Theoretical Insights

The project leadership work of value creation: Reflections from Follett

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ABSTRACT

Project scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the role of projects in tackling environmental and societal wicked problems. This essay contributes to attempts to understand the navigation of the dynamic processes of project value construction in the face of these wicked problems by advancing the socialised perspective of leadership. Drawing on Follett, it offers four key enhancements: 1) an emphasis on interweaving diverse and potentially contradictory values, 2) the recognition that values should dynamically evolve in relation to both emerging events and active confrontations of conflicting values that are made possible by flexible forms of contacting, 3) an openness to learning about alternative ways of relating to nature in shaping values, and 4) opening the collective practice of leadership to broad participation.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the role of projects in the achievement of the United Nations sustainable development goals and responses to climate change (Ika and Munro, 2022; Morris, 2017). These pressing societal and environmental challenges can be characterised as 'wicked problems', presenting a fundamental tension between the attempt to formulate of a shared vision for collective action and the concern for equity that prompts distributional issues and the diversity of values in the public sphere (Rittell and Webber, 1973).

Attempts to interpret project outputs or outcomes in the project management literature are usually informed by the view of project value as worth, which tend to result in a blind spot with respect to such tensions associated with the diverse values of multiple stakeholders (Martinsuo, 2020). Scholars also point to the inherent tension between the 'contractually binding promises' through which projects are formed and the dynamically evolving socio-political and environmental landscape that challenge preconceived future aspirations for value creation (Kreiner, 2020 p. 407), which becomes particularly important in the case of wicked problems since they require a recursive examination of the problem and its solution (Rittell and Webber, 1973).

Some scholars have begun to offer alternative accounts of value as the pursuit of ideal future states and their associated modes of conduct, sensitising us to the dynamic processes of constructing, contesting and negotiating project value and drawing attention to the important role leadership plays in navigating the tensions inherent in these processes (Martinsuo, 2020). Indeed, drawing on Checkland (1981), some scholars have long pointed to the importance of conflict resolution in the value management processes (Liu and Leung, 2002). These alternative accounts offer a powerful avenue for understanding the complex work of value creation in the face of wicked problems. However, there are a number of assumptions that limit the potential of project leadership theories to contribute to these efforts.

Much of the project leadership research downplays the tensions associated with the plurality of values and the dynamic nature of value creation processes by assuming that the project manager develops an image of the aspired future that takes the form of a vision early on, inspires others to commit to this vision and its realisation (Cleland, 1995; Toor and Ofori, 2008; Ram and Dolla, 2023) and reduces resistance (Lundy and Morin, 2013). Some of this research does partly acknowledge the importance of an ongoing negotiation of the diverse and potentially competing values of different stakeholders (Christenson and Walker, 2004), as well as the tension inherent in the alignment of the aspired future states sponsored by the top-level managers with the potentially contradictory diverse wants and needs of their subordinates and other stakeholders (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992), but tends to presume that one set of values dominate through prioritisation or enactment of power asymmetries. Such a reductionist approach is particularly problematic for wicked problems because they defy objective decisions of what is good or bad (Rittell and Webber, 1973).

Whyte et al.'s (2022) 'socialised leadership' perspective challenges this mainstream project leadership theory and research by proposing active engagement with plurality of values through continued democratic deliberations and moving beyond the cognitive undertone in equating the creation of a value and a vision. However, crucial limitations remain that revolve around privileging compromise making over

synergies that may create new possibilities and continuing to remain relatively silent on the tensions between the static contractual promises and the dynamically evolving situation. Moreover, this perspective fails to fully embrace the conceptualisation of projects as interventions into our natural environment, despite emerging debates on alternative ways of relating to the nature (Adams and Mulligan, 2012; Whyte and Mottee, 2022).

This essay argues that if projects are to be part of the solution to our pressing societal and environment problems that are characterised as wicked, we need to address these crucial limitations in theorising about the role of leadership in creating value. It attempts to demonstrate how a more central consideration of the complex process of value creation helps extend the contributions of project leadership theory and research to the debates on value creation through projects.

To do this, it first turns to the literature on leadership. The literature on leadership has traditionally neglected the work of value creation (Heifetz, 2001). 'New leadership theories' have attempted to address this omission by emphasising the work of creating and disseminating a vision grounded in organisational values (Bryman, 1999), and more recently acknowledging the need to reconcile competing values among leaders and followers or between followers (Lemoine et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2021). While this stream of literature has positioned leadership as a moral social construct, it has largely neglected questions of value creation. This is because this literature tends to subsume values under a set of desirable leader behaviours required for task-related performance and follower satisfaction and turn their attention to examining the antecedents, mechanisms and effectiveness of these behaviours (Ng, 2017; Banks et al., 2018; Bavik et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Fladerer and Braun, 2020; Dong and Zhong, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023), or draw on research on the relationship between leadership and culture (Hofstede, 1980; Schein, 2004) to consider cultural values as a contingency factor (Eva et al., 2019; Gebert et al., 2016).

Thus, this essay turns its attention to the seminal works of Burns (1978), Heifetz (2001) and Schein (2004) that put the work of value creation at the heart of theorising about leadership. These works help us deepen understandings of the processual and collective aspects of the leadership work of value creation, but they share some common ground with the literature on project leadership in their assumption that one set of values should dominate. Consequently, the essay then turns to the earlier work of Mary Parker Follett (1924), which is one of the historical underpinnings of the relational perspectives of leadership (Salovaara and Bathurst, 2018).

