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Public leadership to foster peacebuilding in violently divided societies

Loua Khalil[a] and Jean Hartley[b]

[a]Henley Business School, University of Reading, Reading, UK; [b]The Open University Business School, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper examines public leadership for peacebuilding in divided societies emerging from severe violence. It deploys two theories of leadership: social identity and political astuteness, to investigate peacebuilding leadership processes. The paper investigates contradictions in social identity leadership, since peacebuilding leaders reach out beyond their own group to outgroups in hostile contexts. Semi-structured interviews with 32 leaders in Northern Ireland and in Bosnia Herzegovina, reveal that leading for peacebuilding exhibits inverse processes of social identity leadership and that political astuteness is also critical to navigate integration and differentiation within/across groups. Wider implications for public leadership in societies containing division are discussed.

KEYWORDS Public leadership; political astuteness; conflict; inter-group leadership; peacebuilding; peace leadership

Introduction

This paper examines the social processes of public leadership in the context of peacebuilding, which takes place in the context of bitter dispute and violent division. The paper addresses the research question of how public leaders foster peacebuilding among conflicted social groups in violently divided societies. When leadership takes place in high-conflict situations, the danger is often to life and limb as well as risking reputation, loss and ostracism, and encountering physical, economic and/or emotional hardship. This is a relatively unfamiliar context for leadership and public management studies but can provide valuable insights for societies that appear to be stable but which are polarizing. O'Flynn (2021) argues that public management scholars must take on big societal challenges that may reshape the field of public management and studies of leadership for peacebuilding respond to that call. First, with the decline of liberal democratic governance in some democracies (Hajnal and Jeziorska, 2021; Lührmann et al. 2019), it is timely for public management scholars to theorize leadership in divided societies. Second, the extent of division may be starker and more dangerous in conflict-sensitive localities, where identity-related issues are more prominent (Katsos and Forrer 2014) than in many relatively stable societies but Crick (2005) reminds us that 'most societies are divided' (p. 17) to some extent and that the difference is

CONTACT Loua Khalil l.khalil@henley.ac.uk

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sometimes whether violence or institutional politics are the means by which governance is achieved. Third, we argue that studying some aspects of public leadership in these violent conditions is a valuable opportunity to lay bare key processes of group and inter-group leadership, which underlie some of the public management literature assumptions about communities and collectivities.

Roberts and Trevor Bradley (2005), in examining how to organize for peace operations, suggest three phases of peace activities: peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding (see also Lund 2009). This paper is about the third: fostering and strengthening fragile but existing peace arrangements. Leadership for peacebuilding may be undertaken by a range of actors (Roberts and Trevor Bradley 2005; O'Connor 2020; Murphy 2020) including military, political, and administrative leadership, relief and development agencies, international governments and local agencies. Civil society is central to peacebuilding for divided, postwar societies (Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017) so understanding the role of civil society leaders in fostering peace is important. They are public leaders in that they are 'mobilizing individuals, organizations and networks to formulate and/or enact purposes, values and actions that aim or claim to create valued outcomes for the public sphere' (Hartley 2018, 203.) Leadership is not solely about office-holders but about actions affecting society (Crosby and Bryson 2005). Civil society leaders active in the third sector can play key roles in rebuilding the destroyed social fabric in divided societies, facilitating reconciliation processes and contributing to sustaining peace. Leonardsson and Rudd (2015) argue for a 'local turn' in peacebuilding in recognition of Lederach's observation that the greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is 'always rooted in the local people and their culture' (Lederach 1997, 94). Leonardsson and Rudd (2015) note that local people are the 'primary architects, owners and stakeholders of peace' Additionally, civil society leaders can play a key role as an intermediary between citizens and government in 'enabling community voice from different publics' (Pagani et al. 2021, 41). Ricke-Kiely (2016) argues that 'peace is perhaps the most important field when it comes to leadership' (p. 197). There are many instances of violent divisions around the world, from the storming of the United States Capitol to Ukraine and more but leadership, and particularly leadership processes, for peacebuilding (after the conflict subsides somewhat) is still a relatively under-researched area that deserves serious academic scholarship (Miller and Whitney 2016; Ryckman and Braithwaite 2020).

This paper is actor-focused research that examines leaders' experiences of leading for peace. 'Post-conflict' is a term widely used in peace studies literature to describe post-agreement contexts, even though it is a problematic concept because violent conflict may still flare up (Forrer and Katsos 2015). The paper draws on empirical research with 32 leaders in two countries – Northern Ireland and Bosnia Herzogovina – to extend theory about leadership processes in violently divided societies. Using an abductive approach, the analysis first analyses the hostile environment and its impacts for leadership and then uses both the social identity theory of leadership and the framework of leadership with political astuteness to analyse the subtle processes of group and inter-group processes in a context of high risk of blame and violence.

This paper makes a number of contributions to knowledge through path-breaking empirical research which extends theory in this challenging context. First, it addresses an important empirical gap about a major societal challenge – the leadership processes taking place in peacebuilding in violently divided societies, where to date more

peacebuilding literature has focused on formal institutions and structures than on leadership processes. Second, it demonstrates the value of analysing and understanding context in studies of leadership. Most studies of public leadership have taken place in relatively benign contexts but here leadership is exercised in a hostile environment, with physical and other risks to leaders and those they seek to influence. The paper shows how this extreme context also has insights for more stable societies. Third, the paper extends theory-building by challenging aspects of the social identity theory of leadership. The research shows that leadership in peacebuilding involves going beyond leader prototypicality to reach out across the conflict divide to outgroups. Fourth, the paper makes a further theoretical contribution by showing the value of combining politically astute leadership with social identity leadership in order to navigate the complexities of societies where there are diverse and often competing interests between opposing groups in the identity-sensitive conflict and where the social fabric is frayed. In this context, too little or too much integration or differentiation from the ingroup can be highly risky for the peace leader so that the political astuteness of leaders helps to navigate those tensions. There are implications not only for peacebuilding leaders but those exercising public leadership in any society with 'deeply divided and fractured communities' (O'Flynn 2021, 3).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the paper outlines key theory relevant to understanding the contexts and processes of peacebuilding leadership. The paper then examines the social identity theory of leadership and follows this with an outline of leadership with political astuteness. The next section explains the methodology. The findings are then presented, which draw particular attention to the hostile context in which leadership is exercised, and the processes of integration, differentiation and political astuteness that enable those peacebuilding leaders to foster peacebuilding. The findings are then discussed, reversing some conventional thinking about prototypicality in leadership. The conclusions examine the implications for public leaders exercising leadership where there are deep divisions in a society, showing that this paper has wider resonances for public leadership beyond the original context of overt physical conflict.

