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# Exploring Quaker Organising to Consider the Possibilities for Relational Leadership

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## Abstract

This paper develops the perspective of ‘relational leadership’ by exploring dynamics of influence within Quaker organising. The theory of relational leadership is drawn upon as it is connected with more sustainable and equitable ways of organising. A Quaker context is studied as it is conducive for understanding possibilities for relational leadership because there is no formal hierarchy. By applying three aspects of a relational leadership perspective (mutual influence process [1], momentary [2] and socially co-constructed [3]) to a thematic analysis of interview data, understanding is developed about the potential dynamics of influence and leadership in non-hierarchical organising. Two contributions to relational leadership theory are offered. Firstly, the paper shows a need for greater critical attention to appreciate the potential subtleties and tensions involved in influencing dynamics in non-hierarchical organising; and, secondly, assumptions about the continuous potential for fluidity of influencing are challenged.

## Keywords

Quaker, relational leadership, influence, equality, weighty friend, sustainability

## Introduction

In this paper I consider dynamics of taking and giving leadership within Quaker organising. The purpose for this exploration is to consider forms of leadership that can support ‘sustainability’. Sustainability has become a significant and important topic largely as a result of scientific understanding and assessments of issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and nitrogen and phosphorus build-up in oceans (IPCC 2018; Steffen et al. 2015; Warren et al. 2018). Additionally, for some time indigenous communities have highlighted detrimental changes within

various ecosystems (Weatherhead et al. 2010). In the broadest terms, sustainability is about promoting the continuity of human societies within a biophysical habitat (the world) by addressing emerging ecological issues such as those mentioned. The achievement of sustainable ecologies is 'intimately linked to a recognition that, unless society strives for a greater level of social and economic equity ... the long-term objective of a more sustainable world is unlikely to be secured' (Agyeman et al. 2002: 78).

Linkages between social equality and ecological sustainability have been suggested to involve a variety of dimensions and dynamics. Intergenerational equality: so that future generations of human and non-human species have an equal potential to flourish (e.g. WCED 1987). Gender inequalities: whereby patriarchy is connected to the domination of both women and nature (e.g. Plumwood 2002). Class inequalities: by which, through processes of capital accumulation, an elite perpetuate the appropriation and exploitation of the working class and nature (e.g. Marx 1976). Financial inequalities: whereby greater consumption of goods and services (including luxury products) by the wealthiest people in a society become aspirational indicators of social success and a higher status, which informs consumerist ideals (e.g. Urry 2010). International inequalities: with some nations having much greater financial wealth connected to higher levels of consumption and so are attributable for a larger proportion of industrial pollution related to the production and use of goods (e.g. automobiles and aeroplane travel), and so have greater responsibility for remedying ecological issues (e.g. Meadows et al. 2005). Racial inequalities: involving the elevation (e.g. 'Western science') and denigration (e.g. 'indigenous knowledge') of different cultures and related forms of knowing and being that are variously connected to nature (e.g. Banerjee 2003). Indeed, for some, all hierarchical relations (including social, political or economic inequities) are suggested to signify domination of fellow humans, which are reflected in, and the origins of, humans seeking dominion over natural processes (Bookchin 1982; Bookchin 1990).

By assuming, related to the linkages mentioned above, that social inequalities are closely intertwined with unsustainability I am interested in exploring processes of leadership that can be appreciated as congruent with the promotion of equality. In doing so I am connecting with others' interests in critically studying leadership beyond capitalist, managerialist and hierarchical organisations (Sutherland 2018; Sutherland et al. 2014; Western 2014). To do this I explore dynamics of giving and taking leadership in Quaker organising, which has no formal hierarchy and where fostering equality is a key concern (Dandelion 1996; 2008).

In this paper, as will be discussed, taking a critical perspective involves an interest in considering leadership as a 'process of power-based reality construction' between people (Smircich and Morgan 1982: 270). This means that my attentions differ from some existing writings about Quaker 'spiritual' or 'servant' leadership in which there is a tendency to focus on considering inherent traits or behaviours of designated, or non-designated, leaders (e.g. Crippen 2011; Greenleaf 2007).

Consequently, I will draw on ideas of ‘relational leadership’ to analyse and explore interviews with twenty Quakers from across the north of England. By considering questions including ‘how do people work together to define their relationships in a way that generates leadership influence?’ (Uhl-Bien 2006: 668), relational leadership is typically applied within hierarchical organisations and suggested to be an antidote to individualistic ideas of designated leaders (e.g. Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). A relational leadership perspective has not been significantly applied in analyses of organisational contexts, such as Quaker organising, that are described as ‘alternative’ and non-hierarchical (Parker et al. 2014).

This paper will proceed as follows. Firstly, existing writing about relational leadership will be briefly reviewed and three key aspects considered. Next the research context and methodology will be explained. Following this an analysis of key themes will be presented and then discussed from a relational leadership perspective. Finally, two key contributions to relational leadership theory will be offered. One contribution relates to a need for a relational leadership perspective that develops greater critical attention, as studying a form of organising with no formal hierarchy suggests that the patterns of influencing between people can become more subtle and so, if problematic, harder to address. A second contribution relates to how the assumption of a relational leadership perspective about the probable fluidity and fleetingness of influence may obscure, even in situations of non-hierarchy, how patterns of influence can, at times, become quite fixed and static.