Relational perspectives of leadership view leadership as an ongoing process of relating through which values are constructed and changed (Uhl-Bien, 2006), but they leave us with incomplete guidance on how to cope with the abovementioned tensions. Follett (1924) addresses this problem by proposing a way of relating to others and the natural environment in which contradictory values are considered as fresh possibilities for generating added value, and therefore, they are actively surfaced and integrated with the support of a flexible legal order. Her suggestion that opposition is a result of deliberation that seeks to find out the possibilities of action in practice has clear similarities with some of the pragmatist arguments of her time (Dewey, 1922a). Follett (1924), however, emphasises that this deliberation is fuelled by collectivity, with potentially one or more individuals emerging to organise it.

By reflecting on these central ideas and using the wicked problem of climate change as an illustration to discuss their implications, the essay proposes four key enhancements to the socialised perspective of project leadership (Whyte et al., 2022): 1) an emphasis on the integration of diverse and potentially conflictual values through invention, 2) the recognition that values do not only dynamically evolve in response to unfolding events but also ongoing confrontations of conflicting values, 3) openness to learning about alternative ways of relating to nature in shaping values, and 4) opening the collective practice of leadership to broad participation. By proposing a view of leadership as subtle interactions through which new possibilities for the future emerge, it also

contributes to the efforts to move beyond a heroic view of leadership in the project management literature (Packendorff et al., 2014; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009). Moreover, by proposing alternative ways of relating to humans and the natural environment in the social construction of project, the essay contributes to the challenge to the mainstream theory and research on the creation of project value (Martinsuo, 2020), and connects it to the proposal to view projects as an intervention into our world (Whyte and Mottee, 2022).

2. Project leadership, vision, and values

In the literature on project leadership, the discussions about values have traditionally been embedded within the discussions about a vision, which is conceptualised as an aspired future state (Cleland, 1995; Christenson and Walker, 2004). Such a conceptualisation comes close to the conception of values as ideal future states and their associated modes of conduct in the broader literature on project management (Martinsuo, 2020). Having said that, there has been a cognitive undertone in much of the considerations of the vision that can be observed, for instance, in the suggestion that creating a vision involves developing an image of the aspired future (Thoms and Pinto, 1999; Christenson and Walker, 2004). This has largely meant that social aspects of value creation have been downplayed, particularly in terms of privileging discursive actions and interactions over others. In addition, there tends to be a blind spot with respect to the modes of conduct through which the aspired future state is interpreted. While some research has addressed this problem by stressing that a culture of shared values is a complementary element that facilitates a shared understanding of the future state (Christenson and Walker, 2004), the relationship between the values associated with means and end values has remained relatively unexplained. Despite these blind spots, the literature on project leadership has provided valuable insights into the role of leadership in the work of value creation.

A central concern for much of the project leadership research has been to understand the project leadership work of formulating a vision and inspiring others to follow this vision (Christenson and Walker, 2004; Müller and Turner, 2010; Iqbal et al., 2019). One of the early proponents was Cleland (1995), arguing that the success of a project depends on the project manager's leadership work of developing a clear vision, which articulates future outputs and outcomes that improve the status quo, as well as gaining and maintaining resources and the commitment of the people who claim a stake on those outputs and outcomes they view as worthy.

Since then, the literature on project leadership has sought to understand how this work may be accomplished effectively. Thoms and Pinto (1999) have examined the leadership ability of a project manager to develop an image of the future that presents organisational transformation. Müller and Turner (2010) have considered having a vision and foresight of the future as one of the key intellectual leadership competencies of the project manager. Maqbool et al. (2017) have shown that the transformational leadership behaviour of providing a vision exercised by the project manager helps achieve project success. While these studies have directed attention to the importance of developing a shared aspired future state in explaining the work of project leadership, their tendency to downplay the broader context of the project has meant that they have left relatively unexplained how this work may be accomplished in the face of contradictions and contestations.

Boddy and Buchanan (1992) have addressed this absence by pointing out that projects must adhere to the organisational vision but also cater for the potentially contradictory diverse wants and needs of stakeholders to satisfy the demand for a participatory approach to change. In this way, they have drawn attention to the tensions inherent in the project leadership work of developing a shared vision. Unfortunately, however, in considering how such tensions may be navigated, they have reproduced the emphasis on the competencies of a project manager to sell a desirable vision whilst also emphasising the need to gain

commitment from sceptics and resistors. In other words, they have emphasised the oppositional forces of control and resistance, and privileged control.

A relatively small body of research has implicitly reproduced this presumption by emphasising the importance of influencing others to buy into the vision. Lundy and Morin (2013) have highlighted that the transformational leadership abilities of the project managers help them deal with resistance to the intended change. Griffith-Cooper and King (2007) have suggested that the project managers need to use sophisticated communication models that enable others to internalise the choice to proceed towards the proposed future state. Hsu et al. (2017) have argued that the transformational leadership behaviours of the project manager play a key role in reducing the adverse effects of value diversity in teams.

On the other hand, some research has side stepped concerns about the tensions between an organisational vision and the diverse values of stakeholders by assuming project autonomy. Considering projects where goals and methods are not well defined (Turner and Cochrane, 1993), Christenson and Walker (2004), have argued that the leadership work of value creation is accomplished through the project manager orchestrating a process of sensemaking with stakeholders in order to help construct an aspired future state for the organisation and create a culture of shared values that facilitates a shared understanding of the aspired future state. They have argued that such a process ensures that the proposed vision is viewed as desirable, credible, and realistic by stakeholders. Alternatively, research on servant leadership has proposed a follower-centric project vision development process in which the future aspirations of the team members are aggregated, while continuing the long standing heroic undertone of emphasising the project manager as the primary actor of this work (Harwardt, 2020; Bilal et al., 2021).

Recently, the project management research concerned with value creation has also directed some attention to leadership. Matinheikki et al. (2017) have suggested that the project leadership work concerned with value creation involves connecting different parties so that the shared vision can be maintained. Lehtinen et al. (2019) have shown that leadership may help define the propositions that make the aspired outcomes of a megaproject concrete in a way that is perceived as worthwhile by potentially competing organisational actors, and thereby mobilising them towards collaborative value creation activities. In this way, they have contributed to clarifying how the process of sensemaking with the stakeholders to help construct an aspired future state may be accomplished when projects are not presumed as autonomous in the value creation process.

