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What is This?
Dispersed Leadership: Exploring the Impact of Antecedent Forms of Power Using a Communicative Framework

Raymond D. Gordon

Abstract
This article presents an account of a police organization’s attempt to implement what senior officers described as a dispersed leadership initiative. A communicative framework is used to show how a particular historically constituted discourse is embedded in the communicative actions of those officers who participated in the study. Analysis of the effects of this discourse reveals how the organization’s dispersion of leadership, although on the surface representing a new and successful endeavor, is rendered problematic by what the article terms antecedent forms of power.

Keywords
dispersed leadership, antecedent power, change, communication

Introduction
This article details the efforts of a large police organization to implement a dispersed leadership initiative. It reviews the leadership literature and argues

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that a normalized and apolitical approach to power pervades the field. More specifically, the literature pertinent to dispersed or shared forms of leadership normalizes power and consequently insufficiently addresses the political dynamics central to the change in power relations associated with the dispersion of leadership skills and responsibilities throughout an organization. In contrast, the study on which this article is based shows how officers at the police organization in question are subject to a historically constituted understanding of power or in other words a discourse made up of \textit{antecedent forms of power} that adversely affects their attempt to share power.

The catalyst for the police organization attempting to disperse its leadership was the findings and recommendations of a major government inquiry, which had revealed widespread unethical and corrupt behavior throughout its ranks. The inquiry specifically found that poor leadership and outmoded management practices allowed corruption and unethical behavior to emerge and flourish. Among other things, the enquiry recommended that the organization introduce leadership and management strategies that were more congruent with contemporary management theories and practices. In response to the enquiry and as part of this broader reform program, a number of the organization’s local area commands (LACs) had been attempting to disperse their leadership by dissolving traditional divisional boundaries, which were based on function, in favor of cross-functional teams. Furthermore, authority and decision making was formally transferred to the leaders of these teams. Interestingly, this meant that previously autonomous and powerful individuals and groups such as detective investigators found themselves reporting to team leaders rather than divisional managers.

The article begins with a review of the dispersed leadership literature. This review identifies the theoretical focus of the study from which the research question is developed. An interpretative schema is developed to define and operationalize antecedent forms of power. The article then presents the communicative framework that was used to guide the research process and bring the impact of antecedent forms of power on the organization’s dispersed leadership initiative into plain view. The findings are then presented and discussed. As shall be seen, the results leave one to question whether, in a practical sense, the theory of dispersed leadership offers anything new or whether, in line with Hunt and Dodge’s (2000) critical assessment of the leadership field in general, it simply represents another form of leadership \textit{déjà vu}.

\textbf{Dispersed Leadership and Power}

The mainstream literature pertaining to leadership in organizations may be divided into five broad approaches: trait, style, contingency, new leadership,
The trait, style, contingency, and new leadership theories will not be reviewed in their entirety here, suffice to say that they are considered traditional in orientation because they address leadership within hierarchical organizational structures and control systems (Gordon, 2002). These theories treat the relationship between leaders and followers in dualistic terms, where an extraordinary entity, in most cases an individual, leads group followers. Leaders hold a position of privilege in the dualistic relationship because they are considered to be superior to followers, either through natural ability or the possession of appropriate attributes (Gordon, 2007).

The research framework for these mainstream theories takes the superior power of leaders within the leader–follower relationship as a given starting point and uncontroversial—people would not follow a leader if they did not have something to offer them, which in resource dependency terms is a position of power (Gordon, 2002). Even theories pertinent to followership implicitly position the leader as superior (Gordon, 2002). It should be noted, however, that this dualistic and apolitical approach to the relationship between leaders and followers is just that, implicit. One could argue that the superiority of leaders has become assumed as being part of the natural order of things through its conditioned practice over time. In sum, the interpretative position of the research and methodological frameworks adopted by these traditional approaches to leadership normalizes power, which resulted in the critical analysis of the relationship between leadership and power being deemed unnecessary.

Dispersed leadership theories, however, are considered nontraditional in orientation because, at least in theory, they espouse a sharing of power between leaders and followers. In a generic sense, dispersed leadership theories represent the distribution or sharing of leadership skills and responsibilities throughout an organization. With respect to power relations, this sharing of skills and responsibilities between leaders and followers blurs the boundary that, within the more traditional theories, differentiates the identity of the leader from the follower. Bryman (1996) recognized the founding theoretical approaches to dispersed leadership as superleadership (Manz & Sims, 1991), self-leadership (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998), leadership as a process (Hosking, 1991; Knights & Willmott, 1992), and distributed leadership (Senge, 1999). These founding approaches and, more recently, Pastor, Meindl, and Mayo’s (2002) shared leadership; Bono and Judge’s (2003) self-leadership; and Carson et al.’s (2007) distributed leadership have emerged in response to the widespread adoption of organically oriented structures and controls systems by organizations across the globe. Bolman and Deal (2008) refer to these structures and control
systems as new organizational forms that have come about through advances in information technology; these forms are designed to enable an organization to quickly respond to fast-changing global markets and to reduce levels of hierarchy, empowerment of lower level workers, and enhance flexibility. These theories have provided valuable insight and direction into alternative forms of leadership in contemporary organizations. However, bearing in mind that they emphasize the sharing of leadership skills and responsibilities throughout an organization, it seems reasonable to expect the construct of power to occupy a more central position in their development: This is not the case. Indeed, as per their predecessors in their field, the dispersed leadership theorists tend to normalize power (Collinson, 2009; Gordon, 2007). By way of example, in their founding work on superleadership, Manz and Sims (1991) argue that a superleader empowers his or her followers because he or she teaches them to lead themselves. The only explicit mention of power they make, however, is in a table in which they compare the characteristics of superleadership with those of more traditional leadership approaches. The table asserts that power is shared in the practice of super leadership. