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Human rights leadership in challenging times: an agenda for research and practice

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is as an integral part of organisational practice that relates to individual or collectivistic forms of decision-making and action that include strategic decision-making, such as how issues are communicated or 'framed', and how risk is managed. This article applies a systematic scoping review approach to understand the scope of scholarly literature on human rights leadership and assess its volume and focus. We find that there is little in the human rights practice literature that deals directly and explicitly with leadership. Further, the human rights practice literature gives little insight into how leadership can be supported and strengthened. In light of these gaps, we set out some research and practice directions that can inform a new agenda on human rights leadership. We draw on theories, concepts, frameworks and approaches from leadership work outside of human rights practice that might give shape to a new leadership agenda. In doing so, we propose several clusters of questions that might guide research on leadership as a crosscutting theme in human rights practice. The urgency for a new agenda on leadership is reflected, we suggest, in recent high-profile cases of leadership failures and the need for human rights leadership for confronting global challenges.

1. Introduction

From international organisations to grassroots NGOs and individual activists, leadership and leaderful behaviour is part and parcel of human rights work. It includes strategic decision-making, how organisations, networks and communities are mobilised, and how risk is managed and minimised. In this article, we seek to understand the scope of existing work on leadership in human rights practice and we draw on review findings to set out some research and practice directions for a new agenda on leadership.

There are several reasons we have been motivated to write this review. First, literature searches suggest that human rights leadership has yet to be given systematic treatment by the human rights practice literature.[1] Narratives about human rights defending and practice appear to make only fleeting and often implicit references to leadership, suggesting the contexts for human rights leadership may be poorly understood. The approach taken in this review offers a systematic collating and analysis of existing work on leadership which documents current themes and gaps in the human rights practice literature.

Further, we think leadership matters. In recent years it has come under the spotlight following high-profile cases of leadership failures at major third-sector organisations working on human rights issues. For instance, a wellbeing review at Amnesty International's London headquarters in 2019 revealed bullying and discrimination, low levels of trust for organisation leaders, and a perception that leaders and staff held different values. For human rights practice – and as indicated in this review – incorporating an explicit leadership analytic and leadership development initiatives into research may offer new insights into debates and issues in human rights practice including burnout and resilience,[2] framing of arguments and narratives,[3] and practices for wellbeing and protection of practitioners and risk management.[4] A leadership perspective, we suggest, offers to enhance the critical scope of human rights practice in terms of its 'attentiveness to unintended consequences, negative outcomes, tensions, and at times bad decision-making when facing dilemmas' that may also involve 'criticizing the role and performance of human rights practitioners'.[5]

Leadership also matters, we suggest, in light of pressing contemporary challenges to human rights.[6] These include the rise of authoritarian populism and the squeeze on civic space, and the current Covid-19 setting which has seen governments using the pandemic to clamp down on dissent and suppress information.[7] Worsening crises, in particular rising inequality and accelerating earth system transformations towards unsustainability, also threaten severe consequences for human rights in the near and longer term. Yet the international human rights system and community appears unprepared for these crises, or indeed to accord them much measure of priority.[8] Overall, the concern for human rights leadership in this article is aimed as a response to what is emerging about existing leadership deficits in practice and the academic literature and our understanding of the changing contexts and challenges for human rights defending and the demands these are putting to practice.[9]

Building on our review of the literature below, we set out some research and practice directions for human rights leadership. This draws on the substantial social science work on leadership from outside the field, in particular leadership studies. In this academic-practitioner field, research seeks to shed light on organisational problems, practices, processes or outcomes and how these can also inform leadership practice and development. Engaging with broader leadership literature through a human rights practice lens, we position this piece as a contribution to human rights practice as a body of scholarship 'organized around a topic rather than around a theory … [and] open to whatever theoretical inputs it can draw from theoretical sources'.[10]

In harnessing this material and reflecting on its value for the field, we do so from the position of sustained engagement with human rights practice and leadership over a number of years. In particular, Gray has supported the international human rights defender fellowship scheme at the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York, UK. He has a background in coaching and in organisational and leadership development and is interested

in leaderful behaviour of effective human rights defenders (leadership of self and leadership of others), and the formal and informal ways in which leadership roles might be assumed or generated through relationships with others. Hoddy is a social scientist who has contributed to several research-related projects at CAHR over the recent 10 years. He has an interest in leadership in social movement settings, and first became interested in it through Grey's leadership training programme for current and future human rights practitioners in 2014 at CAHR. Both authors share a joint interest in how the human rights movement can benefit from understanding how appropriate and effective expressions of leadership are nurtured and replicated within the movement.

The article is structured as follows. First, we describe the methodological approach used for assessing the scope, volume and focus of the literature. Following this, we present the review findings before moving on to sketch out directions that can inform research and practice agenda for human rights leadership.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach of this review involved the application of scoping review techniques for understanding how leadership is portrayed and understood in the human rights practice literature. The scoping review is a systematic approach that is commonly used for examining research areas or themes that might be emerging or where the existing literature may be thin or unconnected.[11] Its purpose is to understand the overall scope of the literature on a topic. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to apply the approach in the human rights practice field.