Martinsuo (2020) has further extended these understandings by drawing attention to the taken-for-granted values of the industry and the society. Inspired by Schein (2004), she has suggested that the social construction of values is fragile in the face of situated value use. In doing so, she has proposed the conceptualisation of values as aspired future states of desired goals and modes of conduct rather than the worth of outputs or outcomes. By reorienting attention to the social construction of an aspired future state of desired goals and modes of conduct that transform shared background assumptions, she has offered a useful way forward for moving beyond a cognitive undertone in conceptualising the work of project leadership. Yet, her suggestion that the work of leadership is to define and articulate values has meant that the work of project leadership has continued to be associated with control and largely confined to discursive actions and interactions.

Such discussions on value creation in the project management literature have also begun to make inroads to the study of project leadership. In particular, Whyte et al. (2022) have proposed a socialised view of leadership, emphasising that the work of project leadership concerned with value creation is a social accomplishment that results in transformative outcomes. Their argument that this work is the responsibility of the many rather than an individual and is accomplished through the balancing of diverse values, including those associated with stakeholders that do not have voice such as ecologies, has also led to a more collective and democratic understanding of the value creation process. Moreover, they have highlighted the dynamic nature of the process of value creation by directing attention to the unfolding events that may change understandings about values as well as uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity that can destroy or disrupt understandings about values. At the same time, however, the conceptualisation of value as the worth of outputs or outcomes, and the suggestion that the balancing of diverse values through situated compromise making have meant that this work is effectively confined to choosing between elements of competing values. This is significant because it privileges trade-offs over synergies, and thereby produces blind spots with respect to potential opportunities.

In sum, the literature on project leadership and the growing debates on leadership in the project management literature on value creation have been invaluable for alerting us to the tensions associated with plurality of values. However, there is a crucial limitation that revolves around the tendency to resort to reductionist responses such as privileging one opposing demand over the other or compromise making. There has also been a relative silence with respect to the clashes between static contractual promises and the dynamically evolving situation. Thus, the next section turns to the literature on leadership to examine the explanations they offer with respect to the leadership work of value creation.

3. The work of value creation in the leadership literature

Traditionally, the literature on leadership has attempted to take a value-free position, despite implicitly making important assumptions about values by, for instance, emphasising the realisation of the aspiration to create history in the early great man theories of leadership (Heifetz, 2001). While the new leadership theories have emphasised values to position leadership as a moral social construct, they have tended to subsume values under leadership behaviours required to enhance task related performance or follower satisfaction (Ng, 2017; Bavik et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Fladerer and Braun, 2020; Dong and Zhong, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023). Nevertheless, for some of the seminal works in the literature on leadership, value creation is central to the work of leadership. In particular, Burns' (1978) work on transformational leadership, Heifetz's (2001) notion of adaptive leadership and Schein's (2004) work on culture creation emphasise the role of leadership in relation to diverse and potentially contradictory values. Accordingly, this section examines the insights offered by these seminal works.

These seminal works do not necessarily conceptualise values in exactly the same way. Schein (2004) and Heifetz (2001) argue that values are both modes of conduct and future goals. However, Burns (1978) clearly distinguishes between end values which refer to goals or purposes and modal values which refer to modes of conduct (e.g., honesty, fairness), while recognising that some values are both end values and modal values. At the same time, however, they share a common interest to understand why the work of leadership privileges one set of values over the plurality of values others may hold.

For Schein (2004), the work of leadership is to create values that guide a collective to success and evolve these values in relation to the environment. This idea shares some common ground with the project leadership literature discussed in the previous section, in terms of presuming that the leadership work of selling a vision plays a key role in goal achievement. Burns (1978) and Heifetz (2001) have offered alternative explanations. The seminal work of Burns (1978) has a much more ideological undertone, in terms of its argument that the work of leadership is to elevate the values of followers to a stable set of higher social values, and thereby produce social change. Inspired by a Maslowian hierarchy of needs, he has suggested that such a move towards higher values involves departing from basic human needs to affection and belonging and ultimately self-actualisation.

Heifetz (2001) has critiqued the emphasis on universal definition of

higher values in the work of Burns (1978) by arguing that it can be easily forgotten that values are shaped in relation to the situated definition and response to a problem. He has suggested that it is the crucial concerns in a situation that should determine the unifying social values. This critique is significant because it proposes a departure from an emphasis on relatively stable values in the work for Burns (1978) and Schein (2004) to the active efforts to shape values as situations unfold. According to Heifetz (2001) such a view does not challenge the notion of a vision, because leaders still provide clarity and articulation around values but they do so without providing a fixed image of a future state.

Regardless of their divergent explanations of why the work of leadership privileges one set of values, these three seminal works share a common interest in understanding competing values and conflict as a central component of the leadership work of value creation. For both Burns (1978) and Heifetz (2001), the value creation work of leadership is to "orchestrate conflict" to mobilise action. Burns (1978) has suggested that the role of leadership is to adjust the intensity and the scope of this conflict in relation to their political capacity to mobilise collective action towards higher values. In this formulation, it is crucial that contradictory values are unified through higher end values rather than aligned through a bargaining process grounded in the values associated with modes of conduct. He refers to the former as transformational leadership and the latter as transactional leadership. He argues that transactional leadership is more appropriate for the attempts to maintain stability in the face of immediate pressures because it helps satisfy the values of individuals or groups, but also warns that it does not lead to collective action towards shared values like transformational leadership.

