members frequently noted "*we are all working like crazy but there's no direction or there's no purpose to it*" (R132 – Programme Director) and suggested a desire "*to get on quickly and move forward with some direction and have some control of who does what and when"* (R140 - Academic Director). As the third year progressed, the attention of the executive team of the APC was drawn to the need to apply for follow-on funding for a further five years. The need to secure external funding acted as an external cue for members of the APC to address the lack of convergence around collective aims.

Period 2: Directed convergence

The external cue of having to secure follow-on funding was used as an opportunity for the executive team to encourage more directed work within the APC, changing the way strategic ambiguity and reification practices played out. While ambiguity was initially seen as both a source of tension and opportunity, the need to attain follow-on funding led the executive team to reduce ambiguity within the APC, directing *"a much more hierarchical approach where it is me and that's how it operates"* (R132 - Programme Director). The need for follow-on funding was an existential threat for the APC, which enabled the APC to converge on the immediate priority of doing so: *"There is nothing ambiguous about it at all, we need to be re-funded … there is no room to be working differently."* (R131 - Head of Operations). Project teams noted the need to secure follow-on funding meant that "*things tend to be more prescriptive these days"* (R159 - Clinician Researcher). We observed internal meetings in which the Director (an academic) of the APC addressed its members in "*very prescriptive terms"* about *"urgency to submit applications for refunding*" ensuring everybody understood

the "*very clear and rigid lines of accountability"* (R135 - Project Manager, observation of internal meeting, 2011).

The convergence of collective aims around attaining follow-on funding reduced the inward-facing reification practices of familization. The need to imbue collective work within the APC with a sense of symbolic value, driven through the notion of belonging to a "family", was no longer important because: "*Our priorities have shifted … our top priority, at least for now, is to get refunded. We need to get the funding for the APC family to survive*." (R132 - Programme Director). Instead, reification practices now focused externally to the APC. Outward-facing reification practices were aimed at idealizing the APC work in the external context. When talking with external partners, APC members often referred to the APC as *"a world class organization"* (Senior Programme Manager R134, observation of meeting with external partner, 2011), highlighting that *"we've been awarded several fellowships, improvement science fellowships … we are going to get kudos for it with our external partners"* (R89 - Academic Researcher*).*

Outward communication referring to the APC's collective aims reduced ambiguity, as there was a need to be clear about the APC's purpose and the importance of its work to external partners. We observed meetings in which APC directors talked to external partners about how *"refunding will help us build the reputation of the organization as an industry leader in healthcare improvement"* (R132 - Programme Director, observation of meeting with external partners, 2011) and "*the second wave of funding is critical for our vision to become leaders in healthcare improvement by furthering research into care"* (R140) - Academic Director, observation of meeting with external partner, 2011).

We also observed a reduction in ambiguity in externally focused APC documents at this time which clearly stated *"our aim is to ensure measurable and sustainable benefits for patients"* and in internal communications emphasising the importance of *"compliance with*

APC policies". When discussed with the executive team, they suggested the reduction in ambiguity was purposeful: "*the messages to our external partners are much clearer this time… we need to show credibility in our messages that we are clear about what we do here"* (R132 - Programme Director).

The absence of inward-facing reification practices of familization, coupled with a reduction of ambiguity of collective aims, began to generate frustration among APC project team members. APC project team members criticized the executive team becoming too directive, because *"the only way they can keep control over the whole thing is to be prescriptive and I don't see that's the way forward"* (R94 - Academic Researcher). Despite direction from the executive team to work together to secure follow-on funding, we observed that much of the collective working had now stopped. APC members suggested *"we're starting to see silos which makes it difficult to work across a range of stakeholders"* (R114 – Clinical Practitioners), and during a workshop complained *"it feels like we are competing with each other… most of us no longer have the appetite to work together, why would we?"* (R134 - Senior Programme Manager, observation of training workshop, 2011).

Over time, a number of APC members suggested distancing themselves from the APC due to *"the lack of compromise (which) is a real problem with the process"* (R165 – Clinical Practitioner). We observed a reduction in commitment to the collective, for example poor attendance by project teams at workshops designed to facilitate collective working, with suggestions that even if the APC secured follow-on funding, *"there won't be any ongoing relationships"* (R127 – Clinical Practitioner) and individuals may leave the APC because*: "It's their (APC) way or the highway, you know, and frankly, I said fine, take your money away. I could do without the headache."* (R153 – Clinical Practitioner).