In accord with this approach, a search string was developed and applied to the online abstract and citation database Scopus for identifying articles in 22 human rights journals where the title, abstract or keywords contained references to leadership (Table 1). Our choice to focus on human rights journals and peer-reviewed articles only is that these can be expected to represent the state of the art in current thinking in human rights practice as an interdisciplinary field or perspective.[12] A focus on human rights journals would allow us to capture in a strong sense how leadership ideas are being used and what their analytical purchase for human rights practice might be. Inclusion of an asterisk in the search string allowed us to identify articles where there were variations in the search term, e.g. leadership, leaders, leaderful, etc. No date ranges for published articles were set, since we wished to include older as well as newer articles in our search results. Inclusion criteria were developed and then applied to the search results for selecting relevant articles for review (Table 2). Articles included in the review were empirical or conceptual/normative pieces that (i) explicitly identified one or more leadership actors in a human rights context; and which (ii) dealt with leadership behaviour, action, or practices of these actors. Overall, the search yielded 179 results of which 27 were included for

Table 1. Search string for Scopus, where numbers refer to journal ISSNs.

Scopus search string
TITLE-ABS-KEY ('leader*') ISSN (1757-9619 OR 1475–4835 OR 0275–0392 OR 1524–8879 OR 1759–7188 OR 1364–2987 OR 1388–1906 OR 1891–8131 OR 0169–3441 OR 1079–0969 OR 1323-238x OR 0258–7203 OR 2057–0198 OR 1609-073x OR 1874–7337 OR 2056–4902 OR 2365–1792 OR 1361–1526 OR 2213–1027 OR 1461-7781)

Note: For journal titles see Supplementary Material 1a.

Table 2. Inclusion criteria for study selection.

Inclusion criteria
Peer-reviewed journal articles in selected key human rights journals
Indexed in Scopus
Empirical or conceptual/normative papers
Papers that focus explicitly on one or more leadership actors in a human rights context
Papers that deal explicitly with human rights leadership as a subject matter; or papers address behaviour, action or practices of actors as matters of leadership in a human rights context

review. A full bibliographic list of selected studies can be found in Supplementary Material 1c.

Next, these 27 selected studies were coded and analysed for identifying themes and gaps on the topic of leadership. Alongside bibliographical information, codes included the type of leadership actor(s), named human rights issues and the stated contexts for leadership. Review codes were developed on the basis of a framework derived from the leadership studies literature[13] which integrates the different organisational levels where leadership might be expressed, theorised and discussed (Supplementary Material 1b). These levels were the individual, group, organisation and external/strategic.

In brief, the individual level refers to an individual's characteristics or behaviours. It concerns for example leader traits, such as self-confidence and motivation; and the kinds of behaviours or actions taken by individuals in formal leadership positions, such as motivating followers and managing conflict. The group level focuses on non-leaders, or 'followers', and relationships between leaders and followers. It concerns for example how leadership arises or is 'constructed' through interactions between leaders and followers and treats the perceptions and behaviours of followers.[14] The organisation level focuses on the structures, systems and culture of organisations that provide part of the context for leader-follower relationships. It refers for example to organisational tasks and practices, shared values and mission statements, and the potential for systems to foster forms of self-leadership and management.[15] A cultural dimension may capture for instance shared ideas around for instance bravery, sacrifice and selflessness that have been found among staff at human rights organisations.[16] Finally, the external/strategic level refers to the wider context or environment and the development of strategies that take external factors into account. In human rights practice, we suggest this could include enabling or repressive laws, restrictions on foreign aid flows, and civil society space. Though there is disagreement in leadership studies over how to categorise the identified levels and the overall relevance of particular levels over others, our decision to code according to all levels would allow us to capture as much as possible the extent and differences in the way the human rights practice literature has dealt with leadership.

3. Findings

3.1. Overall scope

In accordance with the review aim, the following sets out our findings on the scope of literature on human rights leadership and its volume and focus. The most obvious finding is that there is little work on human rights leadership, as revealed by the very low number of studies selected for review (27). What is more, the literature on the

topic is disparate and limited in scope. None of the selected studies offer a definition of human rights leadership and nor do these studies attempt to develop or employ the notion of human rights leadership as an analytical frame for examining or explaining concrete practices, processes or outcomes. Citation practices indicate there were no common scholarly reference points for leadership across selected studies, and studies did not cite one another. Empirical research on leadership and the presentation of research findings on the topic was found in only a small handful of studies (7). Further, our review did not reveal any studies that describe, document or examine leadership practice and development within human rights organisations, groups and movements or which provide practical insight into how leadership might be strengthened or supported. The few occasions where leadership development is discussed refer to leadership that is external to the organisation or project, that is, where the organisation or project facilitates the training of community or youth leaders.[17] Selected studies were not found to be concentrated in a significant way in some journals more than others (Figure 1). Publication years for the 27 studies ranged between 2003 and 2021, with most (16) published in the last 5 years (2017–2021). Finally, none of the selected studies offered possible explanations for the limited work on human rights leadership in the existing body of literature.