Theoretical framing: conflict, peacebuilding, and leadership

This study recognizes that peace is relational, occurring between two or more parties, as theorized by the seminal work on peace studies by Galtung (1967, 2007). Peace, according to this view, is not a property of one party/group alone, but a property of the relations between parties/groups. So, this paper adopts a relational conceptualization of violent civil conflicts (Miller and Whitney 2016). Hence, we focus on the relational perspective of public leadership (Sancino, Carli, and Giacomini 2022; Uhl-Bien 2006) where leadership resides in and between groups (Ospina et al. 2020) and where identity may be a key element in underlying conflict (Miller and Whitney 2016).

Post-conflict peacebuilding is the term coined by Galtung (1969), who distinguished between negative peace, which is the absence of structural societal violence, and positive peace, where society puts in place the structures and dynamics needed to surface the societal divisions and works towards resolving them. Since then, the term peacebuilding has been widely used to express the transformation period and mechanisms as a society moves from conflict to peace (Ledbetter 2016). Hence, peacebuilding can be defined as 'an overarching term to describe a long-term process covering all

activities with the overall objective to prevent violent outbreaks of conflict or to sustainably transform armed conflicts into constructive peaceful ways of managing conflict' (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006, 16). However, Lederach (1997) noted that, in practice, such conflict usually continues in an episodic fashion over time, albeit not always at the same level of violence and intensity. Some scholars have critiqued the terms 'conflict/post-conflict' for this reason (Forrer and Katsos 2015) which we accept but use here given it is in common academic parlance.

The intensity and duration of the conflict are likely to affect leadership purposes, the opportunities to influence others, and the contexts in which to organize movements for change, and foster peace. The opportunities, and constraints, and the social networks in which to exert leadership influence are also likely to vary by level and role (Lederach 1997). Political and administrative leaders are often central to peacebuilding for divided, postwar societies, and so too are civil society leaders (Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017). Consequently, understanding the role of civil society leaders in fostering peace is important. They are public leaders in that they are 'mobilizing individuals, organizations and networks to formulate and/or enact purposes, values and actions which aim or claim to create valued outcomes for the public sphere' (Hartley 2018, 203).

Lederach (1997) introduces a framework with three levels of peacebuilding leadership. Grassroots leadership represents ordinary people in society who are living mostly in survival mode in the conflict's pressure or aftermath. Leaders are those active at the local community level, e.g. members of NGOs involved in relief projects, health officials, and refugee camps leaders. Middle-range leadership is exercised by those working in non-aligned institutions, e.g. formal leaders in sectors like education, health or business, leaders, and prominent people in networks, groups and organizations that formally or informally link to religious groups, academic institutions, or humanitarian organizations or people from within the identity groups of the conflict who are well known across these groups. Lederach (1997) describes top-level leadership as the political and military leaders in the conflict from both government and opposition(s), or who represent themselves as such.

Leadership of peacebuilding

Peacebuilding research has paid greater attention to the institutions and governance of peacebuilding than to leadership processes. To address this gap, this paper draws on two theories which have not been empirically applied previously in peacebuilding. These are the social identity theory of leadership, and leadership with political astuteness.

Social identity theory of leadership

Hogg (2001) conceptualizes leadership as a relational process taking place within groups (which can be small face-to-face groups or large groups that share a sense of membership). He investigates how leadership can emerge through social, cognitive, and affective interactive processes associated with group belonging. The social identity theory of leadership builds on the foundations of social identity theory (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979), which is about how identity as a group member influences both ingroup and outgroup attitudes and behaviours.

The social identity theory of leadership views leadership as an ingroup process that rises from the social categorization and prototype-based depersonalization processes

related to social identity (Hogg 2001; Hogg and van Knippenberg 2003), so we outline these three key concepts. Social categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987) proposes that people form a group when they internalize a sense of shared social identity, and that this process profoundly impacts their cognitive and affective states and their behaviour (Turner and Reynolds 2012).

The second concept is group prototype, where 'The prototype is configured to capture both ingroup similarities and intergroup differences, in such a way as to maximize the meta-contrast of intergroup and intragroup differences'. (Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast 2012, 262). As a result, 'effective leadership rests increasingly on the leader being considered by followers to possess prototypical properties of the group'. (Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast 2012, 263). The leaders, according to social identity theory of leadership, demonstrate and promote a high degree of differentiation from the outgroup and integration with the ingroup.