During period 2 we saw the executive team leverage an external cue as a strategic resource to direct convergence around collective aims. Consequently, the tension between ambiguity

and reification practices changed. Directed convergence reduced ambiguity, meaning there was no longer an urgent need for inward-facing reification practices of familization, as collective work was directed rather than encouraged through the development of shared understandings. Instead, reification practices consisted of outward-facing idealization, focused on convincing external partners of the importance of the APC's continued work. APC members had to externally communicate a clear organizational aim, further reducing ambiguity within the APC. The reduction of ambiguity meant that, despite a convergent aim of securing follow on funding, collective work ultimately decreased. APC members became disillusioned with the reasons behind their continued involvement, undermining their commitment to the collective and generating an internal threat to the ongoing existence of the collective.

By the end of period 2, the APC had managed to secure follow-on funding for an additional five years. Reducing ambiguity and inward-facing reification practices, however, undermined commitment to the collective. In particular we observed frustration among project teams about the conditions created by directed convergence because *"they have been so prescriptive about it. They'll say 'Monday morning you must do X'. It feels as though all they are doing is micro-managing"* (R205 – Clinical Practitioner). We also noted that relationships within the APC had deteriorated during period 2, to such an extent that arguments became common place: "*We had such a huge argument about all of this that I actually won't deal with him anymore… he said, 'well you have to do this and you have to do that and you said you were going to do this and you haven't, so you have to do this and this'. Well I never agreed to do any of that. How dare you!"* (R195 – Academic Researcher).

The reduction of ambiguity and inward-facing reification practices, whilst deemed necessary to address the external cues faced by the APC, risked significantly undermining members' commitment to the collective and internal relationships. The frustration at the APCs lack of accommodation of different perspectives acted as an internal cue to focus the executive

team's attention to re-emphasizing the importance of tolerating strategic ambiguity, but in a different way to period 1.

Period 3: Unified divergence

In period 3 we noticed an awareness that directed convergence to secure refunding had undermined commitment to the collective, exacerbated by a lack of shared understandings about ongoing collective aims: *"we're still recovering from that experience* (of directed convergence) *and it seems that people aren't entirely sure what they're doing here"* (R170 - Senior project manager). In response, in internal meetings we observed the executive team work to re-position the APC to (re)accommodate ambiguity by highlighting *"our mission is to work in partnership with diverse groups of leaders… and experiment with different ways of doing things"* (R171 - Assistant Manager, observation of internal meeting, 2012). The executive team suggested, "*we need to accommodate for very different focuses in our teams. Obviously, the vision remains the same - to have broad engagement and collective leadership which will shape the future, so we're pretty clear about what we're doing but not so clear about how we're going to do it."* (R176 - Programme Officer).

Similar to period 1, in period 3 we found accommodating strategic ambiguity drove inward-facing reification practices to generate commitment. During internal meetings in this period, however, rather than engaging in reification practices of familization to try and create a sense of "APC family", inward-facing reification practices now focused on the idealization of the APC work. For example, we heard APC members talk about creating a *"social movement… people can use it to connect and we can solve these big problems together"* (R193 - Academic Researcher, observation of internal meeting 2012). We also heard the Academic Director talking about the APC as *"a world class organization that uses a scientific approach to respond to a grand challenge of our society"* (R178 - Academic Director, observation of internal

meeting, 2012). Others suggested they were *"coming together, learning to lead together, and translating an idea into practice, into policy for the benefits of our patients and our society in more broader terms"* (R171 - Assistant Manager).

The inward-facing reification practice of idealization reinforced the accommodation of ambiguity because there was an understanding that *"what we're doing here is crucial but so complex, it requires a high level of ambiguity along the way about what's expected from everyone, which allows us to be very agile… we can't solve these complex problems if we're prescriptive"* (R170 - Project Manager). During internal meetings we noted the Academic Director (R178) stating the importance of "*bringing together multiple perspectives and opinions"* and developing a variety of approaches to collectively solve the complex problems they were tackling. Further, the inward-facing idealization indirectly drove inward-facing reification practices of familization. The sense that the work they were doing within the APC "*feels prestigious … it's more important, the work is larger than it actually is, and I definitely feel now we belong to one big family, the APC family."* (R188 - Academic Researcher).