How did selected studies engage with 'leaders' and 'leadership'? Most (23) appeared to employ everyday ideas of leaders and leadership to denote relatively more powerful actors and their roles in addressing, needing to address, or failing to address specific human rights related matters. As distinct from empirical work that draws on leadership models, styles, or approaches, ideas about leadership in selected studies tended to be vague and embedded in narratives or commentaries about human rights challenges and opportunities. In terms of identified actors, these were both individuals and organisations and were not limited to traditional human rights organisations. They included managers of healthcare institutions and workplaces,[18] social workers,[19] politicians,[20]
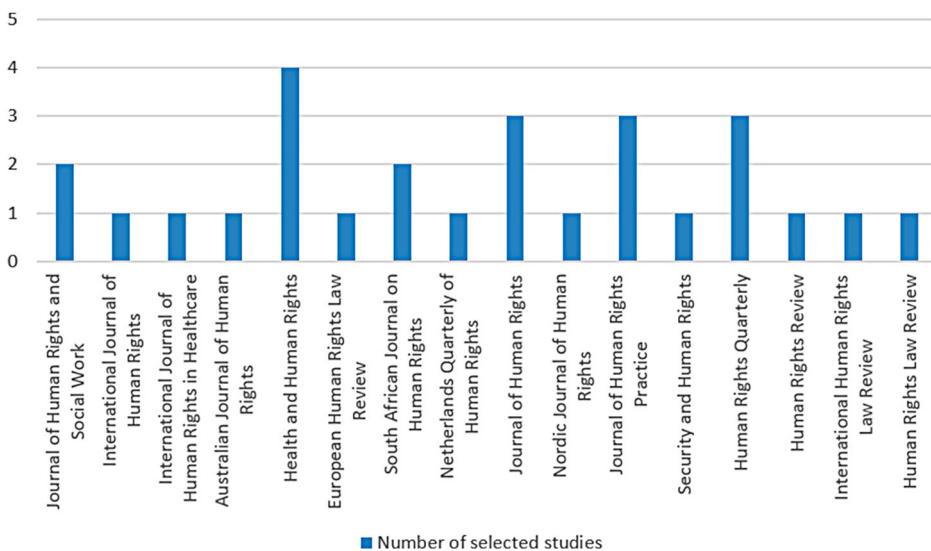

Figure 1. Number of selected studies according to journal.

social activists,[21] members of the clergy,[22] academic groups and institutions,[23] judiciaries,[24] international organisations[25] and high profile human rights figures at the UN.[26] A number of studies referred to particular states as leaders[27] and another referred to a professional sector (social work) as a leadership actor and potential 'point profession' for ESC rights in human rights practice.[28] Several studies referred to leadership within rights-based civil society organisations or by civil society organisations on human rights matters.[29]

In terms of leadership roles, these reflected the wide range of actors and cases in selected studies and included activists' promotion of human rights norms to wider society[30] and domestic political or judicial leadership for creating and strengthening laws to protect societal groups.[31] 11 of the 27 selected studies concerned leadership around human rights issues that were economic, social and cultural. In 12 studies the type of human rights issues was unspecified or appeared to refer to all categories of rights. In relation to our framework, selected studies made some references to aspects of the organisational and external/strategic levels which included leadership by academics and academic institutions in the face of global threats to academic freedom and domestic institutional failures,[32] and leadership at the UN in a context of 'global backlash' against human rights.[33] The individual and group levels for leadership were much less of a focus and only in a small number of cases (2) were attempts made to move beyond everyday and generic references to leadership that draw on work from leadership studies.[34]

3.2. Individuals and groups

In terms of leadership at the individual organisational level, a focus on leader characteristics or behaviours was found in a small number of studies (5). Islam et al's study of workplace bullying in healthcare institutions investigated 'passive avoidant' leadership as a leadership style that has been identified and discussed in leadership studies.[35] However, this study's intended contribution is to scholarly work on leadership developed in the field of health studies and the article as a whole appears intended for healthcare professionals as opposed to a more general human rights practice audience. A second study which spoke directly to human rights practice sought to make connections between leadership models or styles and human rights implementation or protection.[36] This study connected failures to fully implement South Africa's disability laws and policies to the need for 'transformational leadership' in the workplace as a bottom-up alternative to implementation that focuses on followers' needs and priorities and leaders helping them reach their full potential. Sex or gender as a leader characteristic was examined in Burns and Murdie's study of the effect of leadership on human rights practices,[37] while two further studies focusing on high profile human rights actors at the United Nations describe some leader characteristics or behaviours. These latter two, in contrast to the previous, take a narrative or commentary form and do not draw on leadership models, styles or approaches.[38]

In most cases, non-leadership actors (or followers) were unspecified and leader-follower interactions not considered for study or discussion. One study that did appear to deal with some aspects of followership[39] concerned decision-making dilemmas faced by NGO leaders around the possible reputational costs of sourcing funding from

local businesses.[40] In this study, an NGO context of limited access to foreign aid created dilemmas for leaders where there was a tendency for public supporters to associate trust in local human rights organisations with mistrust in local businesses.

3.3. Contexts for leadership

In terms of the contexts for leadership, the few studies treating the organisation dimension of leadership considered both the influence of organisational structures, systems or cultures on leadership or, conversely, the influence that leadership might have on these. Studies treating the former considered how these might obstruct or constrain human rights advocacy or practice by individuals and groups[41] or how organisational settings are a source of barriers to the entry of women into formal leadership positions.[42] The latter set of studies also connected internal organisational barriers to external, societal norms and ideas shaping for example what is expected of leaders and women. In the other direction, the influence of leadership on organisational structures, systems or cultures was considered in a number (2) of studies, such as on the significance of women in leadership positions for dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse in UN peacekeeping missions (Diaz, 2016) and how the former Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights at the UN sought to overcome some of the organisational limits of the UN human rights system by promoting its greater engagement of NGOs.[43]

Aspects of the external or strategic levels received perhaps most attention among the four levels, with two main themes emerging. First, a number of studies treated leadership in terms of cultural ideas about (i) the characteristics that define leaders that are socially and culturally shaped, in particular characteristics associated with gender;[44] and (ii) particular sets of human rights, such as sexual minority rights.[45] A second theme concerned the influence of political or other activities by states on human rights practice.[46] Studies in both cases treated these as barriers for realising rights, although one study considered how cultural stereotypes about women as caring and nurturing could be exploited by women political leaders as leadership opportunities.[47]

4. Towards an agenda for research and practice

These findings illustrate that while the leadership gaps are substantial, the human rights practice literature has nevertheless dealt with some aspects of the individual, group, organisation and external/strategic levels of leadership. In particular, work around women's leadership and leadership characteristics or behaviours,[48] we suggest, indicate the value and potential of a research and practice agenda on leadership that is informed by concepts, theories, frameworks and approaches for leadership from outside the human rights practice field. These studies illustrate how such an agenda can go beyond dominant framings of leadership, defined in terms of actors' engagements with human rights related matters, and their successes, failures and limits, in favour of a focus on individual and group behaviour in human rights organisations, groups and movements and its consequences or outcomes for leadership.