The third concept of depersonalization (Tajfel and Turner 1979) is based on a continuum of interpersonal to intergroup social behaviours. At one extreme, the interaction between two or more individuals is entirely determined by their individual characteristics and interpersonal relationship with no effect at all of any social groups or categories they are members of (for example, the interactions between spouses or old friends). At the other extreme, which is intergroup social behaviour, the interaction between two or more individuals (or groups) is based entirely on their respective membership of different social groups or categories and with no effect from the individual's characteristics or their inter-personal relationship. The interactions are based on depersonalization (for example, soldiers in opposing armies). Tajfel and Turner (1979) note that extreme interactions are rarely found in 'pure' forms in lived social situations but that many social behaviours are identifiable on this continuum. Depersonalization affects how people perceive and feel about one another. They perceive each other based on the prototypicality of their group rather than personal relationships or idiosyncratic preferences (Abrams and Hogg 2010; Turner, Brown, and Tajfel 1979; Turner et al. 1987)

To sum up, from a social identity perspective leadership is a group-member-based influence process that results in ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination (Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast 2012). Some group members are perceived to be more prototypical than others. Within this group, they are generally viewed as best embodying the group's values and meanings, and therefore they tend to enjoy an enhanced influence within the group (Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast 2012). They are more likely to exercise leadership within the group. This leadership theory has been selected for the research because of its explanations of intra and inter-group behaviour.

Leadership with political astuteness

The social identity theory of leadership focuses particularly on attitudes and behaviours within and between groups but pays less attention to the interests, goals and values of those groups. To address that gap, the research reported here draws on theory about leadership with political astuteness (Alford et al. 2017, Hartley, Parker, and Beashel 2019; Hartley et al. 2019; Hartley and Fletcher 2008). Political astuteness involves 'deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to create sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes' (Hartley et al. 2015, 22). This

definition covers a range of circumstances where there is contention or potential contention over purposes, priorities and resources. So, this is about 'small p' (informal) politics and not only 'big P' (formal) politics.

Political skill is defined as the set of capabilities and judgements exercised in context about creating action across diverse and competing interests among stakeholders. These skills have been analysed by Hartley et al. (2015) and Hartley and Fletcher (2008). Their research, with public, private-, and third-sector leaders, suggests that political astuteness has five dimensions of leader actions and behaviours in context: personal skills (including self-awareness, self-control, active listening, openness to the experiences of others and proactivity); interpersonal skills (such as the ability to influence others with no direct authority, making people feel valued, negotiation skills, and handling conflicts constructively); reading people and situations (to understand people interests, agendas, fears and power relations and the person's position towards all of them); building alignment and alliances; and understanding strategic direction and scanning. The framework has been used in other research with public leaders and managers (e.g. Hartley and Manzie 2020; Alford et al. 2017; Hartley, Parker, and Beashel 2019; Waring et al. 2022) where a variety of stakeholders and interests exist and where public leaders must try to discern and navigate those interests in trying to achieve constructive social or organizational outcomes (Backhaus et al. 2021).

This framework is potentially important for research into post-conflict peacebuilding because the existence of diverse and frequently competing interests underlies violently divided societies where contention and conflict may be dealt with through physical and psychological violence and where trust in formal politics is low. The scope for collaboration rather than competition has been limited so diverse interests, values, goals and priorities can be manifold and hard to overcome. The research explored the assumption that public leaders engaged in post-conflict will try to think about different social groups and their interests – what they are aiming to achieve (or avoid). They are 'reading' people and situations, and notably trying to recognize that diverse and sometimes competing interests often involves leadership occurring in arenas where the interpretations of the very same proceedings may be contested, disputed or even violently resisted (Ayres 2019; Hartley, Parker, and Beashel 2019; Hartley et al. 2019)

Research design and methods

This research aims to examine the research question of how public leaders foster peacebuilding among conflicted social groups in violently divided societies. This involves analysing the leadership processes of peacebuilding, as experienced and practiced by public leaders themselves. It uses an abductive research design, enabling the development of the theoretical framework during the research process (Dubois and Gadde 2002) given that there is little extant literature. The research draws on semi-structured interviews with 32 long-standing public leaders, working for civil society organizations in Northern Ireland, and in Bosnia Herzegovina (equal numbers in each nation). The interviews varied in duration from 80 to 150 min. All were recorded then transcribed. The interviews included questions about the context in which the leaders were active, the processes of leading, and their perceptions of leadership influence on their ingroups and outgroups. The sample included both men and women.

Both researchers have experience of working in countries experiencing violent conflict, with the first author a citizen of a nation with an ongoing civil war. In

undertaking the interviews in situ, the first author's openness about their background substantially contributed to the quality of the interview data through mutual engagement, empathy and openness while also reducing the degree of political caution from interviewees. The analysis made use of the insider/outsider researcher methodology (Benington and Hartley 2004; Louis and Bartunek 1992). The first author was an insider, being familiar with the intellectual and emotional experiences of war, but an outsider to the direct context of the interviewees. The first author was an insider to the interviews while the second author was an outsider to those. These differences in closeness to the data, along with familiarity with societies in violent conflict, helped the analysis.

Sampling criteria and processes

The study used 'purposive sampling' of interviewees (Lincoln and Guba 1985), seeking out grassroots and middle-range civil society leaders, based on the Lecderach (1997) framework. The interviewees selected for this research are grassroots and middle-range leaders in senior positions of the organizations and social movements in particular localities working for the specific purpose of building peace in divided societies via an array of non-violent activities.

This purposive sampling was aided by scrutiny of potential interviewees' professional profile before inviting them to take part in the research, ensuring that they met the sampling criteria of level of public leadership and type of organization they worked for. The interviews included ensuring gender diversity and a range of civil society roles. The interviewees had an average (mean) of 23 years of peacebuilding leadership, so they had considerable experience in this field. The research also included leaders from different ethnicities, regions, and age groups in both contexts.

Research settings

Two countries with different socio-economic indicators such as income, education, and access to public services were selected for the study. This is not to provide comparison but to ensure that the examination of leadership processes occurred in more than one context, thereby increasing opportunities for generalizability of findings. Theoretical and practical factors informed the selection of Northern Ireland, and Bosnia Herzegovina. In terms of theory, the research was undertaken in contexts that had met the international criteria of civil war, which is defined as 'any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the [state], (b) the active participation of the national government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides'. (Small and Singer 1982, Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). Thus, the conflicts were civil (internal or intrastate) and not interstate or extra-state (colonial and imperial). Second, the state violence in the armed conflict was reciprocated and sustained, with the war having surpassed the internationally cited threshold of deaths, typically 500 to1,000 in combat-related events per annum (Sambanis 2004). Practically, the countries were selected as contexts with 'mature' peace practices, where post-conflict peace agreements have been sustained for more than a decade. Both Northern Ireland and Bosnia Herzegovina had their peace agreements in the 1990s with substantially lower levels of political violence since. Finally, we selected two countries with different socio-economic indicators such

as income, education and access to public services to increase the potential for theoretical generalizability of the research.