### **Leadership and Relational Leadership**

One classification of different types of leadership theory is arrived at from three perspectives: heroic, post-heroic and critical (Collinson 2011). Heroic or leader-centric perspectives involve assumptions about individual leaders’ inherent or essential characteristics, traits and behaviours (Zaccaro et al. 2004). This perspective is termed ‘heroic’ as the focus of leadership interest is overwhelmingly on the ‘top-down’ actions of the individual leader, with very limited attention to followers, who are assumed to be passively compliant and so unimportant to understanding leadership. Approaches to studying and theorising leadership associated with this perspective are frequently criticised as romanticising the significance of individual positional leaders to organisational success (e.g. Bligh et al. 2011).

Post-heroic, the second perspective, understands leadership to be a less hierarchical concept with more focus on informal practices and shared responsibility—and, significantly, appreciating followers as having a potentially crucial role (Fletcher 2004). However, while it is suggested that this perspective brings significant benefits by decentring the leader and directing attention to their interdependence with followers for enacting leadership, it is criticised for ignoring the role of power relations between leaders and followers (Collinson 2011). These criticisms inform the third perspective, termed ‘critical’.

The critical perspective attempts to address the limitations associated with the heroic and post-heroic perspectives by taking into account the power dynamics involved in the practices of leading and following, as well as considering how leaders and followers are interpreted and portrayed. Within this perspective there is particular attention both to how leaders can compel, in negative ways, followers to conform, comply and consent, and to how followers, in some cases, are able to disrupt and resist leader attempts at control (Collinson 2006). The critical perspective also involves exploring negative aspects of leading such as how leaders can inflict serious and enduring harm on followers, organisations and societies (Padilla et al. 2007). In general, the critical perspective challenges assumptions that the leaders are always the people ‘in charge’ and explores complex leadership dynamics between contexts, leaders and followers with particular attention to issues of power, authority and control.

Connected to the post-heroic and critical perspectives are emerging interests in ‘collective’ and ‘relational’ leadership (Ospina and Foldy 2016; Raelin 2016). Relational leadership, which will be explained in the following paragraphs, offers the potential to understand ways of fostering sustainable and equitable forms of managing and organising to help to address complex, pressing and conflict-ridden socio-ecological challenges (Nicholson and Kurucz 2017). Western (2013) suggests that relational leadership is particularly relevant for organisations pursuing democratic and participative ways of working, such as co-operative, social enterprise and non-for-profit organisations and religious, spiritual and utopian-inspired communities. However, so far relational leadership has tended to be studied in ‘traditional’ organisations with hierarchies and managerial roles (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). Studying Quaker organising offers opportunities for developing the relational leadership perspective because, without a formal hierarchy and with strong attentions to equality, it should be a conducive context (Allen 2017). Consequently, the Quaker context offers possibilities to consider the potential limits of a relational leadership perspective, which are so far under-explored.

Relational leadership explores leadership ‘as a social influence process through which coordination and change emerge’ (Nicholson and Kurucz 2017: 2). This perspective decentres individual people as having an ongoing status, role or capacity to be leaders. In this view leadership is about processes of people interacting in which, at various moments, some people may be ‘taking leadership’—that is, being influential in informing what is discussable, how the current situation is understood and what can be acceptable action—or ‘giving leadership’—that is, permitting or promoting the views or actions of other people as figural in what is relevant and important at that moment. Within a relational leadership perspective an ‘act of leadership’ involves a person influencing other people in ways which those influenced understand to be compatible with their values and interests (Hosking 1988). Consequently, relational leadership can be understood as a ‘mutual influence process’ (Uhl-Bien 2006), which is ‘momentary

within an ever-evolving field of relations' (Wood and Dibben 2015: 39), and where leadership influence is 'socially co-constructed' (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). I explain the meanings of these three key ideas associated with relational leadership next.

Understanding leadership as encompassing a *mutual influence process* means that, as with other ideas about leadership, it is codependent with followership (Uhl-Bien 2006). What is particular to a relational leadership perspective is that the movement between leadership and followership is fluid and potentially fleeting. There can be no influence process without those who are influencing and those being influenced, which means that leadership is understood not to be a property or trait of any person but as occurring within dynamic relations between people (Hosking 2011). To speak of individuals as being 'leaders', with some fixed 'attributes', is incompatible with ideas of relational leadership.

The concept of relational leadership suggests that leadership influence is *momentary* among evolving relations. As suggested by Wood and Dibben, from a process perspective 'leadership does not congeal into human subjects, but is always an achievement that is momentary within an ever-evolving field of relations' (2015: 39). They go on to argue that 'leadership [is] not given, but [is] always in the process of becoming, on the way in or out' (Wood and Dibben 2015: 39)—it is an 'event in the making' (41). What this means is that because the interactions between people, places, words and actions happen in dynamic interplay (e.g. we physically move around, events change our views and offer us new information, words gain new meanings and associations based on our experiences) so the spaces for leading emerge through and among these flowing relations. Consequently, the possibilities for influence and being influenced are formed and reformed by the changing constellations of our social and physical relations.