Heifetz (2001) has offered a similar account of the process of value alignment while attempting to avoid the pitfall of a universal explanation. He has not only drawn attention to diverse and potentially contradictory values, but also the mismatch between these values and the situation at hand. Moreover, he has suggested that paying attention to competing values helps understand the different aspects of a situation and learn from unfolding events, possibly through experimentation, to capitalise on emerging opportunities. This is a much more processual and collective view of the leadership work of value creation than the one offered by Burns (1978). Yet, Heifetz (2001) suggestion to make trade-offs in identifying the most important aspect of a problem has introduced a crucial fault line that revolves around responding to plurality of values through making choices rather than unifying values.

In contrast, Schein (2004) has emphasised the validation of values through shared action in his explanations of competing values. He has suggested that the values set by a leader remain solely as 'espoused values', or put simply the articulation of desired values, unless a group socially validates them through shared action. This is intended to capture the idea that buying into the values proposed by the leader is largely contingent on the testing of their utility, which can result in a gap between what is said and done. In this formulation, resistance is grounded in the utility of alternative values that have served the collective in solving their problems in the past. Schein's (2004) consideration of the influence of past values in these attempts has injected a greater degree of sophistication into the processual view of value creation. At the same time, however, he has largely resorted to explanations about the past rather than unfolding events in moving forward to the future in understanding the dynamic nature of the value creation process.

Despite broadly sharing concern for understanding competing values and conflict as a central component of the leadership work of value creation, these seminal works tend to diverge on their views on the source of leadership. In this respect, Schein's (2004) work has put the emphasis on the formal authority in defining the leader. Alternatively, Burns (1978) has argued that the leader is an individual with personal influence who chooses the higher social values and connects with followers to achieve the change that is intended through those values. In this way, he has presented a view where leaders may emerge from anywhere within the social structure. At the same time, however, he has implied an asymmetrical leader-follower relationship by presuming

their superior knowledge with respect to higher values. Heifetz (2001) has also de-linked leadership from formal authority. Cautioning that reliance on a leader for the definition of values constrains adaptation, he has articulated the necessity for the leader to mobilise others to actively contribute to the value creation process. In this way, he has proposed a shared responsibility for the value creation process.

In sum, these seminal works extend our understandings of the leadership work of value creation, in terms of explaining its processual and collective aspects. Yet, their tendency to place making trade-offs or selecting one value over another at the heart of the process of value creation encourages a reductionist logic which is poorly placed to deal with wicked problems that defy objective true or false criteria (Rittell and Webber, 1973). Such a logic confines value creation to an asymmetrical process of resolving competing values, which downplays the learning and synergies that emerge from the confrontation of diverse human values as well as the environment. While some of the recent literature on leadership attempts to move beyond this asymmetrical process by acknowledging the need to reconcile competing values among leaders and followers or between followers without privileging the values of one party, it does not go far enough to explain what this means and how it may be achieved (Lemoine et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2021). Mary Parker Follett (1924) offers an alternative perspective which this essay examines next.

4. Follett's central arguments

Follett (1924) has essentially viewed the work of value creation as about the social construction of a relationship rather than attending to the problem of valuing which focuses on defining the relative worth of interests in relation to aspired social ends. In doing so, she has raised the important issue of whether value creation is about competition or integration. According to Follett (1924), there are important problems with viewing value creation as competition. First, she has argued that even if some interests are declared valid through explicit evaluation criteria such criteria are likely to remain open to contestation. Her argument is particularly relevant to wicked problems that defy objective criteria for deciding whether a solution is good or bad (Rittell and Webber, 1973). This is because the inability to link evaluation criteria to particular outcomes opens validity claims to contestation. Second, she has critiqued the separation of individual and social values on the basis that it leads to their competition that is likely to result in sacrificing individual interests for the greater good. Instead, Follett (1924) has emphasised integration, arguing that openness in the creation of relations gives rise to fresh possibilities for unifying diverse values. At the same time, she has cautioned that genuine integration cannot be achieved solely through discussions because such an effort will only mask ongoing dissent, and therefore is likely to be only temporary. For Follett (1924), integration comes from a deeper understanding of relationships, unfolding in relation to progressive adjustment through action. Similarly, she has warned against the temporary nature of compromise making, suggesting that the way forward lies within a relationship rather than in-between the two sides.

Similar to Burns (1978) and Heifetz (2001), Follett (1924) has considered the confrontation of contradictory values in the form of conflict to be positive rather than a form of resistance that needs to be eliminated, but she has gone further to emphasise the generative nature of this conflict. For her, integration is about invention, or in other words, creating values that unite the values of the parties. Follett (1924) clarifies that invention does not refer to abandoning the old but rather transforming it, with the aim of generating additional value. She has proposed that it is possible to show that the sought after ends are not necessarily incompatible is possible by shifting the attention from the different parts, people, elements to activities or moving from a short-term view to a longer term one in considering a problem. She has also noted that disintegration may also produce possibilities for uniting in new ways.

In considering how integration may be accomplished, Follett (1924) has pointed to the issue of laws or agreements enforceable by laws. She has insisted on the need to move beyond traditional interpretations of law that privilege guarding interests and maintaining peace and order on the basis that this limits the confrontation of contradictory values, and therefore, the possibilities for integration. Instead, she has proposed an alternative interpretation where laws or agreements enforceable by laws facilitate integration by helping understand diverse and potentially contradictory values. Recognising that such a re-interpretation raises the crucial question of how to deal with promises, she clarified that promise making is fundamentally about loyalty, and loyalty should not be tested by adherence to one situation alone but rather to evolving situations.

In making these arguments, Follett (1924) has emphasised the importance of taking into account the 'total situation', referring to both the evolving ends that are being sought and the processes of relating unfolding through the reciprocal influence of actions and interactions. In this formulation, there is a departure from the idea of resistance towards embracing the confrontation of diverse values as the means for surfacing differences and prompting a re-valuation. Attempts to tackle conflict, therefore, are grounded in a concern for maintaining diversity rather than reducing it. Consistent with the pragmatist views of the time (Dewey, 1922a), Follett (1924) has suggested that the sought after ends should not be reduced to predetermined judgements, but rather re-invented in the face of emergence. According to her, the values of both the individual and social order are likely to change as a result of this re-invention.