Simultaneously, we observed that outward-facing reification practices of idealization continued but, this time, rather than reducing ambiguity, the inherent ambiguity of the APC was now idealized. We observed the reification practice of outward-facing idealization in meetings with external partners where it was suggested the inherent ambiguity of the APC was important to its continued working as it allowed the APC to be more creative and innovative. For example, the Head of Learning and Development noted "*we've deliberately focused on changing our communication strategy to demonstrate our high-quality work drawing on multiple fields of knowledge and multiple academic disciplines. That's been key, emphasising the multiplicity of what we do here"* (R168 - Head of Learning and Development). In one meeting with external partners, we observed APC members emphasizing how exciting it was to work in an *"environment that's so diverse"* (R194 - Academic Researcher, observation of

meeting with external partners 2012). After the meeting, a programme administrator noted *"it's part of our identity, isn't it?... we have to be ambiguous if we want to cross all the boundaries. I think the ambiguity does have its strengths because it is easier for us to blend and develop shared approaches to things … that's what makes the APC so important, that's what we've got to communicate"* (R174 - Programme Administrator).

Interestingly, the inward- and outward-facing reification practices of idealization were intertwined, and acted to promote a sense of belonging and unity amongst APC members. For example, one clinical practitioner outlined how the APC had changed over the last year:

> *"It (the APC) is so important because you've got this big organic system that needs to change the way it's working. It's a massively challenging area because these projects are huge and very complex… But I do really enjoy working with the team… I feel more connected with them; our team is a little family now…. we share a collective responsibility for each other, to support each other by sharing responsibility. You can't mandate that, it didn't work last year when they tried to control us."* (R204 – Clinician Practitioner)

As a sense of belonging and unity was developed amongst APC members, we began to notice changes in organizational processes. We noted that internal meetings were characterized by attempts to develop an agreed direction of what the APC was trying to achieve, without returning to the directed convergence of period 2. APC members talked about *"finally being on the same page of what we're trying to do here"* (R170 – Senior project manager) and noted how a collectively agreed direction had developed over the lifespan of the APC:

> *Things are going in the right direction, towards the early stages (of the APC) participation was low, but things are getting better now. We all understand what*

we need to achieve and we need to make sure that everybody participates so we're all drawn in the same direction (R171 - Assistant Manager).

Alongside the development of a collectively agreed direction we also observed more evidence of collective decision-making and priority-setting as the executive team and the project team worked together, developing a sense that "*the approach to leadership has changed… it's become less top-down and more distributed, there is more of a communal effort through which people are working together to figure out how we move forward. We're all working in our own way but the collective goal is the same"* (R174 – Programme Administrator). This was coupled with an increased sense of commitment to the APC, with members suggesting "*there is shared responsibility and decision making in the APC, it allows us to try and solve the same problems in different ways (R 199 – Clinical Practitioner)"* because *"we have an increased understanding of what our shared priorities are, what the APC should be doing, but also an understanding that we all contribute to that in different ways… like a dysfunctional family!" (R 177 - Academic Researcher),*

To summarize, an internal cue triggered the APC to move from directed convergence to unified divergence, characterized by inward- and outward-facing reification practices and ambiguity interacting as complementary elements. Outward-facing reification practices of idealization focused on communicating the importance of the continuation of collective work. Inward-facing practices of idealization facilitated collective commitment to the APC. Idealization practices focused on how the APC could address symbolically important societal issues by harnessing ambiguity. Through this complementary relationship, indirect practices of familization emerged, meaning APC members developed a sense of being part of a family, and understandings of collective work, while maintaining their own perspectives on that work. We found this unified divergence facilitated agreement about the overall collective aim, alignment of activities and commitment to collective success.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of an APC provides new insight into the contextually-situated process of the development of collective leadership. In Figure I we present a process model of how collective leadership was developed in the APC we studied. At the start of the APC the new interorganizational collective began with conditions of accommodated divergence, in which strategic ambiguity accommodates different perspectives but attempts at inward-facing reification practices of familization do little to resolve divergent aims within the group.

Over time, we showed that an external cue was used to move the collective into conditions of directed convergence, where strategic ambiguity is reduced through a reciprocal relationship with outward-facing reification practices of idealization, but there was no accommodation of different perspectives. Directed convergence was only maintained when the APC was responding to external cues, but over time frustrations emerged within the APC, acting as an internal cue triggering a move towards unified divergence. Under unified divergence, strategic ambiguity existed in a reciprocal relationship with outward-facing reification practices of idealization to accommodate different perspectives; which subsequently drove inward-facing reification practices of idealization, generating a shared understanding of the work. Inward idealization indirectly led to inward-facing reification practices of familization, creating commitment to the collective. Through the process, the collective develops an agreed direction about collective aims, alignment and coordination of activities, and a commitment to collective success, and collective leadership is realized (Cullen et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Gronn, 2002).

