



**Briefing Paper 1: Positioning leadership: an overview of the academic debate on leadership in the voluntary sector**

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## About the CVSL Briefing Papers

This briefing paper is the first in a series of **three** short papers exploring the topic of leadership in the UK voluntary sector produced by the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership (CVSL). Our aim in preparing these papers has been to set the context for understanding recent debates around leadership in the voluntary sector in order to identify where further research and discussion is needed, and to understand what leadership development resources have been developed within and for the voluntary sector. We also hope to frame and shape future debates on leadership, and to point to new research agendas.

Consequently, **Paper 1** concentrates on reviewing literature that is best characterised as broadly concerning the debate about leadership within the UK voluntary sector, but it goes on to open this up wherever possible to explore the broader influence of debates on leadership which have influenced thinking about leadership in the sector. For instance these tend to be more critical perspectives that challenge ‘person-centred’ or heroic leader models.

**Paper 2** describes the recent leadership development ‘terrain’ that has developed for the UK voluntary sector. Finally, **Paper 3** details a (non-exhaustive) group of approaches and theories in the wider leadership literature which are particularly pertinent to understanding, researching and communicating about leadership in the voluntary sector. Each paper is based on a semi-systematic review of the available academic and ‘policy based’ literature.

The underlying questions addressed in **Paper 1** are:

- What is the nature of debates in relation to voluntary sector leadership (particularly in the UK)?
- What concepts and theories in the wider literature on leadership are most relevant in

approaching voluntary sector leadership?

And,

- What does this mean for the possibility of identifying a distinctively voluntary sector form of leadership?

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## 1. Introduction

It has become commonplace to observe that the voluntary sector faces numerous challenges in responding effectively to the highly turbulent context that it faces, currently that means the uncertainty and potential impacts of the complicated process of leaving the European Union, as well as the likely endurance of austerity measures, which have already stretched some organisations and their leaders to breaking point. At the same time, ‘leadership’ appears to be back on the agenda in the voluntary sector, with a number of new leadership initiatives that seem to have emerged in response to generalised anxieties about ‘governance failures’ and scandals over fundraising and a seeming decline in trust in the sector. Likewise, recent reviews and reports, for example Baroness Pitkeathley’s Select Committee Inquiry (House of Lords, 2017), which in large part respond directly to the pressures and tensions the sector faces – have called for strengthened or more confident leadership within the sector. Given that leadership exists at every level and niche within the sector, it follows that it is likely to be an element of discussion of potential solutions or mitigation strategies.

Calls for ‘better leadership’ appear to reflect longstanding doubts about the quality and sufficiency of leadership, often hinging on an implicit notion of a leadership deficit within the sector. While leadership has been proposed as a solution but it nevertheless has the feel of a ‘magic concept’<sup>1</sup>, much invoked but inviting scepticism because of its imprecision and associated doubts about its content, meaning and workings. This seems to be exacerbated by the fact that the UK-based voluntary sector research community is relatively small and there is an even smaller sub-set who are interested in management and leadership issues so it is arguably a concept that has been under-researched. There has rarely been a sense

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Pollitt and Hupe, who define a magic concept as: “These share certain properties, including a high degree of abstraction, a strongly positive normative charge, and a seeming ability to dissolve previous dilemmas and binary oppositions.”

that it has been viewed as a pressing issue worthy of sustained research in this field, despite a resurgence of interest in related fields, for instance, in ‘public leadership’ (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012; Pedersen and Hartley, 2008). On the other hand, there have been numerous leadership initiatives emerging from within the sector itself – from Acevo, NCVO, Clore to name a small number, and these are considered in considerably more detail in **Paper 2**. Perhaps not surprising therefore, such developments have usually been at arms length from academic debates or scrutiny. The outputs of these debates have often been in the ‘grey literature’ and therefore risk being discarded or overlooked.