Relational leadership is *socially constructed*, which is based on an assumption that 'organisational members actively create their organisational world through their relationships with one another' (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011: 1432). Consequently, relational leadership involves a relational understanding of the world—that is, that people and things are given meaning only in relation to, and through interaction with, other people and things. For example, the idea of leadership influence can only be seen as existing if those involved (the influencers and the influenced) construct it to be so. Different people will perceive the meanings of their relations and interactions differently, and hence have varying views about how they are being influenced or are influencing. Additionally, we may well be led and influenced in how we interpret the contributions of others as much by their (historical) actions as by what they might say, which means that identifying and understanding 'flows' of influence may be messy and diffuse. Significantly, social construction implies that the contributions of different people are understood as not having equal influence; inequalities of influence are involved, based on how people are construed (e.g. in terms of ideas of gender, race and sexuality) (Hosking 1988). Consequently, leadership can be understood 'as a political process in which

different participants seek to further different, sometimes conflicting values and interests' (Uhl-Bien 2006: 669).

### Context and Methodology

This relational leadership study explores the context of Quaker organising because there is no formal hierarchy. Quakers (or Religious Society of Friends) are an international community of about 340,000 people, and tend to be understood as nonconformist Christians (Dandelion 2008). There is much variety between Quakers and Quaker Meetings, as there is no creed or statement of belief. For example, some people might identify as Buddhist-Quakers or Muslim-Quakers. In general, Quakers in Britain are guided by four testimonies: equality, simplicity, truth and peace—of which equality tends to be seen as the most important. There are different national, regional and local aspects, and associated roles in Quaker organisation. However, the overriding principle is that nobody is 'in charge' (Bradney and Cownie 2000: 71), and, to avoid the development of hierarchies and protectiveness over people's positions, roles are expected to be rotated every three years. The 'business method', the key decision-making process, has been developed over the past 350 years. There are many dimensions to the 'business method', but a core ideal, expressed in secular terms, is that 'everyone must feel it right to let the decision go ahead, even if there are bits of it which they might have expressed differently, or changed in some way' (Bradney and Cownie 2000: 71).

This is a qualitative study, for which the core data are interviews with twenty Quakers from Meetings across the north of England. I completed the interviews, each up to an hour long, during April and May 2017. Five were completed via telephone or internet video call, while the rest were face-to-face at each Quakers' associated meeting house (the building run by a Meeting). Of the people interviewed, thirteen are women and seven men. Two were aged under forty, five were aged between forty and sixty and thirteen were over sixty, which is fairly representative of the different age groups involved in Quakers in Britain. All the participants volunteered to take part in the study following my email contact with four Meetings requesting people who would be interested in participating.

I explained to participants that the study was about exploring the term 'Weighty Friend'. In general, this term relates to individual Quakers (or 'Friends') whose views are understood in various ways to have greater influence (or weight) in decision-making than those of other Quakers (Dandelion 1996; Plüss 1995). The purpose of the research was to use 'Weighty Friend' as a concept to open up discussion about how the possibility that the contributions of some Quakers had greater influence interacted with the potential to organise equitably. As will be explained below, the core theoretical lens for the study, relational leadership, emerged through the analysis of the interview materials gathered. The two research questions were: 'How is the term 'Weighty Friend' understood by

Quakers?’ and ‘How does this concept contribute to or interrupt possibilities for equality in Quaker organising?’

The semi-structured interviews included a range of broadly situated questions, such as: ‘What ideas or images do you associate with the concept of ‘Weighty Friend’?’ ‘In what ways do you see Friends associating or disassociating with the concept of ‘Weighty Friend’?’ and ‘How is the concept of ‘Weighty Friend’ relevant for you in how Meetings for Business/Church Affairs are conducted?’ Questions were not asked in the same order each time, but were used as a checklist to make sure that all key aspects had been covered in detail. Specific questions were used to seek greater detail and clarity or prompt further examples of what interviewees had spoken about. I had not met with or had any previous contact with any of the participants, other than the process of setting up each interview and gaining their informed consent, prior to meeting and talking with them. I kept a research diary which tracked some of my reflections about the process and content of each interview, and potential connections between what participants said.

My approach to the interview materials is an abductive one, whereby ‘method can generate and shape theory, just as theory can generate and shape method’. It involves ‘a back-and-forth character in which concepts, conjectures, and data are in continuous interplay’ (Van Maanen et al. 2007: 1146). This means that the theory and associated concepts used to make sense of the data are active in shaping themes and patterns that are noticed and interpreted, while the data shape possibilities of potential connections to some theories rather than others. A range of debates and associated theoretical perspectives related to authority, power and equality were considered for the theoretical framing of the analysis of the interview materials. However, through processes of thematic analysis relational leadership became the chosen framing, as it offers possibilities to include aspects of the other mentioned areas because of the focus on the dynamics of influence between people. My phases of analysis, adapted from Terry et al. (2017), are: familiarisation and coding (phases 1–2); theme development (phase 3); reviewing themes (phase 4); and settling themes through writing up (phase 5).

Familiarisation and coding (phases 1–2) involved listening to all the recorded interviews chronologically and noting interviewees’ comments that appeared significant, interconnected or contradictory in relation to what others said. I also made a note of timings of potentially important quotes for later selective transcription. During this phase I began to create one document that included organising the reflections from my research diary so that they were next to the notes of the interviews to which they related. My coding processes involved reading through the document of notes to consider and highlight key ideas expressed by each interviewee in relation to the two key research questions: how interviewees made sense of the term ‘Weighty Friend’; and interviewees felt that how the concept ‘Weighty Friend’ may contribute to or interrupt possibilities for equality in Quaker organising. While particular interview questions were focused around the two research questions, the way in which the interviews



unfolded meant that participants' comments relating to these questions tended to be scattered across each interview.