Interviews have the weakness of self-report, which can be a major issue in leadership studies (Hunter, Bedell-Avers, and Mumford 2007), where performance and attributional bias may play a role. Alternative sources of data can be problematic in 'post-conflict' situations, as documentary evidence can be partisan or missing. The researchers guarded against self-reporting bias in three ways. One was to utilize the insider/outsider roles, which encouraged openness among interviewees as well as scrutiny in analysis. The second was analysing interviewees' online CVs and other web data. Finally and unintentionally but usefully, because of the small size of communities of peacebuilding organizations in both contexts, many interviewees were colleagues or line-managed each other at points in the past. Hence, interviewees reflected on each other's experiences even though they were not aware that others were being interviewed.

Data analysis

In our abductive design, the thematic analysis of interviews closely followed the guidelines specified by the Gioia methodology, which offers a 'systematic approach to new concept development' and brings 'qualitative rigour' and transparency to conducting and presenting inductive research (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013, 15). We were also guided by naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and constant comparison techniques (Glaser and Strauss 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In the initial coding round, or first-order analysis (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013), we coded each interview separately in Nvivo 10 to systematize the data coding, aiming to keep close to the interviewees' terms, notions and language. We relied on a constant comparison of multiple interviewees and detecting conceptual patterns (Glaser and Strauss 2000). In the second round of analysis, discerning similar codes across interviewees, we reduced these codes into first-order concepts, using the interviewees' language that expressed similar views. We continued coding interviews in this fashion until there were no more distinct conceptual patterns shared by the interviewees to be found. After developing the first-order concepts (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013), we started detecting links among them. These emergent links enabled first-order categories to be clustered into theoretically distinct groupings, as second-order themes (that answer the critical question "'what's going on here, theoretically?'") (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013, 20). We then brought together the second-order themes into overarching dimensions that enabled us to finalize a theoretical framework that linked the various phenomena that emerged from the data. These three levels of analyses are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Findings

The contexts as experienced by the peace leaders

Three aspects of context, from the thematic analysis, stood out in in the work of leaders as they engaged in peacebuilding. They experienced a hostile and violent environment, polarization and depersonalization. Figure 1 shows those aspects of context of the analysis.

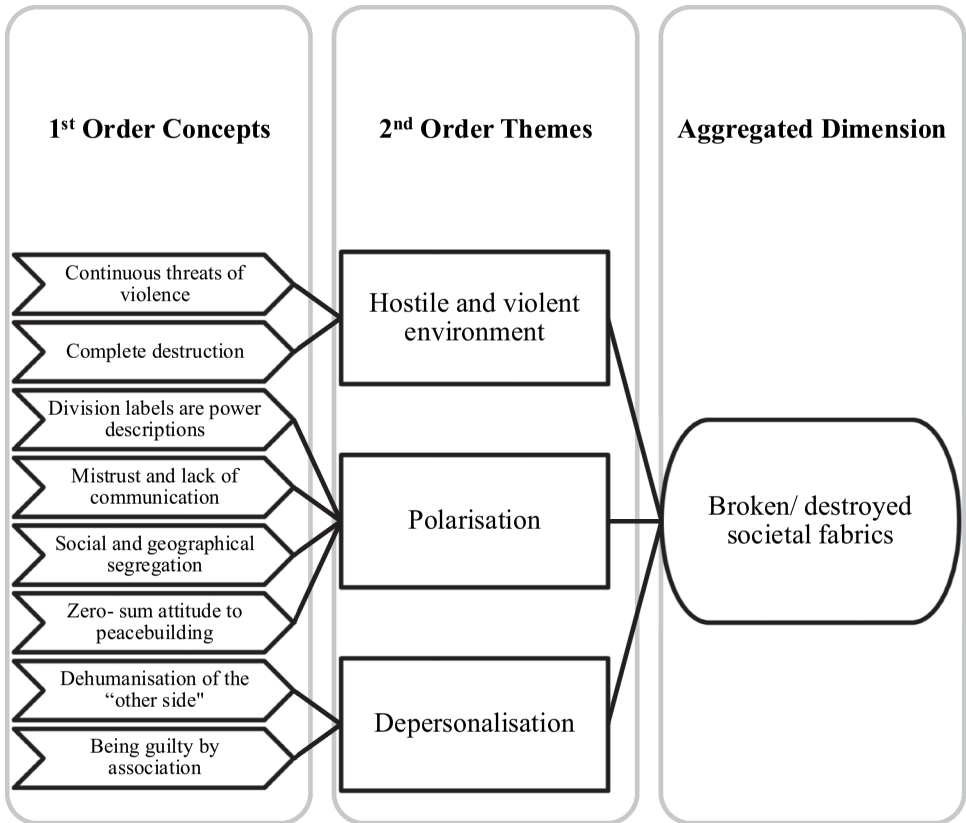

Figure 1. Data structure of the context of leadership for peacebuilding.

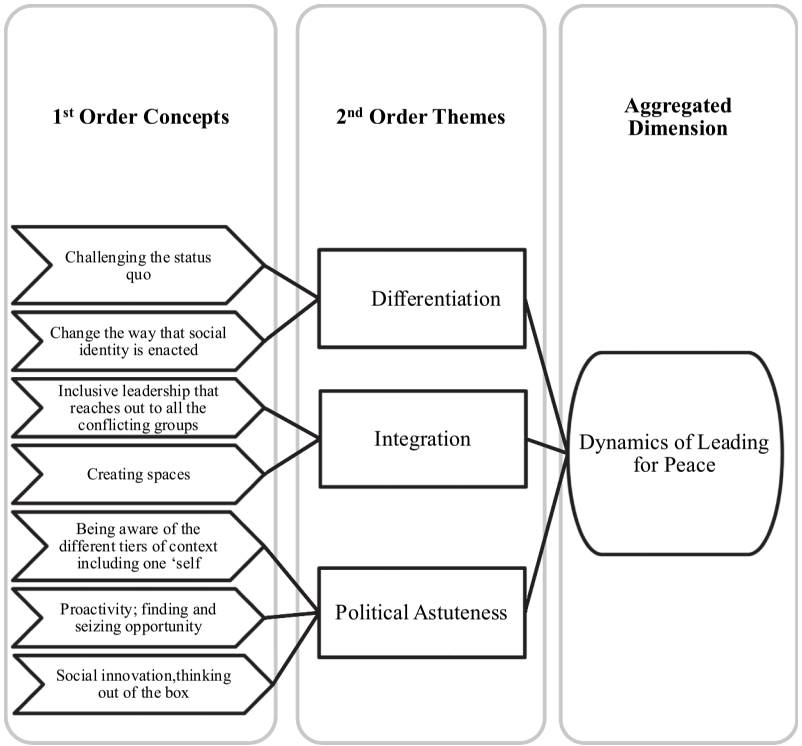

Figure 2. Data structure of the processes of leading for peace.

Hostile and violent environment

The first dimension is the inherited hostile context, where the present is a product of the past, whether the troubles in Northern Ireland or the war in Bosnia Herzegovina. These contexts were described by the interviewees in much detail because they were the daily background to their leadership work.

Violent threats and danger were an everyday aspect of life in Northern Ireland as '*Political violence is never far away in Ireland*' (06-NI) and '*People were being shot on a regular basis*' (01-NI). This made people live in a state of considerable tension for almost 30 years. For example:

> It was drip feed, like every day a person would be killed. And so we got into a situation where it was normal for people to be killed, not even in combat, just people out delivering pizzas. It makes it insidious, it eats into the people, it eats into the community, because we all live constantly fight or flight *(13-NI)*

In Bosnia Herzegovina, the sharp, intense violence took place over a shorter period of time and led to a nearly complete destruction of the societal, economic and political systems. This added an extra level of difficulty as '*there was a horrible war. Everything is destroyed. Sometimes I say it was like Hiroshima*' (01-BiH). Life in Bosnia Herzegovina, after the war, was a real struggle; '*we had nothing, no food, no money, no jobs, no fuel, no nothing*'. The way the war was ended in Bosnia Herzegovina, driven by international powers after several major atrocities, seemed to leave the postwar society in a state of shock, confusion and denial: '*. . . the way our war ended, like we are all winners, but at the same time, we are all the losers'*. (14-BiH). Thus: '*it took us something like 2 years to realize that the war had really ended. We lived with the war habits for a considerable period after the accord was signed*' (03-BiH).

Polarization

Interviewees reported strong polarization which characterized both these post-conflict societies. In Northern Ireland '*Catholic and Protestant are big terms that cover other things*' (08-NI) and '*being Protestant is a power definition*' (05-NI).

It was similar in Bosnia Herzegovina, where *'Being Serb, Croat or Bosniak is not about religion or even national ethnicity, it is a definition'*. (17-BiH).

Such polarization reinforced mistrust between neighbouring communities and created greater social and geographical segregation where *'We lived in an environment where no-one trusted one another, people didn't go in and out the different areas . . . So, there was just a fear'*. (16-NI).

While segregation has happened over an extended period of time in Northern Ireland, segregation in Bosnia Herzegovina was a product of full-scale civil war, putting several interviewees in the tough experiences of seeking refuge. 12 out of the 14 interviewees had to flee their houses during the war. Eight of those 12 never went back to their original neighbourhoods. Segregation turned to be the norm of life in many aspects both of Northern Ireland, and Bosnia Herzegovina,

This seems to reinforce the zero-sum attitude to peacebuilding among many communities, as one interviewee explained:

> the term It's victory, it's defeat . . . if you are defeated, the other person is victorious, and I suddenly went, that's why we can't have a win-win in parades. We can't have a win-win in

> parades because the Protestant community feels any victory for the other side is a defeat for them. *(13-NI).*

Depersonalization

With the extended inter-communal violence and the prolonged social and geographic segregation, there was '*certainly a whole generation of people who grew up really not knowing what they refer to as the other side. You can believe the strangest things about people if you don't really know them*' (08-NI). This has contributed to the process of 'dehumanizing' as described by the same interviewee: '*. . . for them, it did not matter what you think or what do you believe. No one would ask you. You're punished for where you come from'* (05-BiH)

The process of 'dehumanizing' was reported in several ways. First, there was guilt by association:

'That's how people were shot dead. . . . . Some were targeted because they were members of the IRA or the UVF, but more often than not it was a rumour, it was guilt by association, it was the fact that you lived in that other community'. (01-NI).

Second, there was the continual apportioning of blame among the fighting communities or what was sometimes known in Northern Ireland as '*whataboutery*' (08-NI).

> Like for even 20 or so years, you know, we are still arguing about pure historical facts. What had happened. The massacres, the genocide, the things that were widely disputed among the people, especially of the different nationalities, mainly by those who committed that.*(14-BiH)*

Finally, there were the cases where people were seeking revenge instead of justice: *'justice and revenge are very closely linked. So people talk about justice when sometimes it is probably revenge that they're looking for. And we're good at revenge'*. (02-NI)

Exercising leadership in such a context of the ever-present threat of violence, whether directed or random, along with the context of polarization and depersonalization creates very different contextual conditions than are present in many leadership studies. This paper now turns to examine the impact of this on the processes of leadership.