In short, this literature review identifies that the nature of leadership has been extensively researched within private and public spheres. Although the UK voluntary sector literature recognises the significance of leadership, relatively speaking it lags behind in developing clear narratives or a theoretical framework, particularly compared to that in the US (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012). The extant literature predominantly posits a person-centred paradigm, proposing that CEOs have certain core skills and competences, or inadvertently relies on the notion of ‘heroic’ or ‘charismatic’ leadership. These notions have fallen from vogue in the wider leadership literature. Empirical studies have mainly explored leadership from senior positions in large professional organisations, demonstrating leadership practice as a top down approach and based on individual responsibility. Instead, a survey of the wider leadership literature highlights conceptualisations of leadership as collective rather than as individual, as distributed across different levels within an organisation, and as being highly relational in nature (these are explored in more detail in **Paper 3**). Ultimately, the paper and associated work at CVSL aims to contribute to an emerging UK-based leadership debate, stimulate deeper and broader empirical research into leadership and inform the development of accessible, flexible and practice-relevant leadership development resources.

## 2. Putting voluntary sector leadership in context

There is a very large leadership literature developed across a range of disciplines, predominantly psychology, sociology, organisational studies, management and business, illustrating the relevance of this topic and the attention it has received. This vast literature spans an extensive period and has been reviewed by a number of academics (see Grey, 2005; Grint, 2010). In comparison with other sectors, voluntary sector literature on leadership looks comparatively underdeveloped and lacking in theoretical sophistication, having not received sustained recognition or value from voluntary sector academics (we will return to this throughout the papers). Conversely, it is perhaps also true that mainstream leadership scholars rarely consider the voluntary sector context in their research and writing.

The wider literature reflects certain milestones in the development of leadership philosophy and theory, for instance in the 1980s there was a shift from emphasis on leadership traits and characteristics to developing leadership behaviour theories, reflected in particular in the emergence of 'transformational leadership', or alternatively 'new leadership' (Bryman, 1992). In comparison to the idea of a transactional leadership that is based on 'reciprocal exchange' between the leader and follower, transformational leadership refers to a leader who can engage with followers to motivate and 'morally uplift' them (Diaz-Saenz, 2011: 300). Jackson and Parry (2011) describe a transformational leader as someone that 'defines organisational reality through the articulation of a vision, and the generation of strategies to realise that vision' (p.31). Although transformational leadership was highly influential in shifting the focus from traits to leadership behaviour and mobilising others, it does, however, continue to place emphasis on the leader as person rather than on the processes of leadership. As Diaz-Saenz (2011) suggest, 'too much credit is given to the leader, whereas other factors that lead to individual, group or organisational development are ignored' (p.307),

which could include for example emphasis on the role of the follower, and aspects of place and situational context.

The wider leadership literature has explored leadership from different perspectives such as, ethical leadership, collaborative leadership, and charismatic leadership. Whilst it can be thought-provoking and insightful to explore leadership in varying ways, it also creates challenges, such as there being no comprehensive or shared definition of leadership. Instead, it appears academics are more likely to disagree than agree:

*Neither the scholars nor the practitioners have been able to define leadership with precision, accuracy, and consciousness so that people are able to label it correctly when they see it happening or when they engage in it* (Rost, 1993: 6).

Numerous scholars have focused on trying to define and understand the notion of leadership, however, it is not the purpose of this paper to outline and critique these varying definitions. A useful overview is put forth by Grint (2005) in his book *Leadership: Limits and possibilities* that describes how scholars have broadly used four different approaches to explore leadership. These are:

- Leadership as Person: is it WHO 'leaders' are that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Results: is it WHAT 'leaders' achieve that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Position: is it WHERE 'leaders' operate that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Process: is it HOW 'leaders' get things done that makes them leaders?'

(Grint, 2010: 4)

The distinction between a focus on leadership as *person* and leadership as *process* is one that has developed in the wider leadership literature. This represents a significant change of perspective from leadership-as-noun to leadership-as-verb (Hosking, 1988, Grint 2005). While the first perspective draws

attention to individual personality, skills, and achievements, the second focuses on *how* leadership happens. The leadership-as-verb perspective draws attention to leadership as a practice (Raelin, 2016a; Raelin, 2016b) that is situated, relational, and embedded in the everyday, rather than in the extraordinary individual who occupies a rarefied position.