In discussing the totality of a situation, Follett (1924) has also considered confronting the natural environment. She has proposed abandoning our heroic desire to conquer the natural environment which has resulted in a concern for the resistance, instead suggesting the necessity of viewing ourselves as 'at home in our world', which enables us to embrace the confrontation of the activities of the natural environment (Follett, 1924 pp. 131). Follett (1924) has argued that such confrontation is a creative endeavour rather than a heroic one, in terms of the subtle interactions that prompt reciprocal responses. In this way, she has extended the idea of integration to our relationship with the environment.

In Follett's (1924) formulation, the distinction between means and ends is no longer appropriate. She has pointed out that the means and ends are inextricably linked within an activity, arguing that presuming end values are always obtained through specific means ignores evolving values through ongoing interaction. This idea parallels Dewey's (1922b) argument that the means-end distinction no longer holds when means are indispensable for the achievement of ends. Following this line, it is crucial to avoid limiting dualisms introduced by separating out the values that form means and ends.

Moreover, according to Follett (1924), the value creation process is accomplished collectively through everyday interactions. The uniting of the contributions of individuals through confrontations provides an important insight into the nature of the collective leadership suggested by Follett (1924). This is because it draws attention to synergies, or in Follett's (1924) words the productive power of the collective that makes it more powerful than simply a pretty kaleidoscope. Follett (1924) has challenged status differences such as those based on scientific expertise in the value creation process, instead arguing the necessity of interweaving different kinds of experience. In doing so, she has stressed that the values related to the total situation and the sense of collective responsibility should guide these efforts. Accordingly, she has argued that power should not be transferred, but rather developed collectively. Despite such an emphasis on collectivity, Follett (1924) has left room for the emergence of one or more individuals, potentially from multiple locations, organising this collective.

5. Implications for the project leadership work of value creation

Taking the lead from Follett (1924) involves acknowledging that the leadership work of value creation is inherently complex not only because of the seemingly contradictory value demands that are interrelated through a value proposition and the tension between individual values and social values, but also because of the tension between fulfilling the promises made at one point in time and the evolving situation that requires a revision of those promises. Responding to this complexity requires a relational perspective of leadership that is concerned with integration, dynamic evolution, the natural environment, and collectivity.

5.1. Integration

Follett's (1924) work invites project leadership research to move beyond choosing between values or making compromises to, in Follett's (1924) words, interweaving diverse and potentially contradictory values which results in additional value. Such a position is different to the one often taken by the growing body of research on paradoxical leadership. Lewis et al. (2014), for instance, have suggested that competing values should be brought together in a vision but separated through a structure in everyday organisational work. This suggestion is in line with the idea of ambidextrous organising, enabled through project leadership (Havermans et al., 2015). Notwithstanding the value of this approach, what is proposed here is to seek out what Follett (1924) calls 'mystery moments' that arise from the encounters of contradictions and result in emergent outcomes, particularly when crossing beyond the boundaries of an organisation in producing change.

The notion of integration is a relational perspective of leadership that emphasises the capacity of leadership to shape social order rather than the attributes required for influence in interpersonal relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006). According to Hosking (1988) such a perspective is grounded in the concern for understanding how peoples' interpretations of causality connect to their values and are translated into action through negotiations. Acknowledging that such a view is consistent with the notion of sensemaking (Weick, 2001), she cautions that it may implicitly reproduce a cognitive undertone which downplays the social construction of a situation. Instead, she emphasises ongoing negotiations through which a sense of social order emerges.

For Follett (1924), it is the whole activity that needs to be invoked as the starting point for this negotiation. She calls for departing from a focus on discrete elements or immediate pressures associated with a problem towards the totality of the problem. Her argumentation shows similarities with Heifetz's (2001) ideas of value shaping as inextricably linked to the activity of defining and solving a problem. According to Follett (1924), such an extended perspective in the negotiation of a problem offers the possibility of integration. This is because seeing the value creation process as a problem shaping process enables us to move beyond the quest for finding the optimal path towards a pre-determined solution based on what may be called relatively arbitrary choices (Schön, 1986).

This idea is also consistent with the argument that leadership is about asking questions rather than providing solutions (Grint, 2005a). Following Follett (1924), these questions should be underpinned by a concern for surfacing and prompting the confrontation of differences. As Schein (2004) has cautioned, however, it is necessary to move from discursive agreements to testing their consequences in the active efforts to produce a change. Indeed, in line with the pragmatist emphasis on testing values (Dewey, 1922b), Follett (1924) has also alluded to the limits of verbal agreements made in conferences. Following this line, the role of leadership is not solely confined to discursive actions and interactions, but also the active efforts to test unified values.

Such a position calls for a departure from the traditional role of projects as vehicles for implementing planned change to conceptualising 'projects as interventions', which set out to shape futures through active participation (Whyte and Mottee, 2022). It also requires moving beyond defining the role of project leadership from setting the vision and inspiring others, or in other words showing the way. Instead, what is

required are more subtle actions and interactions that enable collective inquiry into the problem and its solution with the intent of producing unified values that stand the testing of their utility.

If we take such a position to project leadership in the creation of value to help tackle climate change, a key challenge for leadership becomes one of surfacing conflicts that emerge at the complex nexus of ecological, social, economic, and technological values and searching for generative possibilities. For instance, mobilising local communities to question the implications of urban greening, offered a solution for reducing the ecological impact of infrastructure, is likely to surface the issue of gentrification that presents a tension between social and ecological values (Grossmann et al., 2022). The work of leadership would then turn its attention to broadening the definition of the problem. Facilitating communities to question their local problems associated with infrastructure, deliberate and test solutions that may address them are likely to prompt new understandings of the impacts of infrastructure that open up further possibilities for creating social, ecological, economic and technological values (Oscilowicz et al., 2023).