An agenda along these lines would treat the relations between multiple, diverse actors in a range of human rights organisational settings, from grassroots movements to national and international NGOs and campaigns, and consider the possible different

meanings of leadership in this range of settings as a gap in the literature. That treatments of leadership concerned issues reflecting a cross-section of rights (civil and political; economic, social and cultural) also points to the wider significance of leadership to diverse organisational settings and priorities. Furthering this agenda would involve, for example, understanding how actors conceive of their own practice and where power, authority and decision-making are seen to reside or should reside. In accord with our framework, understanding these also requires treatment of the organisational context and the different activities, tasks and kinds of practice undertaken by actors. These are further set within wider political, social and cultural environments that come bear on leadership, such as where these supply cultural resources or define degrees of uncertainty and risk that demand leader response, innovation and strategy.

In this section, we begin setting out some research and practice directions that might inform a new agenda on human rights leadership in organisations, groups and movements. Opportunities for research and practice around leadership are presented below in terms of the four levels of our framework, which we view as integrated in practice.[49] Section 4.3 discusses methods for leadership research. The remainder of this paper is framed by several key questions that we suggest may define a new leadership agenda:

- How do human rights organisations, groups and movements understand, practice and develop leadership?
- What is considered 'good leadership' in the context of a human rights organisation, group or movement? By whom and under what conditions? How might leadership be understood differently among actors in different types of organisation, group or movement?
- To what extent does good leadership contribute to security, management of risk, resilience and well-being of practitioners and those they work with?
- What can leadership concepts, theories, definitions and frameworks bring for examining or explaining organisational problems, practices, processes or outcomes?
- How can human rights leadership practice and development be supported?

4.1 Individual and group levels

Across all levels there are opportunities to investigate what leadership theories, concepts, definitions and frameworks could bring for understanding human rights leadership, and whether and how these can be applied in rights-based organisations, groups and movements. The academic and practitioner field of leadership studies is rich in conceptual resources and tools in this regard but have remained largely untapped by the human rights practice literature, as evidenced in the review findings here. In leadership studies, these resources are used for identifying and explaining problems, practices, processes or outcomes in organisations, such as for enhancing organisational performance or addressing problems. Definitions and frameworks also inform leadership practice and development. Insights from social movement studies are drawn on to some extent as well, given our interest in rights-based movements, although recognising that there is a leadership gap in this field as well which the field is yet to address.[50] Taking all of

this together, we suggest the potential of these resources lies in how they may help inform the design of conceptual frameworks, research methods, applied projects and leadership development initiatives and activities in human rights practice.

Among the most widely known leadership approaches are trait-based leadership, behavioural theories and transformative theories. Several leadership styles have also been identified including command and control, situational leadership, servant leadership, facilitative leadership, transformative leadership and authentic leadership. We suggest that four may be of especial relevance to human rights research and practice at individual and group levels: feminist leadership, collectivistic forms of leadership, values-based leadership, and followership. Feminist leadership may be of most immediate relevance given there has been some attention to barriers to women's leadership in the human rights literature already, as revealed in this review. All four incorporate some measure of relationality in how leadership is understood and approached. That is, they capture relations and dependencies between leaders and followers, who may be multiple and diverse. Relational approaches have also been discussed elsewhere as possibly more suited to settings where leaders, organisations, policy and practice are seen to play a broader community or societal role.[51]

4.1.1. Feminist leadership

First, feminist leadership may provide a framework and approach for engaging with barriers to women's leadership in human rights organisations, groups and movements. Its application may help promote shifts in organisational norms, values, cultures and behaviour to become more in line with human rights values and principles that are typically found in organisation missions and statements and which members and followers may claim to hold. At a general level, feminist leadership is identified as form of leadership that engages with gender power and women's lack of access to formal leadership positions.[52] It has been described as having the potential to foster 'democratic, weblike, collaborative relationships'[53] over hierarchical and autocratic ones, such those associated with command-and-control styles of leadership. Definitions of feminist leadership are numerous however and are yet to be 'fully explored or developed as a feminist construct'.[54] Batliwala has synthesised a number of definitions from distinct fields to propose a useful working definition of feminist leadership in women's rights work:

> Women with a feminist perspective and vision of social justice, individually and collectively transforming themselves to use their power, resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes to mobilize others – especially other women – around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic and political transformation for equality and the realization of human rights for all.[55]