The remainder of **Paper 1** outlines key developments that help to explore and unpack leadership in a voluntary sector context – another way of putting this is that it pursues the underlying question of what if anything is distinctive about leadership in the sector. It will demonstrate the extent of this development, highlighting any gaps and limitations emerging from the literature, and make recommendations from the wider literature that could be applied to further knowledge and theories on voluntary sector leadership. In particular, we focus on the key themes that are evident in the voluntary sector literature, which can be summarised as a focus on the leader as person; and in contrast goes on to introduce the debates that have begun to decentre accounts of leadership away from the individual. We return to this latter theme in more depth in **Paper 3**.

### 3. The emphasis in the literature is on a *person-centred* approach

Although there is only a small UK voluntary sector literature on leadership, the review of the literature demonstrates a substantial focus on exploring and outlining the competencies and traits associated with being a 'good' leader. Typically, this has been associated with personal attributes, recognising leaders as having 'charismatic' and 'visionary' qualities, and strong personal skills to actively engage with and motivate groups of individuals. Particular attention has been given to defining the key characteristics and skills required for effective voluntary sector leadership. For example, from interviewing twelve Chief Executives from varying organisational sizes, Cormack and Stanton (2003) identified a long list of characteristics, including: emotional attachment; passion; enthusiasm and affinity with the cause; a strategic perspective and a customer service orientation; networking and influencing; personal humility; motivating a team; resilience; self-confidence and being a visionary and inspirational communicator. They go on to describe the appeal of leaders who have:

*The ability to paint a picture of the future that appeals strongly to others. Shows passion and emotion in visioning and representing the work of the organisation to others. A powerful communicator in all forums from one-to-one to public speaking. Visible and seen to speak out and represent the organisation (2003: 8).*

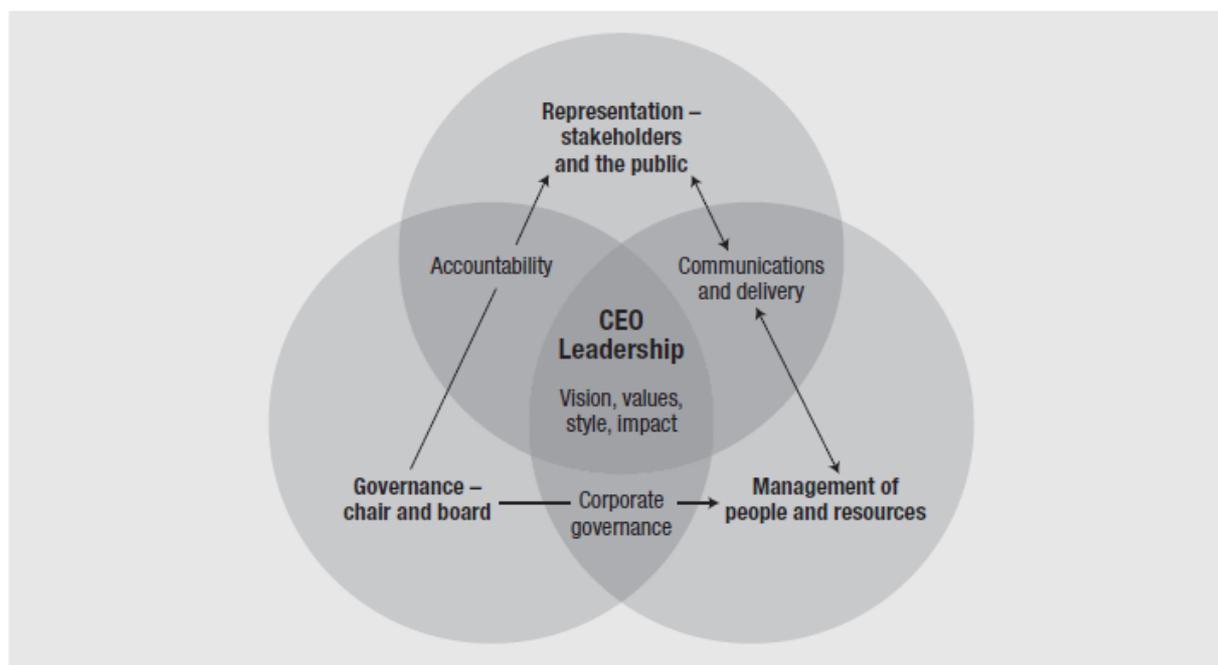
Chambers and Edwards-Stuart (2007), while focusing on the subsector of social enterprises, also produced a list of characteristics that encouraged strong leadership, which included: integrative and speculative thinking; drive and persistence; a strong value-base; focus; and networking. Buckingham et al. (2012) acknowledged that producing such lists could be potentially problematic, as "good'