However, project organising presents important challenges for the accomplishment of this work. Time tends to be a constrained resource in projects (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995), and when the stakes are high the perception of time pressure tends to constrain collaborations (van Berkel et al., 2016). There is also the danger that the concern for achieving the time delimitation displaces the creation of future values (Burns, 1978), particularly when the role of leadership is tied to results associated with time. Moreover, in megaprojects, where multiple temporalities rather than time constraint is the primary concern (Brookes et al., 2017), temporal differences and transient relations may make integration particularly challenging.

5.2. Dynamic evolution

Reflecting on Follett (1924), relational dynamics and the unfolding situation is central to the leadership work of value creation. That is to say, the emphasis is on the interactional processes with others and a situation, through which new possibilities for the future emerge and consequently values evolve. The socialised perspective is very much in line with this view, in the sense that it draws attention to the unfolding events that may change understandings about values as well as uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity that can destroy or disrupt understandings about values. Following Follett (1924), it is possible to broaden this perspective by also considering the reciprocal effects of interpersonal interactions.

Consistent with Heifetz's (2001) arguments, there is a departure from attending to pre-determined values towards continuous efforts to shape values. Such a view reflects the ideas in pragmatism that revolve around problematisation of the ideal of a 'static perfection' grounded in a commitment to certainty (Dewey, 1922a). For project organising such a reorientation presents a challenge as projects are about making promises that are contractually binding (Kreiner, 2020). As Arendt (1958, p. 237) has long highlighted, "… binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security …" In this sense, a legal order guards the ocean of uncertainty that is project organising.

Drawing on Follett (1924), it is possible to suggest that loyalty to a promise should not be tested by adherence to one situation alone but rather to evolving situations. Thus, this is a problem of the legal order, in the sense that it should not be oriented towards guarding interests and maintaining peace and order, but rather facilitating integration. Following this line, a crucial issue is changing the nature of the contracts that govern projects. Indeed, project management research has proposed flexible contracting based on a processual view of contracts in order to allow for capitalising on opportunities to create more value (Kujala et al., 2015), and emphasised the creation of mutual value in alliancing (Pargar et al., 2019). Research on strategy making processes has also suggested that a non-traditional contract may enable a departure from

strict contractual promises to the dynamic shaping of future aspirations in relation to immediate action (Pitsis et al., 2003).

Embracing the continuous process of value creation in this way points to the unfolding counterpoint between means and ends. It directs attention to the ongoing reciprocal influence of values through which end values evolve. Such a view is consistent with the pragmatist view of inquiry, suggesting that ends guide situated deliberations which in turn create possibilities for sought after ends (Dewey, 1922a). Following this line of inquiry, the value creation process could benefit from virtue ethics concerned with enacting values in action (Kortantamer, 2023), particularly in responding to ethical questions that revolve around the dynamically evolving technological, ecological and organisational values (Whyte et al., 2022). In this way, it also becomes possible to move beyond moral justifications associated with the successful achievement of static ends (Dewey, 1922a).

In this formulation, the future is continuously made through unfolding interactions (Whyte and Mottee, 2022). This is not to say that there is no need for exploring alternative futures as suggested by socialised leadership (Whyte et al., 2022). Instead, what is emphasised is the situated improvisations through which these alternative futures may be reproduced or transformed. The work of leadership then becomes one of producing clumsy solutions rather than elegant ones, especially when tackling wicked problems that defy a final solution (Verweij et al., 2006; Grint, 2010). Such a reorientation, however, requires the rethinking of the effects of leadership, in terms of a departure from the taken-for-granted ideal of producing excellence towards one of producing imperfect solutions through enacting values in action (Kortantamer, 2023). It also requires conceptualisation of leadership through relational forms of power rather than power and knowledge asymmetries about desirable ends and means (Follett, 1924).

In the case of climate change, for instance, there are significant uncertainties that revolve around the dual possibilities of technological advances and lack thereof because of the economic disruptions caused by climate change, and the iterative efforts to create legislations (Lazarus, 2009), but also ongoing confrontations between policies that diverge in terms of putting the emphasis on hierarchies, entrepreneurs, new ways of relating to the nature and fatalism (Verweij et al., 2006), and western scientific worldview and local indigenous worldview prompt possibilities for charting a path towards climate mitigation and adaptation (Leonard et al., 2013). Abovementioned discussions put ongoing creative encounters with these dynamics and their regulation through contracts grounded in flexible or mutual value creation at the heart of the value creation work of leadership in projects. Research is required to understand how this work can be best accomplished. However, it is possible to draw inspiration from examples in other settings, such as the enactment of the values of solidarity and local sovereignty by the one of the former mayors of London in interactions with other mayors to confront the expectation that national hierarchies define how to respond to climate change and reframe cities as central agents that should take practical action in tackling the issue of climate change which led to inter-city development of knowledge, expertise and experience, as well as enacting a sense of belonging and empowerment in local actors to develop innovative solutions, offering new possibilities for value creation (Mintrom and Luetjens, 2017). Here, it is important to remember that such an accomplishment is only one of the various clumsy solutions that offers a legitimate way forward, and requires sensitivity to ensuring no one is left worse off (Verweij et al., 2006).