Processes of leading for peace

The data analysis indicated that the peacebuilding leaders tended to enact three distinctive leadership processes: differentiation, integration and political astuteness (see Figure (2).

Differentiation

Differentiation, as analysed from the data, is the dynamic through which the interviewees found their own voice, separated to a degree from their ingroup, and exercised leadership with differentiation. Their leadership involved mobilizing and supporting other people to do the same. The two processes that reflect the dynamics of differentiation in the data were challenging the status quo and changing how social identity is enacted. Interviewees, for example, spoke of a notion of 'good authority' which involved challenging their own people:

> I think I've thought a bit about the notion of good authority. People who actually take a risk with their own people. You know, and who talk in more difficult terms to their own people than they do to whoever their so-called enemy or opposition might be *(08-NI).*

However, '*you can't move too far beyond your own community, we can't pull people too far*' (03-NI). They kept mobilizing and supporting people from the other conflicted social groups to differentiate as well:

> I lead the Youth Initiative for Human Rights . . . what they are hearing right now from the media, what I can hear at the home, right, their parents, is something, which is completely destructive. They're starting [to be] even more nationalistic than their parents are . . . . From young people, you are not refusing them, you are trying to give them more kind of education in that field. And kind of support them because they are very valuable, hopefully, for this country. *(17-BiH)*

Interviewees also reported their perceptions of the risk and difficulty of differentiating themselves from their own social groups, including losing relationships with family and friends, and the risk or experience of physical harm. So, they strongly commended the importance of *'building supportive systems and safety nets'* with other peace leaders (04-NI).

These quotations illustrate that the public leaders involved in peacebuilding are far from exhibiting prototypicality. They are not at the centre of the in-group but are reflecting on and questioning of the attitudes and behaviours of their own group (their in-group).

Integration

Integration is the dynamic through which the public leaders try to reach out to other social groups; for example, they create spaces for the 'enemies' to meet. Reaching out to all the conflicting groups can be very problematic and distressing:

> you start to say I don't work with this institution, I can't work with that institution, [but] you've got to be prepared to work with everybody and see that everybody has a contribution to make somewhere along the line. *(02-HiB)*

However, it seems that it was important for people experiencing the impact of conflict to see someone from the other side attempting to help:

> So I was working with refugees who came very bitter, very angry at the people who committed crimes against them. And for me, working with them. Because also, you know, just working there . . . very importantly, I am not Muslim . . . [he is Serb]. So it was very important for them to see that not all of these others . . . Are cleansing them up or want them dead. *(17-BiH)*

A great deal of this integration dynamic happened through creating space for people to meet up. The '*spaces for people to meet*' could take several different physical or conceptual forms, including forums or terms of engagement, offered by the third sector:

> what I was trying to do was to use the third sector as a vehicle, could the two main protagonists Unionism and Nationalism, create space together through the neutrality of the third sector on issues like unemployment, the economy, jobs, housing, childcare, the environment, disability – to work together, to understand each other better and to forge a third force between Unionism and Nationalism and in relation to the State, even though it was a contested State, obviously a contested State. *(05-NI)*

Political astuteness

In the interviews, the processes of both differentiation and integration were underpinned by behaviours and judgements which can be seen as political astuteness. For example, one interviewee was reflecting on his analysis of ways of choosing tactics as a leader:

'05-NI [the previous leader of the organization] would have been much more combative with the government because again coming from the sort of background that he did [Protestant], didn't cost him a thought like to battle it out in public … Whereas coming from the sort of background that I came from [Catholic] you're likely to be more careful. In terms of you always believe there can be consequences, you know? So therefore as I say there are tactical differences there'. (08-NI)

Interviewees demonstrated their political astuteness through a broad set of views, examples and reflections. We analytically aggregated them into three themes. First, there was being aware of the different tiers and layers of context, including first-hand knowledge of realities at the front-line:

> We made contacts with people because we were at events where things were happening, when disorder was happening, and we could talk to them about it. Not because we'd seen it on the media but because we knew what was going on, we knew the situation on the ground.*(02-NI)*

This included being aware of oneself and one's own biases: *'With my own story, of course, you can't put away your subjectivity in that way because I'm expressing my opinion, but I have learnt to be aware of this subjectivity' (11-BiH)*

The second theme is proactively finding and seizing and shaping opportunities to foster peace:

> as an opportunity arises where spaces opened up and you either, you take that space and try to broaden it and open it and move forward into somewhere else, or you just stay where you are. Use the opportunity and widen it *(04-NI)*

A third theme found in the data was being innovative and alert to symbolic power and action in peacebuilding initiatives. One interviewee decided that '*to work for peace we needed to involve paramilitary*' (12-NI), which she felt was a starting point for one of the most effective initiatives in containing and controlling inter-community violence in Belfast.

Nevertheless, interviewees said that it was essential to be aware of the consequences of the risks taken:

> I think it's almost like a seesaw, you know a seesaw on a children's playground. So the more your credibility goes up on this side the lower it becomes on the other side. So within this community the higher profile I had here and the more acceptance I had within the – not only this community but the wider Catholic community probably the less I had in my own. Because of perception, I think well if they like him, we've got to hate him … *(06-NI)*

In summary, the data suggested that leaders differentiate themselves and mobilize other people's differentiation from their social group, but without losing some degree of connection, and they do this astutely. This dynamic of differentiation is married with another dynamic of integration where they reach out to other groups on the opposite side of the conflict and support people in building cross-communities bridges. They challenge the divisive authority structure simultaneously with building a supportive network and creating spaces for people to meet. They do this while being

politically astute, creative, and sensitive to the different interests and pressures of their context.

Discussion

The context of leadership for peacebuilding

This paper aims to explore the processes of public leadership in challenging contexts by drawing on the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast 2012) and leadership with political astuteness (Hartley et al. 2015). In analysing these processes, it is critical to incorporate a holistic understanding of the context that shapes leading for peace in such hostile and dangerous environments (Vivier, De Jongh, and Thompson 2021).