Theme development (phase 3) involved going back through the coded document to start to bring together the notes about the various meanings of 'Weighty Friend' expressed by participants within themes, with associated sub-themes. To keep track of the range and number of participants being associated with each sub-theme I highlighted each participants' contributions in a unique colour. A process of sorting and resorting (phase 4, 'reviewing themes') the different contributions into themes with sub-themes was carried out until there was a coherence and connectivity between all contributions captured under each sub-theme (see Table 1). It was more straightforward to thematically arrange the views expressed about how 'Weighty Friend' may interrupt or promote possibilities for equality (see Table 2), because the second research question had less variety than the first question, which involved an array of meanings attributed to 'Weighty Friend'. This phase of analysis involved going back to the recordings to transcribe key quotations across the sub-themes which had been tracked via the note taking in phases 1–2. Phase 5 of the analysis, 'settling themes through writing up', was enacted through preparing papers such as this one, in which the lens of relational leadership was used to interpret and make sense of the interview materials gathered.

### Analysis and Discussion

The themes and associated sub-themes are presented in Tables 1 and 2 in relation to both the research questions, respectively. As noted in the tables, the number of participants to whom the theme relates is presented in brackets following each sub-theme. I first provide some overview about Table 1 and Table 2 and then the themes and sub-themes are discussed from a relational leadership perspective.

We can make some general comments about the themes and sub-themes presented. First, theme 4, 'As a negative aspect of past and current ways of working', and the connected sub-themes were the most discussed by participants. In part this relates to how the term 'Weighty Friend'—although it is a part of the Quaker vocabulary (found on a wide range of Quaker websites and in writings)<sup>1</sup>—is

1 The term 'Weighty Friend' can be found in various Quaker books and articles—for example, Dandelion (1996); Calvert (2009); Robson (2014); Frost (2014); and Hamm (2003)—in doctoral and masters theses—for example, Sutherland (2012); Manasseh (2009); and Robson (2005—as well as on a range of websites [all accessed February 2019]: 'Weighty Friends and Quaker Pharisees', <https://westernfriend.org/article/weighty-friends-and-quaker-pharisees>; 'On Being a Weighty Friend', <http://nancyjthomas.blogspot.com/2013/05/on-being-weighty-friend.html>; 'Weighty Friends', <http://www.catapultmagazine.com/weight/article/weighty-friends/index.html>; 'What do Quakers mean when they say ...?', <http://www.chapelhillfriends.org/popups/glossary.html>; 'Quaker Jargon Buster For Ealing Quaker Meeting', [http://www.ealingquakers.org.uk/jargon\\_buster](http://www.ealingquakers.org.uk/jargon_buster); 'Quaker Glossary', <http://downtownfriendsmeeting.org/glossary.htm>; 'A Quaker Glossary—With some notes on how things got that way', <http://bellinghamfriends.org/wp-content/uploads/A%20Quaker%20Glossary.pdf>; 'Open Quakers', <http://www>.

Table 1. Overview of themes related to the question  
‘How is the term “Weighty Friend” understood by Quakers?’

Theme	Sub-theme (and number of participants that it particularly relates to)
1. As positive and aspirational ways of being	a) Comprehensive understanding of process and procedure ‘right ordering’ (9)
	b) Opening up ways forward, not forcing a way forward ‘holding the meeting’ (6)
	c) Bring out others gifts ‘drawing people out’ (7)
	d) Myth, anecdote or rumour (3)
	e) Living their Quaker faith (5)
2. As organisational experience and depth of knowing within Quakers	a) Have or have held formal roles—connections these bring (9)
	b) Knowledge of Quaker writings (5)
	c) Length of service/retired from work so having time (7)
3. As social performance/ being socially successful beyond Quakers	a) Comes across as confident and articulate (4)
	b) Professional and technical knowledge (11)
4. As a negative aspect of past and current ways of working	a) Not a used term now/of the past (16)
	b) Disparaging and derogatory term (14)
5. As a term that should be resisted to apply to others and yourself	a) Resist having term applied to them—would not use in conversation (10)
	b) If you see yourself as a Weighty Friend then you are not one (6)

suggested to be a notion that is no longer in regular oral usage. A few participants even asked why I was researching a concept about which they didn’t hear very much. In addition, a large proportion of the participants (70 per cent) mentioned that it was, among other meanings, a derogatory or pejorative term connected to people who ‘threw their weight around’ and felt that they deserved to be heard more than others. Second, across the themes the concept of ‘Weighty Friend’ was seen by many research participants as both having positive and negative meanings and associations. Although, as mentioned above, the term tended to be seen as quite tainted and of a previous era, many of the same participants also said that there were Quakers who they generally respected more than others for what they said and/or did. This is connected to sub-theme 5a, ‘Resist having term applied

[openquakers.org.uk/language.html](http://openquakers.org.uk/language.html); ‘Quaker Alphabet Blog Week 45—W for Weighty Friends’, <https://stumblingstepping.blogspot.com/2013/11/quaker-alphabet-blog-week-45-w-for.html?m=0>; and ‘Hasting Quakers’, <http://hastings-quakers.org.uk/index.php/language/>.

Table 2. Overview of themes relating to the question ‘How does “Weighty Friend” contribute to or interrupt possibilities for equality in Quaker organising?’