INSERT FIGURE I ABOUT HERE

Through our analysis of an APC, and development of a process model, we advance scholarship on collective leadership in three ways. First, we address the "what" (and "what is not") question by bringing conceptual and definitional clarity to collective leadership (Collinson et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Ospina et al., 2020). By exploring the different constellations of strategic ambiguity and inward- and outward-facing reification practices, we are able to provide definitional clarity for the concepts of directed work, collective work and collective leadership.

Directed work is seen in contexts where work converges around directed strategic aims to ensure ongoing administrative stability (Murphy et al., 2017). Directed work allows the collective to respond to external cues but limits potential to solve complex problems through collective leadership, as there is no room for different perspectives (Denis et al., 2012; van Marrewijk et al., 2016).

Collective work is characterized by alignment and coordination of activities in contexts where individuals still pursue their own divergent aims. Collective work enables limited collaboration over short periods of time, but ultimately dissipates as actors are not committed to collective success over the longer term (Denis et al., 2011; Denis et al., 2001; Kaplan, 2008). We join other scholars in arguing that it is important not to fall into the trap of romanticizing collective work as collective leadership (Collinson et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020).

In providing working definitions for directed work and collective work, we are better able to clearly delineate what collective leadership is, and importantly what it is not. Previous theoretical research defines collective leadership as: an agreed direction about collective aims; alignment and coordination of activities; and a commitment to collective success (Cullen et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Gronn, 2002). However, we develop this definition of collective leadership further by arguing that collective leadership is also reliant on maintaining divergent

perspectives alongside agreement, coordination and commitment. Therefore, we define collective leadership as: *the interaction of strategic ambiguity and inward- and outward-facing reification practices to maintain divergent perspectives alongside agreed collective aims, alignment and coordination of activities, and commitment to collective success.*

In distinguishing between different forms of collective action we advance current debates on collective leadership. While the plasticity of the concept previously had an ambivalent impact on collective leadership scholarship (Ospina, 2017), we argue that now is the time for a more cohesive conceptual understanding. In bringing conceptual clarity to collective leadership we create a base from which scholars can position themselves with the same understanding of the concept to avoid falling into the trap of treating collective work as collective leadership (Buchanan et al., 2007) or of conceptualizing the phenomenon of collective leadership in different ways (Denis et al., 2001; Gronn, 2002). Furthermore, in providing clear working definitions of directed work, collective work and collective leadership, we lay the foundations for scholars to approach collective leadership research with a continuing critical perpsective about what they are observing. Ultimately, our first contribution responds to increasing calls for definitional clarity relating to "what" collective leadership is (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020).

Second, we address the "how" question by providing a contextualized understanding of the way collective leadership develops over time (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020). Specifically, we show that collective leadership development is reliant on both internal and external reification practices occurring in parallel. Inward-facing reification practices of familization are limited in what they can achieve without outward-facing reification practices, which resulted in accommodated divergence, limiting activities to collective work rather than collective leadership. The dynamics underpinning accommodated divergence give insight into contexts where collective leadership attempts have failed due to

insufficient shared understandings about collective aims. Without an external cue to focus and converge collective aims, actors' attention may be directed towards their own individual agendas, resulting in a situation of "nobody in charge" (Buchanan et al., 2007).

Conversely, when there are outward-facing reification practices of idealization, but no inward-facing reification practices, directed convergence drives directed work. While this aligns the work of the collective towards a centrally-determined aim, directed convergence undermines the antecedents of collective leadership development: construction of shared understandings of collective work and commitment to the collective (Eva et al., 2019; van Marrewijk et al., 2016).

Our work extends current understandings of collective leadership by arguing that it only develops under conditions of unified divergence, where the outward- and inward-facing reification practices of idealization exist in a reciprocal relationship, generating shared understandings of the perceived symbolic importance of collective aims. In turn, the shared understandings of the perceived symbolic importance of collective aims then drive the inward-facing reification practices of familization, generating commitment to the collective and encouraging alignment and coordination of activities. Accordingly, we explain the how the antecedents of collective leadership development are achieved: construction of shared understandings of collective work and shared commitment to the collective (Cullen et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019).

We suggest that extant work pointing to the limitations of collective leadership does not move beyond conditions of accommodated divergence (collective work). For example, when considered in light of our conceptual states of collective leadership development, Buchanan's assertion of "nobody in charge" (Buchanan et al., 2007) and Denis' suggestion of "escalating indecision" (Denis et al., 2011) do not align with the state of unified divergence. As such, we argue, their research is focused on collective work and not collective leadership. In doing so,

we suggest that when scholars argue that some new collectives are unable to develop collective leadership (Buchanan et al., 2007; Collinson et al., 2018; Sillince et al., 2012), it is because they have not yet moved beyond conditions of accommodated divergence.