5.3. Natural environment

Another implication of following Follett (1924) is the necessity of including the natural environment in the conceptualisation of relationality. According to Follett (1924) the emergence of confrontations with the natural environment that give rise to generative opportunities are crucial for the appreciation of the totality of the situation in which values are created. Such a view is broadly in line with the socialised

perspective of project leadership that pays attention to ecological actors as stakeholders (Whyte et al., 2022). However, Follett (1924), emphasises co-evolution of self and the other in relation to each other rather than their treatment as separate entities (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Relational leadership theories have acknowledged such broader view of relationality. Hosking (2011) has pointed out that the leadership interactions with the natural environment are particularly important in dealing with complex issues grounded in interrelationships such as climate change and biodiversity loss which require new ways of relating. She has drawn on Pearce (1992) to argue that such an approach necessitates a departure from solely scientific evidence-based inquiry underpinned by a preoccupation with conquering the natural environment towards the social construction of relationships and realities by suspending presumptions and being open to learning about alternative ways of being in the world. Like Follett (1924), she has suggested that this is a relatively subtle rather than a heroic process grounded in an appreciation of the ecological cues in ongoing interactions and facilitating learning in response to them (Whyte and Mottee, 2022). Unfortunately, however, this idea has not been materialised in much of the relational leadership research (Uhl-Bien, 2006), except for a handful of more recent collective leadership studies that have turned their attention to indigenous perspectives have begun to address this omission by emphasising the ties of affection to nature that resemble kinship that drive our unification (Spiller et al., 2020).

In terms of climate change, what is proposed here is not a privileging of natural solutions, often involving conservation, enhancement or imitation of nature, since they hold the potential to be as risky and technocratic as other solutions (Osaka et al., 2021). Instead, this broader perspective of relational leadership directs attention to ecological conditions that emerge in response to interventions, prompting questions about dynamic responsiveness through learning (Palframan, 2015).

However, learning in relation to the natural environment can be particularly challenging in projects when a sense of urgency dominates. In these situations, what is called for is the command of a solution that enables moving forward fast (Grint, 2005b). Accordingly, the pacing of these engagements as well as maintaining future flexibility for later learning become important considerations in the accomplishment of this leadership work (Ferraro et al., 2015).

5.4. Collectivity

Follett's (1924) emphasis on the situated uniting of contributions through confrontations helps us see leadership as a collective phenomenon. Her argument that democracy is about integration of diverse experiences rather than fully surrendering to the values of experts has crucial implications for how one conceives this collectivity. The social construction of a structurally embedded, small group of leaders Denis et al. (2012) refers to as pooled leadership tends to encourage a more disciplining discourse of participation while embracing the contribution of multiple actors to the work of leadership (Mantere and Vaara, 2008). Consequently, as Denis et al. (2012) highlight, power asymmetries underpinning individual-centric views of leadership are likely to be retained. Following Follett (1924), on the other hand, helps us see collectivity as situated, emergent and open to broad participation.

The socialised view of leadership proposes a democratic deliberation process which is very much in the spirit of Follett (1924) understanding of collectivity. Whyte et al. (2022) have pointed out that such a position raises the crucial question of how to frame the boundaries of a project, in terms of who is viewed as being an insider or an outsider. Following Follett (1924), however, the key question here is not one of how to set boundaries, but rather how to cross boundaries.

Despite suggesting that one or more individuals situated in multiple locations may facilitate the crossing of boundaries, Follett (1924) has remained relatively silent on how this might be accomplished in practice. One way to approach this problem is to turn to research on social movements, drawing attention to the social construction of partially

Table 1
Summary of implications of Follett (1924) relational view of leadership.

Key dimensions	Main arguments	Links to contemporary debates on project leadership	Implications for future project leadership scholarship and practice
Integration	Interweaving diverse and potentially contradictory values through the active negotiation of a problem. Giving centrality to the generative nature of conflict and moving beyond solely relying on discursive negotiations.	Negotiation of diverse and potentially contradictory values as central to the work of project leadership (Whyte et al., 2022), the fragility of the values promoted by the leader in the face of situated value use (Martinsuo, 2020), and mobilising actors towards collaborative value creation activities by making outcomes concrete (Lehtinen et al., 2019).	Moving from choosing between values or making compromises to integration of values through invention. Giving centrality to the problem formulation process, asking questions to actively surface conflict and testing values rather than discursive prioritisation of values and elimination of resistance.
Dynamic evolution	Centrality of unfolding events and confrontations of conflicting values to the leadership work of value creation. Loyalty to a promise is not tested by adherence to one situation but rather to evolving situations.	Dynamic nature of the value creation process: unfolding events that change values, and uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity that can destroy or disrupt understandings about values (Whyte et al., 2022), enacting values in action by departing from utilitarian ethics to virtue ethics (Kortantamer, 2023).	Departing from the tradition to promise a static future state towards the development of imperfect solutions by enacting values in action with the support of dynamic forms of contracts. Avoiding limiting dualisms introduced by separating out the values that form means and ends.
Natural environment	Extension of the idea of integration to relating to the natural environment. Embracing the subtle acts of confronting the natural environment rather than heroic acts that seek to conquer it.	Cooperation, collaboration and sharing of power with ecological actors such as frogs and other species as stakeholders (Whyte et al., 2022). Attempts to move beyond a heroic view of leadership (e.g., Packendorff et al., 2014; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009).	Moving away from a heroic desire to conquer the natural environment by giving primacy to scientific evidence. Instead, entwinement in the world through the suspension of presumptions and openness to learning about alternative ways of relating to nature.
Collectivity	Collectivity as situated, emergent and open to broad participation rather than surrendering to the values of a small group of experts.	Collective nature of the leadership work of value creation based on "power with" relations and the framing of project boundaries (i.e. who is viewed as being an insider or an outsider) (Whyte et al., 2022). Attempts to move from individual-centric views of leadership to collective views of leadership (e.g., Packendorff et al., 2014).	Moving from starting with a concern for identifying the leadership actor (s) to starting with a concern for the boundary crossing processes through which the work of leadership is accomplished. Embracing diverse leadership patterns in which one or more individuals, potentially from multiple locations may organise this collective.

organised and institutionalised spaces that seek to maximise participation through the development of networks (Haug, 2013). Individuals, then, may mobilise these spaces, and thereby enable the emergence, reproduction, and transformation of collectivity. However, reorienting ideas around democratic participation in the work of value creation in this way presents the risk of not achieving timely closures, which is a core concern associated with the linear progress of projects in delivering change (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995).