Theme	Sub-theme (and number of participants that it particularly relates to)
1. Interrupts	a) Supports the possibility of understanding some as possessing consistently superior contributions (9) b) Helps individuals consider their potential to be something more than others (7) c) Assumes invisible hierarchy (7) d) Helps to avoid talking about power (6)
2. Contributes to	a) Through associated humour allows questions to be raised (5) b) By Weighty Friends bringing out others’ gifts (6) c) Weight is not fixed—can be dynamic and surprising (5)

to them—would not use in conversation’, whereby ‘Weighty Friend’ might be an idea participants connect to other Quakers who they understand that they are more influenced by, but that saying and publicly attributing the term to others was something that should be avoided. Third, the positive qualities associated with the concept were generally expressed as about processes and ways of being (in particular sub-themes 1b, 1c and 1e). However, there were also positive qualities that related to particular types of knowledge that a Weighty Friend was seen to possess, about ‘right ordering’ (1a), performing a variety of roles (2a and 2c), an understanding of Quaker texts (2b) and professional and technical knowledge (3b).

Some general observations may be made about Table 2. First, both the range of sub-themes and the number of participants related to the idea of the ‘Weighty Friend’ as *interrupting* possibilities for equality are greater than those for the idea of the ‘Weighty Friend’ as *contributing* to possibilities for equality. The former group of connected dynamics are mostly (1a, 1b and 1c) about the opening up of a possibility of a fairly permanent label becoming attached to particular Quakers. The final sub-theme in this group (1d) indicates how participants suggested that, as part of the Quaker vocabulary, the term helped people to avoid talking about power. Second, the term ‘Weighty Friend’ was suggested to contribute to equality by being understood as a humorous concept that helped to support discussions among Friends about different people’s authority (2a), by relating to the notion of people having different ‘gifts’ (2b), and by signalling a dynamic notion of influence that was not fixed to particular people’s bodies (2c).

I will now move from this general commentary on Tables 1 and 2 to explore a range of indicative quotations to give more texture to the themes and sub-themes presented. The most interesting dynamics and insights in this study, for developing a relational leadership perspective, relate to how the various themes expressed by

each participant potentially connect and come into tension with each other. I have organised my discussion under the three aspects of relational leadership outlined earlier: mutual influence process, momentary and socially constructed. The quotations are selected to give as wide as possible a range of voices from the research participants.

*1. Mutual Influence Process—Leadership is Understood Not to Be a Property or Trait of Anybody but Occurs Within Dynamic Relations Between People*

The interviewees frequently mentioned concepts such as leading and leadership as applying to particular people, rather than leadership as a mutual influence process. However, as the interviews were explained to participants to be about exploring ‘Weighty Friend’ this may have helped to shape and individualise leadership to be a property of a person. For example, for Tracey the concept of ‘Weighty Friend’ can be seen to connect to a person and endure as a potential ‘label’, as opposed to being a more transitory descriptor.

Tracey—I talked to somebody yesterday ... about the term [Weighty Friend], they used the word pejorative. If you use it it is more pejorative than an admiring, respectful thing. We are not using it seriously in this Meeting. The person I was speaking to said they could only think of one person who would have wanted to be thought of a Weighty Friend, and we both smiled and knew exactly who that person was. It was indeed somebody who was very elderly and no longer with us by a few years.

As this quote suggests, there is a multidimensionality to the meanings that Tracey (along with many other) participants gave to the term ‘Weighty Friend’: it had both negative and positive associations (as mentioned in relation to the themes listed in Table 1). In this example, the negative sense related to the term as a pejorative one about Quakers who might think too much of their own views, and the positive sense related to the term’s use in a potentially ‘admiring’ or ‘respectful’ way. These tensions in the meanings of ‘Weighty Friend’ was also expressed by Emily.

Emily—When I was young a Weighty Friend was somebody who might be described as weighty, but it was done very lovingly. There were Friends who spoke whose words had weight to them, who could hold the meeting, who could pull us back if we were not centring in a Business Meeting. They might be the person who got to their feet and you always think ‘oh good, they are going to say something worth hearing’. You might think they were very serious, but actually looking back all the Weighty Friends I can think of had lovely senses of humour, really lovely people. ... I think now it’s almost said defensively it’s a sense of people being too serious for their own good possibly.

In this quotation there is an association of the term with the past (as mentioned with regard to Table 1), but also indications that Emily currently uses the notion of ‘Weighty Friend’ in how she makes sense of other Quakers. There is a sense of nostalgia: she has a loving association with the term which is for her connected to

images of particular Quakers. However, Emily expresses ideas that the term has developed negative connotations which have challenged and changed the general contemporary meanings away from the appreciative and respectful sense that she attributed to Quakers who had ‘lovely senses of humour’. Consequently, we can appreciate the multifaceted aspects of the meanings many participants attributed, as they would tend to describe a term that is interwoven with both negative and positive associations.

The term’s negative connotations relating to the extra weight given to particular Quakers’ views are highlighted in Scott’s comment below. In the quotation he reflects on his decision to leave ‘Young Friends General Meeting’ (the national organisation for Quakers aged eighteen to thirty years in Britain) as he felt he was being listened to too much. His withdrawal from this Meeting in the interests of equality can be construed as an act of leadership as he seeks to help to open up the space for others to influence.