leadership cannot be captured within a definitive set of functions or skills that can easily be taught or learnt by aspiring leaders' (p.10). Nonetheless, their article goes on to identify characteristics that represent 'good' leadership of the voluntary sector, which they claim includes: values; independence; connections; representation; accountability; insight and balance. In particular, they stressed the idea of a leader being perceived as 'authentic', 'transparent', and 'genuine' as an essential component to demonstrate the responsibility and legitimacy of the leader, and ultimately, strengthen the profile of the organisation. Looking at international voluntary sector literature there is a wealth of leadership philosophies that acknowledge this notion of an 'authentic' leader which is based on having self-awareness, self-regulation, relational transparency, and a clear moral compass (Avolio et al., 2009).

However, there is some recognition in the UK voluntary sector literature that personal characteristics play out within a broader system of leadership, highlighting that leadership is not solely invested in an individual but can also include others. For example, as part of Kirchner's stream of work on leadership she developed a model (2007a) that places individual characteristics in the context of leadership processes that reflect the particular structure of a voluntary organisation (see diagram below). From this model, Kirchner (2007b) claims the key leadership skills of any Chief Executive can be summarised as:

- **Leading upwards** – managing the governance of the organisation
- **Leading downwards** – harnessing the organisation's resources organisation
- **Leading outwards** – representing the organisation.

**Figure 3:** The three leadership spheres of a third sector CEO



The diagram above (taken from Kirchner, 2007a) demonstrates that the individual is still represented as the central focal point in the model. However, the model begins to explore how leadership consists of a number of processes that are interconnected. This challenges the idea that leadership is static, or fixed by an individual's characteristics and traits, but instead is dynamic, relational, and dependent on the context. The model also demonstrates how the particular structure of a voluntary organisation – its governance and accountability, frame the processes of leadership. However, this model does continue to place the individual CEO, their personal style and characteristics, at the heart of a system of leadership.

Other ways of representing and understanding leadership evident in the voluntary sector literature include: leadership styles (Buckingham et al., 2012), leadership approaches (Howieson and Hodges, 2014), and leadership practices (Paton and Brewster, 2008). Paton and Brewster (2008) continue to put the chief executive officer (CEO) at the centre of analysis, but focus on the inner experience of those playing a leadership role. Their aim is to explore the detail of the leadership practice of the 'CEO as leader' – how they go about it and why, and what the everyday experience is like for them as a leader. Although Paton and Brewster carried out some of the research on CEOs in medium