Nevertheless, such a view suggests the necessity of shifting from starting with the concern for identifying an individual or collective to starting with the concern for the process through which the work of leadership is accomplished. Indeed, some leadership research has called for attending to the 'doing of leading' rather than leadership (Pye, 2005) and directing attention to how relations that unfold over time are temporarily stabilised into individuality or collectivity (Wood, 2005). This position is also evident in the arguments that revolve around the fluidity of leadership in the socialised perspective of leadership. However, the suggestion that this fluidity revolves around roles provides important blind spots with respect to the potential emergence of individuals as leaders.

Moreover, there is the danger that such a view is interpreted as the transfer of power. Follett (1924) account of collectivity offers a view of power that emphasises its productive nature. It proposes a shift away from the position-based power-over relations towards a view of power as a generative phenomenon that produces collective agency (Carlsen et al., 2020). This notion of 'power with' has also been emphasised by the socialised view of leadership. Yet, by proposing a role-based transfer of the work of value creation, to a certain extent, this perspective has implicitly shared a predisposition towards a more traditional interpretation of power over relations.

Indeed, it is important to remember that power with relationships tend to be fragile and requires continuous efforts to prevent them from evolving into a power over relationship (Carlsen et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant for project organising, typically underpinned by unequal power and knowledge relations associated with the tendency to draw a boundary between those who produce change and those who receive change.

It is possible to identify examples of leadership as an emergent process that is open to broad participation in the response to climate change in some localities. An example is the case of Green Rapids where emergent leadership actors came together in different configurations to synergistically create the ambition to be a green city and translate it into various courses of action whilst also catalysing the emergence of other leadership actors (Quick, 2017). However, how such collective leadership processes can possibly be achieved in planned interventions that take the form of projects remains an open question for future research.

6. Conclusion

This essay argues that the interest of project management scholars to study wicked problems provides an opportunity for the extended perspective of socialised project leadership offered here to be established within the attempts to understand the processes of creating value through projects. The literature on project management and the seminal works in the leadership literature concerned with value creation have broadly shared the tendencies to respond to the plurality of values by privileging one set of values over others, often through the construction of unequal power and knowledge relationships or attempting to reconcile them through compromise making. Notwithstanding their value, it is unfortunate that their acknowledgement of the importance of confronting conflict is never really pursued with respect to wicked problems that defy clear criteria for evaluation. Follett (1924) ideas that revolve around dynamic processes of value integration and forms of collectivity, however, offer an alternative avenue for coping with wicked problems that question some of the broadly shared assumptions with respect to value creation processes and the role leadership plays in them in the

project management literature. Table 1 summarises these ideas and their implications for leading projects aimed at tackling wicked problems.

As Table 1 highlights, the essay draws on the rich source of insights in the relational leadership perspective of Follett (1924) to build on and extend the socialised perspective of project leadership proposed by Whyte et al. (2022). It develops four key enhancements: 1) an emphasis on interweaving diverse and potentially contradictory values, 2) the recognition that the dynamic evolution of value should not only be prompted by emerging events but also by active confrontations of conflicting values made possible by flexible forms of contacting, 3) openness to learning about alternative ways of relating to nature in shaping values, and 4) opening the collective practice of leadership to broad participation. The idea that leadership involves subtle, ongoing interactions also contributes to the attempts to move beyond a heroic view of leadership in the project management literature (Packendorff et al., 2014; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009).

Moreover, by proposing alternative ways of relating to humans and the natural environment in the social construction of project, the essay contributes to the challenge to the mainstream theory and research on the creation of project value (Martinsuo, 2020), and connects it to the proposal to view projects as an intervention into our world (Whyte and Mottee, 2022). It is also the hope of this essay that it acts as further inspiration in taking forward related avenues of research. Research on future making, for instance, shares a similar concern with the dynamic processes of creating an aspired future state (Comi and Whyte, 2018). The concept of entwinement in the world is a potentially useful way of connecting the ideas presented in this essay and to this research, reminding us of our ongoing engagement with human and natural agencies.

Practically, the ideas discussed in this essay call for alternative ways of leadership capacity development, such as those that combine individual leadership development initiatives with interventions that disrupt routines and norms that may constrain collective leadership, and encourage dialogic conversations (Eva et al., 2021). On the policy making level, they also call for the promotion of conditions that enable integration in projects concerned with wicked problems, such as the forms of contracts that support the dynamic shaping of values and strengthened connections between policy making and implementation.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the insights provided in this essay are only theoretical possibilities with respect to project organising. Real-life examples Follett (1924) provides often come from relationships that continue from the past into the future, such as those encountered in trade unions or between farmers and middlemen, which leave us with incomplete guidance on how to translate them to project organising where relations tend to be transient. For many projects where time is a limited resource, there is also the thorny issue of the achievement of timely closures. Illustrations of how Follett (1924) ideas may apply to the wicked problem of climate change offered by this essay have also encountered a similar challenge. As such, there is a clear need for future research to explore in greater depth how these insights may translate into everyday realities of projects. Considering everyday realities of projects are likely to be grounded in an interplay between 'power over' relations that enact power asymmetries and 'power to' relations, or in other words the disciplinary knowledge through which power relations are (re)produced, these explorations would benefit from investigating the possibilities and limits of Follett's (1924) ideas of 'power with' relations (Carlsen et al., 2020).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dicle Kortantamer: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial

interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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