This approach encompasses several themes identified in existing leadership definitions: attributes, behaviours, values and practices that focus on inclusivity, participation, empowerment, and consensus building; issues of power and politics which are less visible in mainstream approaches to leadership; and feminists' own uses of power when they are in leadership positions.[56] The feminist 'leadership diamond' (Figure 2) captures the core components that make up feminist leadership for social transformation: (i) power, which includes leaders' abilities to examine different forms of power and how they operate in social contexts; (ii) principles/values, such as equality, human
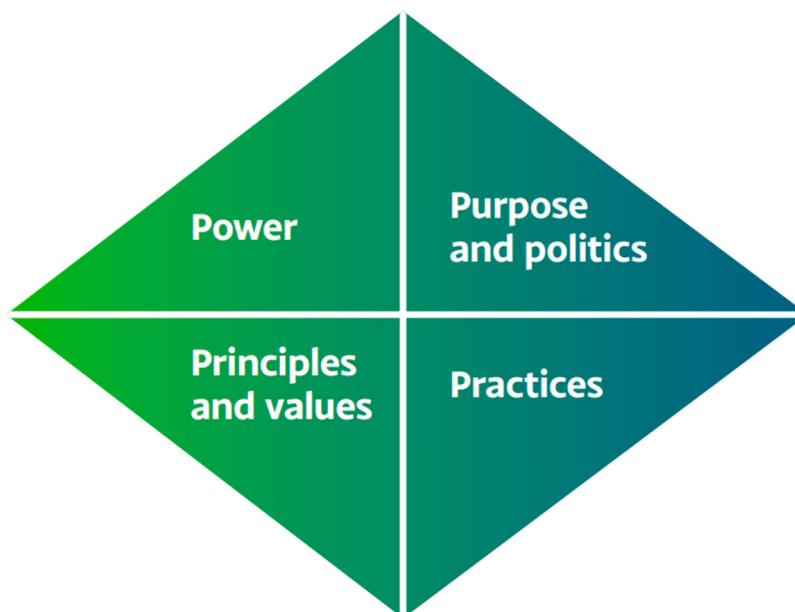
Figure 2. The feminist leadership diamond (Batliwala, 2010, p.15).

rights, inclusion, etc.; (iii) politics/purpose, by which is meant analysing socio-economic realities and ideologies informing analysis and the 'longer-term vision and mission for change that emerges from that politics'; and (iv) practices, which refers to how leadership unfolds in practice and in relation to these other components.

This definition and approach is described as contributing to Oxfam's work on 'Transformative Leadership for Women's Rights', which has sought to re-examine concepts and approaches to leadership in the organisation's work and to embed it with transformative feminist leadership practices.[57] Brown et al.[58] identify a number of key characteristics for Oxfam's programming which include collectivistic modes of leadership as opposed to 'individualistic, potentially atomising approaches'; men being leaders for women's rights – and not just partners; combining organisational skills with feminist analysis; intersectionality in analysis and practice, which includes awareness of race, class, disability, religion, age and sexuality; and transformations of the 'systems, structures and institutions in which transformative leaders work' in order to embed change.[59]

4.1.2. Collectivistic leadership

A second theme of potential value to human rights practice is collectivistic forms of leadership, which have been dealt with both by leadership studies and social movement studies.[60] Collectivistic forms may better describe the everyday practice of leadership in some human rights organisations and movements, such as where human rights work takes place in conditions of uncertainty and risk. An umbrella term that captures a number of approaches at group and organisational levels, collectivistic leadership includes team leadership;[61] complex systems leadership;[62] network leadership;[63] and collective leadership.[64] Though these approaches differ from one another they all approach

leadership as involving 'multiple individuals assuming (and perhaps divesting themselves) of leadership roles over time in both formal and informal relationships'.[65] Relationships and roles in such settings are not static 'but are rather fluid and dynamic in nature and depend on organizational and environmental demands and requirements'.

In social movement studies, a field with concepts, frameworks and questions that differ from leadership studies, horizontal forms of movement organising have been considered for instance in relation to the wider political context and movement goals.[66] Cheng and Chan for instance describe how Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014 comprised a horizontal-network structure and decentralised protest groups.[67] Initially, formal leaders and organisations played important framing and negotiating roles with the government while daily operations were conducted by a 'plurality of self-organized groups serv[ing] as temporary centres of influence through flexible networks and overlapping membership'. Increased repression in the post-2014 period and the jailing of formal leaders meant activists reorganising into a more 'leaderless' movement,[68] marked by multiple 'decision-making platforms' of informal leaders that actively crafted 'ingeniously diverse tactics and mobiliz[ed] fellow citizens'.[69]

4.1.3. Values-based leadership

Third, values-based leadership theories, which focus on behaviours and styles of leadership with moral and ethical dimensions, may help explain processes and outcomes in terms of the values held by leaders, members and followers.[70] For instance, how far outcomes can be explained by perceived agreement or conflicts over values held by actors. Ethical leadership for instance is one such approach which describes 'the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making'.[71] For Brown et al., people perceived as ethical leaders are those that model conduct in ways followers consider 'normatively appropriate', such as trustworthiness, fairness and so on, and this makes them legitimate and credible in the eyes of followers.[72] Feminist contributions to the theme (e.g. Fine, 2009) have highlighted moral and ethical dimensions of leadership that are grounded in the feminist ethic of care.[73] Another values-based theory may also have some salience in light of recent attention and concern around matters of mental health and wellbeing-promotion in human rights organisations.[74] What is called 'authentic leadership' describes 'a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development'.[75] Research suggests authentic leaders have acquired self-realisation or eudaemonic well-being and are able to impact the well-being of their followers.[76]