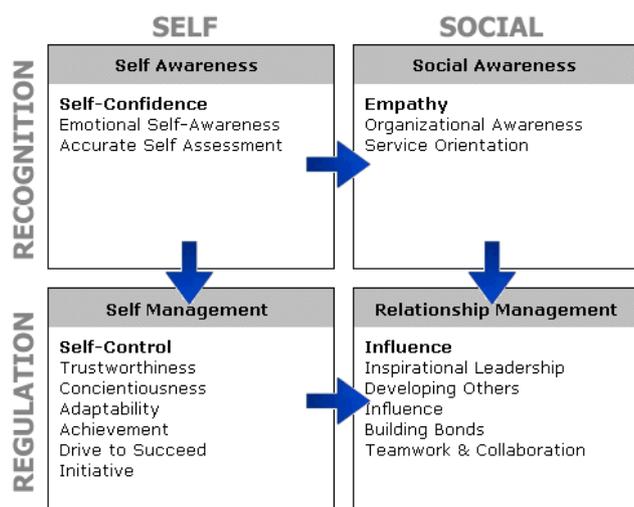
to large sized organisation, they have not fully published these research findings. Nevertheless, their conference paper (Paton and Brewster, 2008) has initiated an insightful and alternative way of looking at voluntary sector leadership, bringing back the role of actors and agency into voluntary sector literature on leadership, highlighting contextual factors, and how leadership practice can be played out in various ways.

In addition to voluntary sector leaders being described as having wide-ranging and multifaceted core skills and traits to scan and navigate the turbulent operating environment, it is also claimed that they require the ability to successfully manage the passion and values of their workforce (Kirchner, 2006). This is particularly pertinent for a sector in which alignment with organisational mission and values is a key factor in recruitment. The wider leadership literature refers to this as emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence was first coined by two psychologists who defined it as:

*The ability to monitor one's own and other's emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action (Salovey and Mayer, 1990).*

Over the years the idea that a leader can, and should, improve their emotional intelligence, even more so than their intelligence quotient, has grown in salience (Goleman, 1995). Subsequently, this has encouraged a wealth of frameworks and assessments to support the leader's development of their emotional intelligence. The framework (below) produced by Goleman (1995) is often viewed as the *de facto* standard for applying emotional intelligence (Mersino, 2007), therefore, other frameworks are often an extension or interpretation of this. The framework is based on a set of traits and competencies that drives leadership performance, such as, self-awareness, social awareness, self-management and relationship management.

Figure 1 Goleman's emotional intelligence competencies framework



Emotional intelligence has been recognised as important in general in leadership studies, and more recently within the voluntary sector, due to the benefits of leaders being aware of their own and others' emotions and the skills to enable a productive team, because 'such people get the best out of others, who in turn love working with and for them' (Edwards, 2011). This suggests that such leaders would enhance organisational sustainability, success and ultimately the impact of the organisation, so are worth investing in.

In recent years, these ideas have evolved to not only consider 'good' emotional intelligence and intelligence quotient, but also that leaders need to be adept in 'cultural intelligence' to be able to lead effectively (Common Purpose, 2017). This idea has been developed by the Common Purpose Founder and Chief Executive, Julia Middleton, who recently published a book on cultural intelligence, arguing that globalisation has shifted the need for leaders to look across cultural boundaries; faiths and beliefs; public, private and voluntary sectors; and between the generations. She argues as society becomes increasingly diverse, so has the need for leaders to be better equipped to work and relate across cultures.

This ultimately brings the narrative back to the wide range of skills and characteristics that the literature suggests are necessary for voluntary sector leadership. It also reflects the debate in the wider leadership literature that has given extensive attention to understanding the personal qualities and characteristics that are meant to inform good leadership, enabling observers to 'distinguish effective from less effective leaders' (Jackson and Parry, 2011: 26). However Grint (2005) is amongst those scholars who question the usefulness of this approach, noting that no two lists of leadership traits are ever the same. In addition, he questions the 'god'-like qualities attributed to individuals to encapsulate the extensive range of characteristics and skills typically identified. We argue therefore that this critique of the person-centred approach to leadership has been given insufficient attention in the voluntary sector literature, and indeed offers the potential for a move away from over-reliance on the individual in voluntary sector theory and practice. We consider some of these approaches in more detail in the next section.