Third, we address questions relating to our lack of understanding of the dynamics through which collective leadership develops in complex organizational contexts (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019). Through our process model we explain the development of collective leadership over time, highlighting the contextually-situated process through which actors develop a shared understanding of work and collective commitment (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2017). We argue that all new collectives start with conditions of accommodated divergence: a group of individuals align activities with their own aims, without commitment to ongoing collective success. These conditions are often seen in studies that highlight the potentially transitive, temporary nature of collective work, which lacks direction and a clearly agreed collective purpose, leading to atrophy (Buchanan et al., 2007; Denis et al., 2011).

Our findings suggest that moving from collective work towards collective leadership may be reliant on the strategic use of external and internal cues to change internal collective processes. In our empirical case the external cue was the need to secure refunding, but we argue all newly established collectives will be exposed to external cues which can be used in the same way (i.e. new technologies, legislation, competitors, products or changing economic, social, environment or politcal contexts). Focusing on outward-facing reification practices forces the collective to converge around directed aims to ensure their ongoing survival.

While directed convergence undermines collective leadership by reducing strategic ambiguity, and could be criticized as undermining the potential for complex problem solving, directed convergence creates the conditions enabling the development of unified divergence and collective leadership. Specifically, directed convergence generates internal frustration and

misalignment of activities, threatening the survival of the collective. This internal cue subsequently forces the (re)accommodation of strategic ambiguity, but also brings together the inward and outward facing reification practices established in the first two phases.

Transition through all three phases is necessary for the development of collective leadership due to the iterative relationship between strategic ambiguity and reificaiton practices. While existing work suggests collective leadership is inhibited by tensions between reification and strategic ambiguity, resulting in short-term strategic agreement but long-term tension (Denis et al., 2011), we argue that this is just one potential outcome of that relationship. However, while we argue that transition between accommodated divergence and directed convergence is necessary to develop collective leadership, we cannot claim it must be navigated in the sequential order we propose in our model. While unified divergence is the final stage in the realization of collective leadership, the movement between collective work and directed work may be more dynamic than we observed in our case, and may potentially be reversible. Further, while collectives in new interorganizational collaborations are likely to start in conditions of accommodated divergence, some new collectives in already established organizations may start in conditions of directed convergence. Our model gives insight into how unified divergence can be developed through any path, depending on the final constellation of strategic ambiguity and reification.

Strategic ambiguity and reification are building blocks in the development of collective leadership. While some scholars suggest that strategic ambiguity should be reduced to facilitate collective leadership (Denis et al., 2011; Denis et al., 2001), we suggest these assumptions are misplaced. We acknowledge that the existence of multiple perspectives and divergent strategic priorities complicate the realization of collective leadership (McGivern et al., 2018), but we also offer a potential counterview. We argue that eliminating strategic ambiguity reduces collective activities to directed work. Although external cues may necessitate a temporary

reduction in strategic ambiguity to ensure administrative stability, negotiating strategic ambiguity alongside inward and outward-facing reification practices is central to the development of unified divergence, creating the conditions for collective leadership.

Finally, while developing a shared understanding of collective work and collective commitment are antecedents to collective leadership (Cullen et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019), we show that the contextual negotiation of tensions between strategic ambiguity and reification is an antecedent to that development. Considering the dynamic tensions within the development of collective leadership offers critical insight into how individuals negotiate contradictory influences characterizing dynamic organizational systems (Collinson, 2005, Fairhurst, 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we addressed the "what" and "how" questions of collective leadership. Responding to calls for definitional clarity about what collective leadership is (and is not), we provide clear conceptual definitions of directed work, collective work and collective leadership (Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020). In addition, we addressed the "how" question by providing a contextualized understanding of the way collective leadership develops over time (Denis et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020). In doing so we introduced the concept of unified divergence to explain the conditions required for collective leadership to be achieved; the accommodation of strategic ambiguity, inward and outward facing reification practices of idealization, and an indirect inward -facing reification practice of familization.