4.1.4. Followership

Finally, followership brings a perspective on followers as active subjects in the construction or formation of leadership rather than one that views followers as recipients or moderators of leadership.[77] Uhl-Bien et al's followership framework defines individuals enacting followership both in the context of hierarchical roles while also

engaging in 'following behaviors in ways that construct leadership'.[78] The former emphasises follower traits, characteristics and styles and follower behaviour. Such a framework may be usefully harnessed for understanding for example the kinds of 'following' behaviours and their effects in human rights organisations and why actors that are internal or external to a human rights organisation might choose not follow or desist from following. The emerging significance of followership, we suggest, is also reflected in new questions of how arguments and narratives about human rights can be communicated or 'framed' in relation to wider audiences. As Paul Gready has recently argued, there is a need for a 'communications revolution' in human rights practice that will 'reframe arguments and narratives so that they are more persuasive and convincing, and support efforts to reach new audiences'.[79] This call demands a focus on follower perceptions, values and experiences and to cultural contexts and discursive fields that shape more how leadership as an interactive process unfolds.[80]

With these four approaches in mind, a first cluster of sub-questions is offered. These are concerned to shed light on the relations and dependencies between actors in human rights organisations, groups and movements and are focused in the main on the individual and group organisational levels.

- What existing leadership styles fit with current practitioners' leadership practices?
- Are there common themes or styles of leadership which can be articulated from practitioners' leadership in contemporary human rights contexts?
- What role, if any, do followers and other stakeholders external to the organisation, group or movement play in leadership?
- Do values-based leadership models fit more naturally with leadership in human rights organisations and movements? What does a values-based leadership imply for women's leadership, and gender relations?
- How are conflicting values negotiated in processes of human rights leadership and decision making?

4.2. Organisation and external/strategic levels

4.2.1. Contextual frameworks

This section seeks to connect our discussion of individual and group levels of leadership with questions about the wider contexts for leadership. Several recent and oft-cited articles have contributed frameworks identifying core dimensions of the organisation context for leadership. Porter and McLaughlin's review is potentially significant in terms of its distilling out of the core components of contexts internal to organisations[81] and that, we suggest, are likely to be relevant to human rights organisations, groups and movements as well. These include:

- culture/climate, such as whether the organisational culture is adaptive or bureaucratic and whether there is a cultural emphasis on ethics;
- the goals, missions and strategies of individuals, groups and organisations;
- state and condition, such as whether the organisation is in a state of stability or crisis;
- and organisational structure, such as the degree of formalisation and centralisation.

Human rights organisations, groups and movements are likely to experience significant variation along these dimensions as well as change over time, for instance where periods of instability may precipitate or coincide with changes in organisational structure.

A further cultural component that has been suggested refers to its objective and subjective dimensions as both a potential antecedent to leadership behaviour and as an influencer of the relationship between leadership and outcomes.[82] Wider cultural influences outside the organisational setting are suggested for instance to mediate expectations and acceptability of leadership styles practices, in particular relationships with others (ideas and practices of individualism or collectivism); and power difference or the concentration of authority.[83] For instance, organisational cultures that have become masculinised may shape particular leadership styles and expectations in human rights organisations, as indicated earlier in relation to women's leadership:

> often women leaders […] believe that they must adapt their leadership style accordingly. Women leaders are often bound by these perceptions that constrain them to their gender roles and influence their leadership styles and behaviors. At the same time, these same behaviors may be defined as signs of ineffective leadership.[84]

The external/strategic aspects of leadership are outlined in Oc's adaptation of Johns's (2006) framework for organisation context, which provides a framework for understanding leadership outcomes through the interfacing of different organisational levels (Figure 3).[85] Its value for human rights practice lies in its potential, for instance, to inform research
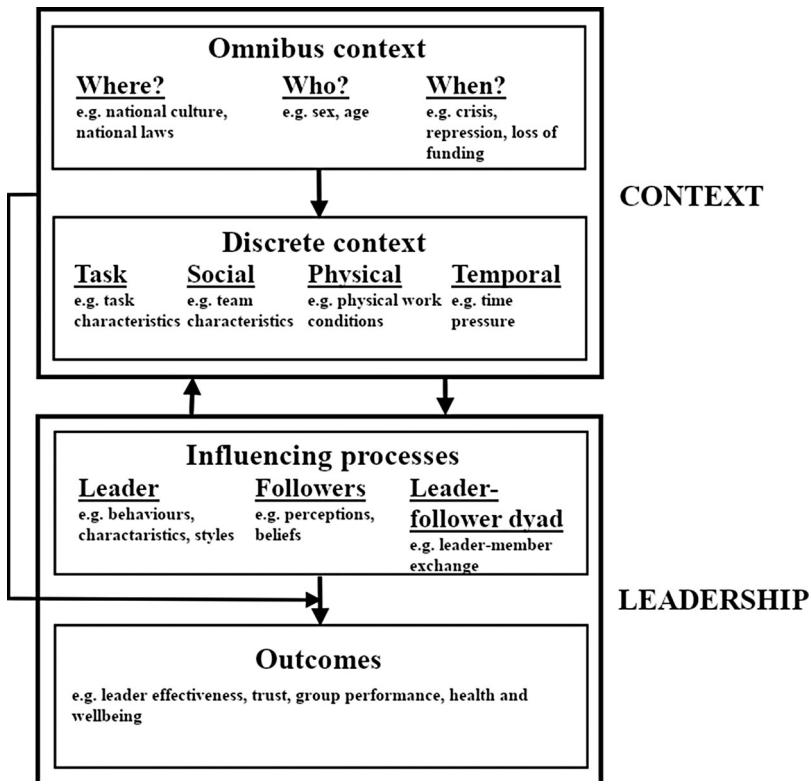