## 4. The potential of perspectives that stress ‘sense-making’ and the power of narrative

One direction that represents a decisive departure from the conceptualisation of leadership as a lone individual with a hierarchical position, the ‘heroic leader’ perspective (Kay, 1996), is the stream of voluntary sector leadership literature focused on sense-making. This stream of literature offers two insights. First, it draws attention to recurring narratives that endeavour to make sense of leadership in the voluntary sector. Second, it highlights the processes of sense-making as constructed through processes of interaction between people at different levels of an organisation. For example, Kay (1996) argues for understanding ‘leadership as a multi-dimensional *process* of social interaction, creating and sustaining acceptable meanings of issues, events and actions’ (p.131). This means that rather than a downward facing process (one of the suggestions in Kirchner’s leadership model previously outlined) it explores how the interactions between individuals from all levels of the organisation (staff, volunteers, board) are involved in the sense-making process. Kay describes the leadership process as being composed of four dimensions:

- **Social and cognitive:** this involves a sense-making process on issues and events, not only using one’s own meanings, but also accepting the meanings by others
- **Socio-political process:** this involves encouraging the commitment towards particular meanings
- **A cultural process:** this involves embedding particular meanings within an organisation’s culture
- **The enactment process:** this refers to meanings being reproduced through actions.

In contrast to traditional perceptions, this conceptualisation disputes leadership being constructed and defined by one individual at the top. Instead it argues various individuals are involved in continuous negotiation through social interactions, therefore, ‘any account of leadership has to take account of this context of social relations; as well as the cultural context within which the meaning-making process is taking place’ (p.134). It is through these processes of sense-making, where meanings and values are negotiated with others, that leadership is understood and formed. In practice, leaders are encouraged to be aware of the individuals that are influential in this process, what the created shared meanings contribute to the leadership practiced (e.g. towards vision and goal setting, building credibility etc.), and the appropriate method for this to be enacted through actions.

Another approach to unpack this negotiation of leadership is by looking at the sense-making process used within narrative, or more imaginatively, the role of ‘storytelling’ by leaders (Schwabenland, 2006). Schwabenland describes the importance of leaders telling organisational stories, particularly the founding story, which can construct and reinforce the values and commitment of the organisation’s members. This means some individuals are labelled as ‘leaders’, but individuals from different levels are involved in this leadership process through the act of storytelling, to interrelate and interpret the meanings. Interestingly this echoes the common idea that leaders ‘need’ followers. As Schwabenland describes, this is intended to ‘provide a means to structure our thinking so that our interpretation can be located in an ongoing narrative in which there is some underlying logic, rationale or plot to link events’ (p. 171). This practice of storytelling can enhance the leader’s strategic position by building both the internal legitimacy, as well as the external profile of the organisation.

Macmillan and McLaren (2012) expand on this by adopting a wider perspective on *leadership of the sector*, rather than just *leadership in the sector*, and exploring this through the idea of ‘strategic narrative’. They argue the focus should not only be

on who created the story, and what the story refers to, but that it is essential to locate the story within a broader context and whether there is 'room' for it within a particular 'field'. By using a 'field' approach it provides insight on the power positions and conflicts that may occur within a field, to understand whose interests the story is supporting, or whether it is in fact responding to a wider political agenda (see Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). By doing this, it illustrates how organisations 'jostle' with one another, to make 'room' within a field, to find an advantageous position to negotiate from. They distinguish two types of leadership narrative that is involved in this process:

- **Illustrative narrative:** this is important for a voluntary sector organisation to effectively demonstrate its impact and activities
- **Strategic narrative:** from the perspective of the national umbrella bodies, to develop a clear narrative of the sector's direction and focus, which in turn can inform a strong foundation to build alliances across sectors