Scott—The thought that people can be accorded more weight was one of the reasons that I moved on from Young Friends General Meeting. There was only one person who had been continuously going longer than me at that point and they had started younger. I had noticed that people had started listening to what I said, which was initially gratifying. Until I got the impression that they were according it too much authority ... . Which I didn’t think was good for the Meeting especially given the nature of Young Friends General Meeting with the continuous turnover of people. People stopping thinking for themselves as much would be bad ... so it seemed a good time to move on.

In relation to ideas of leadership as a mutual influence process, Emily mentioned ‘Weighty Friends’ as Quakers ‘who could hold the meeting, who could pull us back if we were not centring in a Business Meeting’. Whilst this aspect can be appreciated as involving the attribution of a potential ‘leadership quality’ it can be understood that influence in decision-making processes (e.g. Business Meetings) may be seen to be not about asserting a viewpoint, but about helping those present to (re)focus on the matter under discussion by ‘holding the meeting’, ‘pulling us back’ and ‘helping centring’. The meanings of these ideas are perhaps somewhat particular to Quaker organising and theology owing to commitments to ‘God in everyone’ and decision-making that involves ‘discerning the will of God’, although it has been argued that ‘Quaker decision-making can be interpreted in ways that allow “secular” appropriations of the process’ (Muers and Burton 2018: 10). However, in relation to considering aspects of mutual influence the concept of ‘Weighty Friend’ suggests somebody who can show careful awareness of the group processes and at given moments intervene in emerging dynamics in ways that others appreciate and find helpful in making collective decisions. Another participant, Mary, adds to these notions by suggesting that the idea of ‘gifts’ is important, saying that leading can involve drawing out the gifts of other Quakers:

Mary—We are all equal as people, but some of us bring different gifts and sometimes you need the gifts to be pulled out by other people. There is no point in putting somebody who is terrified of numbers to be the treasurer on day one for example. Some people as I say struggle with the concept of equality and gifts.

As we have explored under this first aspect of the relational leadership perspective participants tended not to articulate ideas about dynamic mutual influence processes, instead tending to speak about the relatively stable positive and negative qualities of particular people. However, what comes through from the participants, as shown in the quotations presented, is that ‘Weighty Friend’ and connected notions of leadership are related to enabling the space for there to be equality among Quakers, whether it is about ‘helping others centre’, ‘bringing out others’ gifts’ or withdrawing from a group in which they feel they are being overly and unhelpfully influential. In many senses interviewees saw leadership as related to others’, or their own, focus on processes in which Quakers strive to come together so that all can be influential.

## *2. Momentary—the Possibilities for Leading and Being Led are Formed and Reformed Through our Evolving Relations*

A key aspect of non-hierarchical Quaker organising is, as previously mentioned, that roles within a Quaker Meeting are formally rotated at least every three years. This way of working creates ongoing evolution in the roles and associated relations and responsibilities. This dynamic is mentioned by Cathy when she talks about people being appointed to roles and their associated power:

Cathy—The practice of appointing people for three years to do a job makes it much more equal. Otherwise you would end up with people saying ‘oh well they’ve always been the treasurer they can be the treasurer, or the whatever’. That does change power relationships, and I know Quakers don’t like talking about power, but there is power among Friends ... . Some Friends do have power at different times, they will have more power. I don’t think that is necessarily wrong, but I know that most Quakers hate to talk about power and leadership.

While relational leadership decentres a focus on people doing particular (‘leader’) roles, what Cathy appears to be suggesting is that roles offer the individuals holding them the potential for greater influence. So Quaker organising is characterised by an enforced evolution in the relations between people, as formalised roles are shifted in regular cycles. Cathy is not inferring the moment-to-moment reconfiguring of ‘influencing’ and ‘being influenced’ characteristic of a relational leadership perspective, but does indicate organisational tendencies towards more fluid leadership dynamics. Although ‘Weighty Friend’ was related directly to roles (particularly sub-theme 2a in Table 1), it was also seen as a label that might be attached to or detached from somebody, aside from the roles they might hold. Amy suggests these potential processes of (de)attaching using the metaphor of a ‘cloak’.

Amy—They could lose it [the label of Weighty Friend]. I think it would be about the way they conducted themselves . . . . I would assume that they would be active in a lot of matters concerning the Meeting like finance, the building and everything else . . . . I think if they did start pushing a particular view that cloak would fall away from them.

However, other participants noted that complications existed relating to certain people having influence and their views tending to be respected, alongside a situation in which everybody should be able to contribute. For example, Tina appears to see the concept of ‘Weighty Friend’ in both lights:

Tina—Most of the people I know would probably say the same that we are democratic and we accept contributions from everybody without giving anybody any more weight than anybody else . . . . It [Weighty Friend] is not anti democratic but it’s not pro . . . people receive respect in whatever organisation and I would think that anybody here would receive respect without being labelled.

David offers the idea of, and opposition to, weight being something that can potentially ‘freeze’ on an individual, i.e. weight as a stable attribute of a person at all times rather than something that is fluid and contextual. However, like Tina, he expresses an underlying tension, or dilemma, between undue deference and respect for experience. David seems to navigate the potential tensions through this notion of ‘freeze’, i.e. that the respect for experience, and so the influence that can be achieved, is understood to be situational and specific to certain interactions and instances.