Our findings provide avenues for further research. We encourage scholars to explore our model and concepts in other settings where organizations are seeking to address complex problems, particularly in contexts where the inter-relationships between collective leadership strategic ambiguity and reification may be explicit. In particular, we call for more work to examine the importance of delineating between internal and external practices of reification,

and how they may shape the enactment of collective leadership. In addition, we suggest scholars should also examine the different reification practices that may be employed in enacting collective leadership. In this study we identified a novel reification practice beyond that proposed by Denis et al (2011). Future work might consider the dynamics of "familization" and their influence on other forms of collective work or on the establishment of new organizations.

Finally, we highlight the importance of understanding the nature of internal and external 'cues'. While the examples given in this paper were specific to this case, the development of collective leadership in both new and established organizational contexts is liable to the influence of external and internal threats (Yang & Aldrich, 2017). However, future work should consider whether internal and external cues which are not seen as threatening, but instead as positive opportunities for growth, have similar influence on the development of collective leadership.

In conclusion, we aim to bring conceptual clarity to a theoretical umbrella. Collective leadership should no longer be amalgamated with collective work. We define collective leadership as the interaction of strategic ambiguity and inward- and outward-facing reification practices, resulting in agreed collective aims, alignment and coordination of activities, commitment to collective success, and the maintenance of divergent perspectives. We conceptualize this as a state of unified divergence, and our process model gives insight into how complex organizational collectives may achieve that state.

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TABLE I:

Executive team roles and identifying numbers

R1	Quality improvement manager
R2	Project officer
R3	Programme administrator
R4	Senior Programme manager
R5	Assistant manager
R6	Head of quality improvement
R7	Head of learning and development
R8	Project manager
R9	Head of evaluation
R10	Academic director
R11	Programme director
R12	Head of operations

TABLE II:

Summary of informants and identifying numbers used in the manuscript

Role in APC	Phase 1 (2009 - 2010)	Phase 2 (2010-2012)	Phase 3 (2012-2013)
Executive Team	**12** (R1 – R12)	**24** (R59 – R70; R129 -140)	**12** (R167 – R178)
Academic researchers	**12** (R13 – R24)	**24** (R71 – R94)	**18** (R179 – R197)
Clinical Practitioners	**34** (R25 – R58)	**60** (R95 – R128; R141 – R166)	**14** (R198 – R210)

TABLE III: Coding structure for Accommodated Divergence

Examples	First order codes	Second order codes	Theoretical categories
Because of the ambiguity we need to help the different parts of the APC come together (R25 – clinical practitioner)	Strategic ambiguity inherent in APC	Strategic ambiguity accommodated	Accommodated divergence
I think we're definitely looking at the right question, but we are well aware that we look at it from a different perspective or have different priorities, so it is a very diverse group and some ambiguity encourages a diversity of interpretations and perspective (R13 – academic researcher)			
I personally think to harness the benefits of the APC work, we need to develop a culture of inclusiveness and belonging… so that then makes people from all these different backgrounds feel like they belong here (R58 - clinical practitioner)	Importance of developing shared sense of belonging		
You've got to hit some level of ambiguity that allows room for diverse objectives and expectations, but I think that it creates challenges and difficulties of being embedded within the core team which can prove challenging. So, developing that sense of belonging is key (R50– clinical practitioner)			
Becoming more of a family, sharing the same vision and purpose may help with the diversity and not having that clarity all the time (R10 – Academic director).	Shared sense of belonging related to a sense of 'family'	Inward facing reification practices of familization	
What we're trying to do is get them to see we're a family, rather than separate units, and encourage them to use a shared language and develop that genuine shared understanding of a loosely defined agenda to so that we can accommodate the quite disparate backgrounds, values and priorities in the APC (R51 - clinical practitioner)			
What we are trying to do is engage with different staff groups or different patient groups try to solve the complex problem of knowledge translation in a complex environment… So, to do that we need to try to create a lot of synergy between them and a lot of resonance between the ideas, to bring those groups together as a family (R39 - clinical practitioner)	Sense of family will accommodate divergence of aims		