Figure 3. Contextual framework for leadership, adapted from Oc (2018, p.220).

strategies for exploring wellbeing outcomes in relation to leadership variables at different levels. First, an 'omnibus context' describes the context as a whole in reference to the questions, 'who?', 'where?' and 'when?'; and second, a 'discrete context' which refers to 'specific situational variables that influence behaviour directly or moderate relationships between variables'.[86] Adapted for leadership, these terms refer to the following:

- 'where', in the omnibus context, describes the influence of location on leadership, and may include culture as a factor, such as how culture differently construes leadership qualities;[87] and institutions of the wider environment that prescribe rules, norms and requirements and from where legitimacy can be obtained.
- 'who' refers to the actors in a leadership process that are being led and can be examined in terms of characteristics such as sex;
- 'when' refers to events such as organisational change, economic conditions and crisis situations, about which more is written below.[88]

Research on leadership around the 'discrete context' meanwhile has engaged with several themes that can be applied for investigating the conditions shaping human rights leadership and outcomes:

- 'task' as the task-related factors such as the complexity or risk associated with the job or task and how this influences the kind of leader behaviour or style that is most effective;[89]
- 'social context' as social factors such as social networks and their characteristics;[90]
- 'physical context' such as the physical work conditions and the physical distance between leaders and followers;
- and 'temporal context' which refers to factors such as time pressure and perceptions of threat.[91]

4.2.2. Extreme contexts and crises

One recent stream of literature that speaks to some of these contextual themes, and which may have relevance for human rights practice in challenging settings, is the work on 'extreme' contexts.[92] This work builds on the ideas originally set out in a review and framework by Hannah et al.[93] and which consists of a typology of extreme contexts and the influences these have on leadership. From this perspective, leadership is viewed as a contextualised phenomenon unfolding amid 'particularly unique contingencies, constraints and causations' that characterise extreme contexts, events and conditions.[94]

What makes contexts extreme is that these events exceed the capacity of an organisation to prevent them and the impacts that follow. For instance, the operating environment for human rights organisations in Egypt post-2013 became increasingly extreme, such that many leaders were forced to disband their organisations, change their work or go into exile.[95] In human rights settings, we suggest extreme events requiring responses might include the arrest of leaders and followers, or the implementation of repressive laws or measures, such as China recently introduced in the Covid-19 context under the guise of public health.[96] Leadership responses influence contexts in ways that intensify or attenuate levels of extremity, and Hannah et al. introduce several such attenuators (psychological, social, organisational resources) and intensifiers

(time and level of complexity). Crucially, Hannah et al.'s framework suggests a contingent approach to leadership under extreme conditions that varies across situations and contexts. A general definition of leadership in extreme contexts is put forward as

> adaptive and administrative processes of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives and purpose under conditions where an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences may exceed an organization's capacity to counter and occur to or in close physical, social, cultural, or psychological proximity to organization members.[97]

Several reviews have sought to synthesise an existing crisis leadership and management literature in the direction of extreme contexts.[98] Hällgren et al.'s review leads them to propose a taxonomy of extreme contexts that may be harnessed in human rights practice research.[99]

First, 'risky contexts' captures organisation strategies in situations of 'near-constant exposure to potentially extreme events'. Research themes that characterise work on risky contexts and which may characterise the work of human rights organisations include risk management, namely how organisations design their operations in environments where there are knowable and specified risks with serious consequences; responses to risk by individuals, teams and organisations, such as initiating 'team scaffolding' strategies;[100] the role of stakeholders in risky contexts, for example upon whom at-risk human rights organisations might depend for resources, operating licences and less tangible phenomena such as legitimacy;[101] and lessons learned from managing risk.

Second, 'emergency contexts' are ones where the potential for catastrophe that characterised risky contexts has become actualised. Research into 'emergency contexts' considers organisational responses to actual events, such as could include the arrest of an activist, and, like risky context research, comprises a number of themes: how organisations respond to emergencies, including the successes and failures in adaptive responses and the difficulties of reorienting action;[102] how emergencies are experienced by individuals and teams, of which a strong focus includes emergencies as a site of stress, anxiety, fear and sadness and the consequences for wellbeing and dealing with them; the role of stakeholders in positively or negatively affecting responses; and lessons learned.

Finally, 'disrupted contexts' refers to contexts 'triggered by extreme events that occur outside the core activities of organizations or communities' which catch organisations unaware and which they have therefore been unable to plan for.[103] Empirical work in this area is organised around two main research themes in this regard: organisational responses, such as the creation of teams and organisations that operate in the short term for dealing with the task at hand, and the role of stakeholders.

4.2.3. Resilience

The notions of 'resilient leadership' and 'resilient organisations' may connect with work on extreme contexts, crises and leadership and organisational,[104] and may be of use for investigating and supporting human rights leadership practice and development in challenging settings. These may be of especial interest as factors shaping whether and how far '[human rights advocates] develop resilience and ensure sustainable work practices' as underexamined areas in human rights practice.[105] Grounded in a systems approach,

the notion of resilient leadership is viewed as a response to complex challenges such as posed by disasters and crises, where 'resilience' denotes organisational

> flexibility, coping with unexpected and unplanned situations and responding rapidly to events, with excellent communication and mobilisation of resources to intervene at the critical points […] [as well as] the ability to avert the disaster or major upset, using these same characteristics. Resilience then describes also the characteristic of managing the organisation's activities to anticipate and circumvent threats to its existence and primary goals.[106]

Research might investigate for instance organisational capacities for flexibility and coping, such as access to funding and information and symbolic status, and the sorts of adaptive strategies that might be embarked upon. For example, organisations remaining in Egypt after 2013, such as the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance and the Al-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture responded to shrinking civil society space by cutting staff and reconfiguring activities.[107] Sundkvist shows women's organisations and activists in the country responded by shifting towards 'using the legal framework without mobilisation'.[108] And in Venezuela, Uzcategui describes how building resilient human rights organisations required work to maintain higher public profiles and moving towards less technical language in their communication strategies.[109] This allowed more people to understand how the political costs of attacks on human rights defenders would increase.