David—The deference to the person is negative, but also the failure to respect the experience is also problematic. It bothers me in today’s society the cult of the celebrity that you are just looking at the person and not saying ‘well what experience have you got?’. I fear a lot of people think that because they have got a certain amount of experience they have somehow or other arrived. If you then add some concept of weight, it can freeze. What is it, we are all humble learners in the school of Christ, until we die, that learning never stops.

In relation to the momentary aspect of relational leadership, through these interviews we gain the impression that there can be shifting dynamics in the production of leadership influence. As discussed, this is in part connected to the enforced shifting or rotation of formal roles in Quaker Meetings. However, in a broader sense the label ‘Weighty Friend’ can be a ‘cloak’ that can fall away from a person, while a struggle exists between an appreciation of somebody’s specific experience and the need not to defer unnecessarily to their viewpoint. This analysis suggests that there are indications of dynamisms and multi-directionality in influencing within Quakerism. However, tensions associated with the idea of the ‘Weighty Friend’ related to keeping open and evolving the potential for anybody to influence are indicated (i.e. weight not frozen by being permanently attributed to a person).

### *3. Socially Constructed—Understanding Who Is Influencing and How They are Doing So Are Interpreted by the People Involved*

At the start of this paper, a ‘heroic leadership’ was explained to be a perspective in which leadership is understood to be solely about people who are defined to be leaders due to possessing some particular characteristics or enacting certain ways of being. However, explored from a relational leadership perspective (which is associated with post-heroic and critical viewpoints, as discussed earlier), dynamics of influence are interpreted and so co-constructed by those involved. How somebody might be understood to be influential in a Quaker context was given a variety of possible dimensions by participants, as set out in Table 1 in relation to meanings of ‘Weighty Friend’. However, as suggested by Scott, how knowledge and associated possible influence in other contexts translates into Quaker organising is related to becoming ‘well integrated’.

Scott—I think it [weight] can come from both [roles in the Society and in life in general] but my impression is that somebody who comes new to the Society with a pre-existing expertise in an area won’t have much weight in that area until they are well integrated and earn some degree of respect. Because whether it is true or not ... there seems to be a general view that doing a particular thing for Quakers, or in a Quaker context, say knowing about architecture or accountancy, or whatever, that those skills do not automatically transfer to the Quaker context. A person needs experience and to establish themselves as understanding it in the Quaker space not just in general.

Scott’s statement challenges not only the general applicability of knowing about how to organise from other contexts (such as ‘architecture or accountancy’) but also how that knowing is brought into Quaker decision-making processes. As noted, there are particular ways and methods of doing things in Quakerism and how a person is seen to uphold those and work in a ‘Quakerly manner’ (which is not something that is necessarily clearly defined) can be fundamental to their potential influence. Consequently, how a person communicates and ‘performs’ their ideas is completely intertwined with how those ideas are interpreted. As Lisa suggests below, a person’s learned ways of operating in another context (e.g. as a headmistress) will be part of what they bring into a Quaker setting. While the ‘drama’ involved in conveying the appearance of leadership may be understood as manipulative of potential followers (e.g. Sharma and Grant 2011), here I am suggesting that the different ways in which people ‘handle’ themselves and whether or not this successfully connects with an imagined ‘Quaker Way’ is important for how others may ignore or embrace their influence.

Lisa—I think the Weighty Friend idea to me would be something to do with it being assumed, or assumed by that person, that they had a bit more to say than others, or that they were somehow more valued. Something assumed by their position or their way of behaving or their name being known or whatever ... . I am just thinking of particular people who I know who would come into that category of coming from established background and having been fairly steeped in



Quakerism ... . It [being weighty] could be to do with class as well. I can think of somebody who I would definitely characterise as a Weighty Friend ... she was a Headmistress at a school so there is that sort of air of authority and gravitas around anyway.

As well as offering her views about how people can be understood as bringing an 'air of authority and gravitas' in a Quaker setting, Lisa also indicates—in connection with Scott's statement above about translating knowledge and skills into a Quaker setting—that a person being understood as influential can relate to them being 'steeped in Quakerism'.

From these selected quotations we can glimpse some aspects of the participants' understanding of peoples' views as more or less influential (or weighty), whether related to other Quakers' interpretations of how compatible a person's speech and actions are with a Quaker Way (which, as explained, encompasses much variety) or to how ideas are presented as informed by what a person has learnt and have become accepted ways of organising in other settings. While, as explored, participants did bring some attention to the social construction of others and their views, this was not a core focus of discussions. Quakers in Britain, although actively encouraging diversity, tend to be white, middle class and older than middle-aged, and the construction of the influence of those people who deviate from a typical Quaker profile did not come into focus during the interviews. However, I did encourage interviewees to reflect on potential genderings of the term 'Weighty Friend'. No pattern emerged, although a few interviewees suggested that it might have been more associated with men from prominent Quaker families in past centuries. However, the tendency for interviewees appeared to be to evenly distribute the label among the sexes, or possibly associate it more strongly with women.

In this analysis I have explored and reflected on the three aspects of relational leadership based on the twenty interview conversations centring around the concept of 'Weighty Friend' and its relationship to organising sustainably and equally. My analysis develops the few previous empirical studies of relational leadership (Biehl 2018; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Henry and Wolfgramm 2015), by exploring the perspective in the context of Quaker Meetings, which do not have a formal hierarchy. This analysis brings attention to some ways that leadership becomes constructed when the intention is for 'nobody to be in charge'. Interestingly, as presented in Table 2 and in some of the interviewees' statements, notions of power and leadership are not ideas that were understood as being often embraced and open for discussion within Quaker Meetings. However, influencing and being influenced are multifaceted and an array of interpretations exists relating to how people's speech and actions give them 'weight'.