Macmillan and McLaren (2012) identify a number of 'strategic narratives' that have emerged in particular from national voluntary sector leadership bodies, which are informed by their own beliefs about leadership and what it should look like, which in turn has developed "discursive" constructions of the field' (p.7). They suggest that multiple strategic narratives can co-exist, each with its own interpretation and representation of the sector, however some narratives can have more 'purchase' than others and be significantly influential within the field. Macmillan and McLaren conclude with a call 'for a leadership narrative that embraces a more open and vigorous conversation about the role and future of the sector, and the potential for developing a big narrative for the voluntary sector and civil society' (p.3). To return to the point we made at the very beginning of this paper, in the very pressing operating environment of increasing demand and shrinking resources, they suggest the voluntary sector would benefit from developing a powerful narrative on the positioning and role of the sector. By collectively using this narrative across the

sector it would also encourage the development of strategic alliances across other sectors, subsequently, voluntary sector leaders are viewed as key players within this movement and fundamental to empowering the sector.

More recently, Macmillan (2017) illustrated concerns about the current voluntary sector leadership narrative, on the sector being portrayed as having a lack of leadership skills and a 'leadership deficit', even though there is insufficient empirical evidence to support such claims. He suggests the adoption of a 'field' perspective to help understand this leadership narrative, to identify who else is involved in this storytelling, who is setting the agenda, and whose interests it is promoting. In a field conception of the voluntary sector, more attention is paid to how the sector, and its leaders, fit within a wider terrain of a 'social order' (a grouping of individuals, organisations and institutions), structured by wider societal processes – such as public policies, markets, and new social movements. Within these wider *strategic action fields*, in which "actors maintain a common set of understandings about the positions, hierarchies and the rules for what behaviour is legitimate, conceivable, and 'makes sense'" (Taylor et al., 2016, Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). By pursuing this conception, Macmillan highlights how the 'leadership deficit' narrative is shifting the focus away from the government on the current political and economic upheaval, by stating 'the voluntary sector needs to get its own leadership in order', and consequentially pushing responsibility onto the voluntary sector.

If nothing else, this reminds us that normative narratives should not automatically be accepted but need to be investigated and unravelled to understand their premises, and as Macmillan suggests, perhaps responded to through an alternative 'strategic narrative' possibly articulated by the sector itself. Nevertheless, it is also worth remembering that in such a diverse sector it will be difficult to agree or articulate any such coherent narrative (see also Carmel and Harlock, 2008).

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper we set out to review and to contextualise the voluntary sector literature on leadership. One underlying question that each of the three papers seek to address is: is there a distinctive form of leadership in the voluntary sector? Or to put this another way, are there particular forms of leadership practice that leaders in the voluntary sector are likely to need to adopt? We will return to this theme in the third and final of these briefing papers.

Here we have reviewed the UK voluntary sector literature and found three key themes:

First, as Macmillan and McLaren (2012) note, research in the field is ‘embryonic’. We suggest there has been an over-emphasis on the person-perspective – particularly in the more policy and practice oriented discussions – and the nature of the debate therefore lags behind that in the more mainstream leadership studies literatures (particularly in relation to the public leadership debate, which ostensibly considers similar issues, in a similar context).

Second, all of this is not to say that person-centred accounts don’t remain useful, and there have been a variety of person-centred approaches which do suggest a number of ways in which the voluntary sector may present a unique context for leadership, and require specific demands of its leaders. For instance many accounts draw attention to authenticity, ethical behaviour, the importance of understanding and enacting values, and cause affinity. Of course, the problem is that each of these can be claimed in both public (‘public value’) and private/market (‘corporate social responsibility’) contexts. As we also noted, many accounts also begin to complicate this person-centred picture with models that note relational, multi-dimensional models of leadership (e.g. Kirchner, 2007).

Thirdly, we note the influence of, and draw contrasts with, a wider leadership literature which unmistakably de-centres the person-centred account. We focused here on the role of sense-making in the mutual construction of leadership, the

importance of narrative and story-telling, which can be further enriched by being placed within an account of the operation of leaders and organisations in a strategic action field context (Macmillan, 2017).

This sets the scene for **Paper 2** which surveys the contemporary leadership development terrain, before further assessment of the more academic literature is outlined in **Paper 3**. We return to the themes noted here in our final conclusions.

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