At the same time, the academic literature concerned with the relationship between resilient organisations and leadership is still rather thin, though some attempts have been made to develop a theory of 'resilient leadership'.[110] Academic contributions have sought to identify the characteristics, skills and activities of resilient leaders.[111] Lane et al.'s review of the literature for instance suggests resilient leaders require abilities to be 'flexible, adaptable, and innovative within an increasingly complex and dynamic environment: to be the leader of change who is prepared to take risks'.[112] To a far larger extent, resilient leadership has been described by practice-oriented texts, such as Strycharczyk and Elvin's (2014) volume on developing resilient organisations, Pirotti and Venzin's (2016) book on resilient organisations, and Grey's (2013) work on resilient leadership.[113]

Having discussed some key resources for connecting individual and group levels of leadership with questions of context, we offer here a second set of sub-questions.

- What are the (real and perceived) contingencies, constraints and causations that characterise the contexts of human rights defending?
- How are human rights leaders and leadership outcomes mediated by context?
- What organisational capacities exist for flexibility and coping in times of stress and crisis? To what extent do/can human rights leaders seek to respond to and shape context?
- What risk and resilience practices can be modelled by those in leadership roles?
- What contribution can be offered by boards, trustees, community stakeholders and other organisational governance structures?

4.3. Methods for leadership research

Review findings offer little by way of methodological insight into empirical research designs and strategies that might be harnessed for human rights research. As indicated

above, the number of empirical pieces included in this review was very small (7). Yet leadership studies is methodologically rich and diverse, offering tools, procedures and analytical approaches for theory development and testing[114] which may be adopted and adapted for human rights practice research. These have included experimental methods and observational methods, and quantitative and qualitative approaches such as discourse analysis,[115] biographical methods,[116] and social network approaches.[117] Selection of methods and how different methods might be combined will be driven by research questions, frameworks, purpose, stakeholder interest, and organisational levels (e.g. external strategic). Statistical and quantitative techniques may be useful for examining the effect of sex or gender as a leader characteristic on human rights outcomes[118] but may be less appropriate for explaining social practices in human rights organisations, where observational and qualitative approaches would be preferred.

Given our interest in research for leadership development and practice in human rights, we suggest action-oriented research approaches may be well suited for the research and practice agenda set out here. These are well positioned to accommodate the existing stock of common designs and methods used in human rights practice: 'micro-level, qualitative […] applying anthropological and sociological methods'.[119] Designs for research on leadership may draw inspiration from previous action-oriented and participatory research projects that have been undertaken in education and healthcare settings in particular.[120] For instance, Fletcher and Marchildon describe how a participatory action research approach was combined with the Delphi approach for examining effective leadership practices in challenging healthcare settings that could 'provide just-in-time information that participants could put into action'.[121] In another action-oriented study, Kekäle and Pirttilä lay out how participatory research can be used for planning, implementing and reflecting on developmental actions around leadership and management, work quality and well-being in educational settings.[122]

With designs such as these grounded in critical action-reflection cycles, leadership research in human rights practice would involve academic researchers and human rights practitioners collaborating around identifying and explaining concrete leadership challenges in different contexts. Extant leadership theory, concepts, frameworks and approaches may be examined, harnessed or modified by research groups as they develop and test possible solutions in the form of new behaviours or practices. These could be designed as project action plans, for example, developed independently or collectively and whose implementation may be assisted through coaching supplied by the project. Information is then gathered, such as around effectiveness, and solutions evaluated by individual practitioners and collectively by the research group and next steps planned. Kekäle and Pirttilä's emphasis on leadership development for delivering outcomes around quality and wellbeing helpfully illustrates how leadership and leadership development might be integrated into existing research streams that focus on related aspects human rights work, for instance, those addressing wellbeing and resilience of staff and risk management and response. Accordingly, we may view leadership development in action-oriented projects as driving the delivery of a range of outcomes rather than it being an end in itself. At the same time, seeking to understand processes that connect leadership development and outcomes will help identify good practice.

5. Conclusion

This review has revealed the limited work on leadership in human rights practice, with the body of literature on this topic quite small. The existing literature dealing with leadership, we suggest, is underdeveloped. In particular, it is yet to engage in a significant way with the substantial work in leadership studies as a source of conceptual resources and tools that may be put to use in human rights leadership research and to shed light on how leadership practice and development can be supported. In this article, we have drawn on a number of these resources in setting out research and practice directions that can inform a new agenda on human rights leadership research and practice. The questions and sub-questions posed are aimed as responses to the leadership gap identified in this review. They invite human rights practice to engage with theories, concepts, frameworks and approaches from leadership studies for answering them.

Finally, this study has illustrated an application of the scoping review approach to the human rights practice literature as an underutilised method in this field. We suggest applying this approach more widely in future as a means of examining and reporting on topic areas in the field, in particular those which may be nascent, may benefit the field by enhancing the methodological rigour of review work and increasing transparency.

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