This study extends existing work by exploring the potential limitations of relational leadership in practice: limitations in the sense that it offers opportunities to consider how post-heroic and critical notions of leadership can manifest and flourish in practice. Not unexpectedly, dominant (heroic) meanings and

discourses of leadership were better understood and accepted by participants. In addition, through participants' likely involvements in typical hierarchical organisations, and the associated vocabularies, they tended to understand leadership as a concept that just related to individuals who held particular roles in a hierarchy. However, significant texture is added to the potential dynamics of leadership in non-hierarchical situations. In particular, influence relates to: people fulfilling contested images of how Quakers should be; how other hierarchical contexts in which Quakers might work are displayed through how they conduct themselves (e.g. appearing confident, articulate and clear minded); how roles, although formally rotated, are part of how a Quaker's influence is construed and their access to and control of organisational resources (e.g. being the point of external contact for their Meeting, setting the agenda for Business Meetings and helping to decide who is appointed to certain roles); and the way in which 'freezing' weight on to somebody can be part of simplifying how to make sense of group dynamics (i.e. it allows a person to stop continually reflecting on the attention they pay to what a particular individual might say on every occasion, and, rather, to assume that what that person says should generally be influential).

### Concluding Comments

In this paper my focus has been on exploring the meanings of leadership and connected ideas of influence in a context with no formal hierarchy and where fostering equality is a key concern. Equality is understood to be integral to pursuing socio-ecological sustainability because it involves challenging superiorities and privileges related to dimensions including gender, race, class, generation and financial wealth. In this study I have not attempted to make direct connections from my analysis to 'sustainable organisations'. As stated at the beginning, I have assumed that sustainability and equality are closely intertwined because of interconnections between patterns of social and ecological domination (Agyeman et al. 2002; Bookchin 1982; Bookchin 1990). This assumption would benefit from greater investigation, which is beyond the scope of this study.

Relational leadership has been considered because it brings attention to the potential for multidirectional and evolving dynamics of influence between people. Quakers were interviewed for the study as Quaker organising, being without a formal hierarchy, appears to be a conducive organisational context within which to consider relational leadership. The concept of 'Weighty Friend' was used as a way into conversations about authority and leadership with twenty Quakers who volunteered to participate. Three core aspects associated with a relational leadership perspective (mutual influence process, momentary and socially constructed) were used to organise and focus the analysis of the conversations. This study demonstrates two main areas related to how relational leadership theory could be developed and possibilities for the enabling of 'new forms' of leadership in Quaker contexts.

First, potential dark sides associated with (relational) leadership to do with ideas of status and power do not disappear. However, Quakers' attention to equality allowed complex tensions about how influence might be given and taken to be explored. Such tensions relate to striving not to indelibly attach a 'weight' of influence to certain people, while also respecting the ability of some people to be repetitively insightful. However, seeing all 'as equal' and so having the same potential for leadership, because of the lack of formal hierarchy, is probably an issue in a socially constructed world in which different bodies and voices are associated with different meanings for individuals, for groups and for societies. How we reflect on the influences we may apportion to some people more freely than others because of their privileges (e.g. race, gender, class, profession) becomes even more important in a relational leadership perspective if we are serious about connecting it with developing equitable forms of organising.

Second, while this is an interview-based study, ethnographic approaches may well be more able to access some of the 'micro' conversational and interactional dynamics, including the potentially momentary sense of influencing assumed in a relational leadership perspective (Burton et al. 2018; Sutherland 2018). As was explained above, the relational leadership framing was selected through an abductive approach to analysing the interviews. However, the materials gathered from the interviews suggested that influence dynamics were generally less fluid and momentary than might be desirable in equitable ways of organising. It appeared, as should probably be expected, that relational patterns (who is giving and taking leadership) could become quite set and static, despite the rotation of roles, within communities of Quakers that have worked and worshipped together over many decades. Consequently, how to refresh and evolve the relational dynamics so that influence has the potential to be momentary is an important issue, which relates to appreciating the significance of potential dimensions of inequality.

In closing, an intention of this paper is to help to develop a vocabulary associated with relational leadership to open up and deepen discussions about people's interpretations and experiences of influence in 'alternative' forms of organising (Parker et al. 2014). Through my analysis and attempted development of a relational leadership perspective, questions emerge about how valuable the notion of (relational) leadership is to studying non-hierarchical contexts such as Quaker organising. My interest has been in critically studying leadership beyond capitalist, managerialist and hierarchical organisations, but are associated languages and discourses of leadership too entangled in capitalism, managerialism and hierarchy to comprehensively explore influencing dynamics in Quaker organising (Learmonth and Morrell 2017)? It may be challenging to interrupt connections of leadership with top-down control between leaders and followers, so bringing these differently located concepts into play in analysing alternative organising needs to be done cautiously and carefully. Insights have been gleaned in this study allowing reflection on a relational leadership perspective which suggest that

critical work is needed to make it a valuable lens for studying non-hierarchical contexts. By seeking to explore a relational leadership perspective by grounding it in a Quaker context it appears that I may well have glimpsed some potential limits that need further exploration.

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