I think we're very clear that we need to get people on the same page, working together as a team or a family so they're all working towards the same thing rather than on their own priorities (R19 - academic researcher)			
My focus is to ensure I'm constantly in connection with the other projects, talking to the projects, talking to others who are working closely with the projects, making sure that we're meeting their needs within the APC and providing things that actually help them (R6 – Head of quality improvement)	Discussions about the APC are focused on internal context	Outward facing reification practices not explicit	
So rather than thinking externally what does this look like to people, and then changing and adapting, internalising everything in APC is more important now (R11 – Programme director)	External context of the APC not seen as pressing		
For me, it's around what's going on internally. The external face and the linkages with both other significant external organizations are probably less important for the time being (R 24 - academic researcher)			
What brings it all together I suppose is working together to make things happen wherever possible (R6 – Head of quality improvement)	Alignment and coordination of activities	Collective work	
We can see people starting to working together as a team and everybody is willing to take one for the team at some point. So, we are taking a collaborative approach and the collaborative nature of APC is something that particularly appealed to me (R10 – Academic director)			
We've got multiple projects… but the proviso is that you're not telling them what to do or solving the problem for them: we're all working together to solve the problem or to make an improvement (R37 – clinical practitioner)	APC structured to encourage collective work		
I think collaborative working in the APC is very idea driven and can be very spontaneous, and that's how it's set up, to make it easy to collaborate with lots of different people (R20 – academic researcher)			

TABLE IV: Coding structure for Directed Convergence

Examples	First order codes	Second order codes	Theoretical categories
I think we have to make a firm decision about the overall direction of the APC, that has to happen (R132 - Programme Director, internal meeting, 2011).	Sense that multiple perspectives can no longer be allowed	Strategic ambiguity reduced	Directed convergence
But now they have started imposing things on the project teams to ensure (the APC) gets the new funding in. So, they tell us how to work now (R114 –clinical practitioner)			
The executive team are being very prescriptive about it, it has to be done this way, you have to do it this way, and some of the things I found to be very impractical (R118 – clinical practitioner).	Executive team direct APC priorities		
And I think it's very important to realize and be clear with the idea that this is a decision that people can't influence, because the decisions are already made for them (R 62 – Project manager)			
I think the whole point is refunding is the main priority, there is no ambiguity about that' (R 75 – academic researcher)	Clear focus on need to secure refunding		
To develop and expand our programme we need more funding, we're explicitly told that's the only way forward (R43 – clinical practitioner)			
In the early days there was a lot of focus on developing a sense of family and there were lots of opportunities for people to get involved in. These days everybody seems to be talking about how to bring in this new funding and everything else is side-lined (R 104 – clinical practitioner)	Need to develop sense of belonging no longer felt	Absence of inward facing reification practices	
It's not really about the collective effort now, it's more hierarchical and I find it is difficult to involve people more. There's no sense of community (R76 - academic researcher)			
We can't look long term and think about the APC family unless we get refunded for the next five years (R132 – Programme Director)	Internal context of the APC not seen as pressing		

If we're going to survive beyond five years we build that external image as a world class academic centre (R 77 -academic researcher)	External context of APC seen as important	Outward facing reification practices of idealization	
We will be doing some of that external stakeholder stuff that will gradually increase our visibility with our partners so that they can trust we can support them achieve their objectives (R69 – Head of quality improvement)			
We need to demonstrate to [external partner, a world class University] that we are becoming a world class organization, loud and clear (R63 – Head of Evaluation)	External communication used to imbue APC work with importance		
It's a world class collaboration it's just been curated in a way that makes it world class (R141- clinical practitioner)			
There is no doubt that our partners need to clearly understand that we can help them achieve their strategic objectives, so external stakeholder engagement strategy should be very clear. we have to be known for developing a scientific and systematic approach to support evidence-based innovation (R 99 – clinical practitioner)	External communication clear about the purpose of the APC		
Part of their job is that external engagement, so working with people across the sector, our partners and making it crystal clear that the purpose of the APC is to help them solve important problems or to help them make an improvement in the long-term (R132 – Programme Director)			
The silo mentality seems to have come back and I think we are changing the way that we work, there is less input that we are getting from the project teams (R135 – Project manager)	Work no longer aligned or coordinated	Directed work	
There used to be more appetite for collaborative working. These days everybody sits in their own project team. We are encouraged to spend time in their teams (R 128 - clinical practitioner)			
We had built up a core of people, a sort of a clan or a community of practice but now everything is being controlled by the executive team and it seems more fragmented because you're always being told how to work, even if it's not the right way (R88 – academic researcher)	Work is directed by executive team		
Authority and accountability are centralised with the top, and there's not much evidence of distributed leadership in the way that our project runs on a week to week basis (R 65 – Project manager)			