These are intensive and often extensive violent conflicts, based on the polarization of individuals and groups. The findings showed that people were perceived (and sometimes harmed and killed) based on the social group to which they belonged, regardless of their personal behaviour and opinions. Hence, the findings support an intergroup social behaviour perspective where people perceive each other based on their group membership rather than on their individual characteristics (Tajfel 1974). Factors such as geographical and social segregation, political and power struggles using divisive labels, along with mistrust and lack of communication, may contribute to explaining this intergroup social behaviour, even years after signing peace agreements. These documented conditions of hostility, polarization and depersonalization in which leadership is exercised support our rationale of analysing leading for peacebuilding as a social identity phenomenon. Thus, in this divided and fragmented context, processes of leadership were distinctive, and are important to understand.

Processes of leading for peace

The research suggests that differentiation, integration and political astuteness are core processes in leading for peace. These three processes are interconnected and appear to reinforce each other.

The original social identity theory of leadership focuses particularly on leader prototypicality, on the basis that the leaders of groups tend to exhibit important but typical group member characteristics (Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast 2012). However, the research on peacebuilding leadership reported here points to a different relationship between leader and in-group. Leading for peacebuilding involves, strikingly, an inverse set of group dynamics. The research shows that leaders exhibited a degree of differentiation with their ingroup and also they support and encourage others from their ingroup to do similarly. Leaders also seek out and move towards a degree of integration with key out-groups. This shows that the leaders involved in peacebuilding do not exhibit prototypicality, and they do not capitalize on it to enhance their ingroup leadership influence. They champion and endorse a shift for group members in their regard for the outgroup, moving their own group in subtle ways further along the continuum from primarily group identity to including more personal characteristics.

The physical, emotional and psychological risk of differentiating from own group and reaching out to the outgroup through a degree of integration cannot be under-estimated.

In order to be able to do this successfully without remaining locked into their own group (which would not create overtures for peace) nor being over-identified with the outgroup (which had lead at times to losing support from their own group and cries of betrayal) the leaders needed to undertake their work with a heightened sense of political astuteness. This research suggests that peace leaders are politically astute in order to understand their own personal biases and motives, to intuit or analyse other stakeholders' interests, biases and motives and to 'read' people and situations in the wider context of highly-charged conflict where these biases and motives interact. They can discern and understand the interests which underlie conflict and contest and so they shape their goals and actions accordingly. (Hartley et al. 2015; Hartley and Manzie 2020).

Leaders involved in peacebuilding in hostile and violent contexts use political astuteness skills and judgements. They pay a great deal of attention to multiple layers of context, including national, political and policy context, the regional and local context, and the internal organizational context. These are volatile and uncertain contexts, with shifting coalitions of interests, to which the peacebuilders must be alert if they are to survive both physically and in terms of their influence in civil society and with state institutions.

Peace is not a linear progress from war to stability, but in the fragile post-conflict phase, there is an ever-present possibility that tensions will increase and conflict re-emerge. The public leaders in this research have shown great awareness of this context, and their actions in exercising leadership show considerable sensitivity to context and to 'reading' the interests and motives of others. Peace leaders lead beyond as well as within societal division, working with or symbolically 'speaking to' various stakeholders who may have some shared interests and goals but where divergent, competing and sometimes conflictual interests and goals still exist. This sensitivity to the interests, goals, values of self, others, and broader context and acting upon them is valuable in leading for peace in volatile, uncertain, and conflictual societies. It is not only crucial to achieve goals, but it also helps the leaders deal with the violence and hostility they face in these contexts.

This research focused on grass-roots and middle-range leadership, based on empirical research with public leaders working for third sector organizations, who were also creating partnerships and links with the state in order to quell conflict, foster peace, find integrative activities and encourage a shared identity across groups. The research demonstrates that the 'local turn' in peacebuilding research is valuable, shifting focus from national initiatives to local action (Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015) and there is scope for further research in this area. It is an important complementary perspective to those academic analyses of peacebuilding which focus on national and international institutions such as the UN and international NGOs. Local leaders, embedded and often well-known in their own communities, are in key roles to influence those around them in peacebuilding through modelling peacebuilding behaviours and encouraging a reaching out beyond identity politics. However, this comes at a price that the local leaders have to navigate. They are more likely to experience hostility from their own side, for example, name-called as traitors and physically threatened from within their own side. These are powerful social pressures to conform to in-group mores, attitudes and behaviours which the local leaders recognize but try to move beyond.

The research also highlights the value of examining the processes of leadership in peacebuilding. To date, more academic analysis has focused on peacebuilding governance structures, or on formal leadership roles, rather than what leaders do and how

they interpret their experiences. This paper rebalances analysis by focusing on leadership processes. The levels of risk mean that local leaders report finding ways to act with political astuteness in order to work between the conflicting leadership pressures of differentiation and integration. Drawing on the social identity theory of leadership, the research shows that far from exhibiting prototypicality, these leaders show the reverse – they are less prototypical (though they must exhibit some ingroup features in order to stay safe and to have influence).