TABLE V: Coding structure for Unified Divergence

Examples	First order codes	Second order codes	Theoretical categories
We secured funding for the next 5 years and this is our opportunity to become more diverse and try to solve more complex problems by drawing on a range of partners (R 170 - Project manager)	Ambiguity again accommodated within the APC	Strategic ambiguity (re)accommodated	Unified divergence
We can again do that kind of work, which involves cooperation of people from lots of different organizations, but now we are not going to be very prescriptive about how we do it (R176- programme officer)			
Our community is growing, we are becoming more diverse and complex and we can speak different languages and have many different aims. So, we need to find a way of feeling like we're sort of halfway between a true academic department and slightly more frontline NHS staff (R210 – clinical practitioner)	Ambiguity around goals requires shared sense of belonging		
It is our understanding that by working together we can achieve a massive cultural shift to transform the way health research and innovation is coordinated… to create a more innovative health service that benefits the whole system, the whole of society (R207 – clinical practitioner)	Shared sense of belonging related to the importance of APC work	Inward facing reification practices of idealization	
I think that's probably one of the big selling points of the APC, I see it as good way to do important research and implement some important research or new research to solve big challenges (R183- academic researcher)			
What we do here is so important. We are trying to engage with different staff groups or different patient groups try to solve the complex problem of knowledge translation in a complex environment… there is no one way to solve that problem (R149 - clinical provider)	Importance of work allows for multiple perspectives		

It is our understanding that by working together we can achieve a massive cultural shift to transform the way health research and innovation is coordinated… to create a more innovative health service that benefits the whole system, the whole of society (R196 – academic researcher).			
Many of our stakeholders realize the APC has an important role to play, in that they have seen a value in bringing together diverse groups to sort of trying to disrupt the normal system (R192 – academic researcher)	Acknowledgement that there are many different ways to approach the important APC work		
You've got to hit some level of ambiguity that allows room for diverse objectives and expectations, because the stuff we do here has no clear right answer. So, we've got to encourage different ways of working together (R203– clinical practitioner)			
We are becoming very influential as a community with a very strong brand, so it has helped to gel relationships with the actual team and create that sense of belonging to an organization that does really important work (R172 – Head of learning and development).	Perceived importance of APC work creates a sense of belonging	Indirect inward facing reification practices of familization	
Its' a privilege to feel part of a team which is working on such a complex and critically important programme. So, I feel like we have a very strong community (R204 - clinical practitioner)			
What attracted me to this role is that you can see there's a clear feeling in this APC you are part of a family (R198 – clinical practitioner)	Talk about belonging to the 'APC family'		
Our world class reputation dealing with complex interventions, it's around complexity and complex intervention and, and there is a bit about it in being much closer to the real world. In other words, we're dealing with real, real problems (R 184 – academic researcher)	External communications used to imbue APC ambiguity with importance	Outward facing reification practices of idealization	
We are extremely diverse, that's our strength, so that's what we've been trying to communicate (R178 - Academic Director)			
The vision of the APC is something that we all agree is very important and buy-into it, but involves things that you can't control or you don't have the right answers and that makes it exciting, but I think that's very challenging for our team to work without our partners so making our communication more ambiguous, if you like, does help I think (R209- clinical practitioner)	External communication highlights the work of the APC is ambiguous		

We need to be clear to a partner, the APC is a collective, it is a collective of projects and that inevitably leads to ambiguity in some cases (R179- academic researcher)			
I think we're very clear that what we're trying to do here is solve some complex issues by bringing together a diverse group of people. We don't always agree on how to do that but we agree where we want to be (R199 – clinical practitioner)	Agreed direction about what the collective is trying to achieve	Collective leadership	
Because we all do broadly agree on what we're doing here but we have our own ways of doing things, it means it's flexible and it empowers individuals or empowers teams to have confidence to develop ideas and initiatives, to have their ideas and initiatives listened to and responded to, to take on leadership of different projects or come up with different solutions to things (R195 - academic researcher)			
There's a lot of stuff that's democratic, there's a lot of leadership stuff that other people are doing. Rachel will come along and say, no, you need to think about this differently. Tom will say, no, let's try it this way and he'll take on leadership of another aspect of the project (R 170 – senior project manager)	Alignment and coordination of activities		
We make communal decisions really, and I think there's a lot of quite consensual work, and I think that's probably an example of more distributed leadership; just allowing different people to get on with it and coming up with creative solutions (R172 – Head of learning and development)			
We all want it to work, we're all here to make a difference. So, everyone is taking more and more leadership responsibility… everyone is responsible at different times shaping the development of shared objectives and goals for service innovation (R 183 - academic researcher)	Commitment to the success of the collective		
We are sharing a collective leadership responsibility for each other and supporting each other to participate within this programme, to imbed some of these deep principles into workable partnership and develop collective opportunities and skills (R187 – academic researcher)			

FIGURE I: A process model of collective leadership development