Further research might examine, using the social identity theory of leadership, what are the contexts where prototypicality is prominent and what are the situations, likely involving some kinds of changes for the ingroup, where prototypicality is not prominent. There are potential theoretical links with adaptive leadership (Heifetz 1994) which has been applied in situations of managing inter-group conflict in Northern Ireland (Benington and Turbitt 2007), for example, Heifetz's observation that difficult leadership challenges involve disappointing followers, at a rate they can stand. Inevitably, there is further work to be done to understand the practices of leadership, the leadership development and the emotional experiences and the wellbeing of the leaders

This research has focused on civil society leaders as public leaders who are aiming to nurture the fragile seeds of peace in order to promote settled, stable and fair societies. It has been noted that nation states rely on civil society leaders and civil society organizations in all phases of peace-creation but particularly post-conflict peacebuilding (Lederach 1997) in order to strengthen and consolidate peace, and also to establish or re-establish public services (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, and Dunn 2012; Murphy 2020). Peacebuilding is, prima facie, a wicked issue (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head and Alford 2013) which requires inter-organizational collaboration (Roberts and Trevor Bradley 2005). Puljek-Shank and Verkoren (2017) note that civil society strengthening is central to peacebuilding, providing an intermediary space between citizens and government and is increasingly seen as vital to peace and democracy (Kaldor 2003). Public management ignores this at its peril. There is a need for public policy and practice to understand the key role of local leaders, the risks they experience in their peacebuilding work, and importantly how they achieve outcomes for society through differentiation, integration and political astuteness.

Furthermore, this research about peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, and Bosnia Herzegovina reveals processes of leadership influence within and across identity groups which may be more widely relevant beyond violently-divided societies. Identity politics is growing across a number of nations, with implications for public management processes and outcomes (Hajnal 2021). Stable societies can deteriorate into higher levels of contest and conflict, and there can even be hotspots of violence or threats of violence which could destabilize peaceful communities and nations (with examples happening in the USA among other locations). There is a growing literature in organizational behaviour within organizations operating or situated in violent and unstable contexts (Murphy 2020; O'Connor 2020) for which this research is relevant. Consequently, understanding the work of public and other leaders in fostering and sustaining peace and reaching out beyond difference between groups is a critical area to understand.

Conclusions

Researching public leadership has expanded considerably in recent years as Wart and Montgomry (2013), Ospina (2017) and others have observed. However, there is

room for exploring new leadership theories perspectives, using a variety of methods (Crosby and Bryson 2018). This paper attempted to inject a fresh perspective into the study of public leadership by using the context of peacebuilding to better the analysis and understanding of intra- and inter-group leadership especially in time of polarization. It has extended and critiqued the social identity theory of leadership and also brought into play the value of combining this with the theory of leadership with political astuteness in order to understand how peacebuilding leaders navigate the risks entailed in their work. This paper has examined public leadership in the context of violently divided societies – a relatively unusual context in the public leadership literature but one which is ignored at the world's peril, given political populism, climate change, migration and many more societal and global challenges.

Even the limited number of studies of peacebuilding leadership have tended to focus on formal structures and governance and less about leadership processes, including those processes at the local level, and the value of having political astuteness to navigate the threats of violence, to make use of integration opportunities, but without straying too far from group identity. Studies of leadership processes are invaluable for understanding how leadership occurs in societies with intense conflicts where many aspects of institutions and organizations have broken down, are not trusted or function in a highly partisan manner. In such contexts, the tasks of leadership for peacebuilding are not only to attempt to mobilize people from different conflictual social groups to achieve change but to do so in a context where institutions are absent, weak and/or are not functioning in ways to achieve public value. The social identity theory of leadership combined with the theory of leadership with political astuteness has helped to analyse and interpret the findings from this empirical research.

This paper offers a nuanced and challenging reading of the complex processes of public leadership for peacebuilding, as undertaken by civil society local leaders. It challenges the conventional social identity theory of leadership because it turns upside down the role of leader prototypicality. The social identity theory of leadership constructs leadership as a dynamic feature of group membership, i.e. occurring as a dynamic within a particular group and with implications for behaviours towards outgroups, building on the notion of leader prototypicality. Leading in this traditional social identity view is mainly about the prototypical leader exhibiting higher levels of differentiation from the outgroup and strong integration with the ingroup. However, it is a striking finding of the research in this paper that not only was this effect not found, but its opposite was apparent. In this research, leading for peace often implies reversing these dynamics because peace leaders seem to support a degree of differentiation with and from their ingroups and a degree integration with the outgroups to achieve superordinate goals that go beyond the binary divisions of the civil conflict, paving the way for peace. In addition, they needed political astuteness to discern how far and with what consequences differentiating from their own group was both safe for them and also productive for their society, as they tried to foster the delicate intra- and inter-group processes of peacebuilding.

Most research on public leadership, whether exercised by elected politicians, organizational leaders or civic activists, has been conducted in relatively safe societies where institutions have been largely stable and trusted. Much leadership theory and research takes insufficient account of the contested pluralism inherent in stable societies, let alone in the context of bitter dispute and violent division. This paper starts to unwrap the complex processes of leadership in divided societies,

It can be argued that all societies are divided to some extent (Crick 2005) so the ability of leadership to reach out beyond their own group to an oppositional or 'enemy' group is critical to understand. This has never been more important as the world faces wicked societal problems, including where Covid-19 has acted as an accelerant and where public management academics need to address wider questions within society (O'Flynn 2021). This paper responds to that call by examining leadership for peacebuilding and extending and combining theories about social identity leadership processes and political astuteness processes.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Loua Khalil is Lecturer in Leadership at Henley Business School. Specialist in public policy, leadership, leadership development, peacebuilding, and professional learning. She has conducted several leadership and leadership development studies in the field of post conflict peacebuilding. These leadership development programmes were mostly designed and funded by international NGOs and the UN affiliated institutions. Loua also has several years' experience conducting research with England and Wales police forces to improve their learning and development processes and structures, leading to a better overall organisational learning, and has designed and implemented the action research structure for the British Council.

Jean Hartley is Professor of Public Leadership at The Open University Business School, where she is undertaking research on leadership and leadership development by politicians, public servants and civic activists, and particularly on leadership with political astuteness. She established, and is the Academic Director of, the Open University's multi-disciplinary Centre for Policing Research and Learning, which involves over 50 academics and works closely with more than half the UK's police forces to create and use knowledge in policing. She also researches innovation in governance and public services, and public value. Jean's most recent edited book was The Routledge Companion to Leadership.

ORCID

Jean Hartley http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9488-1894

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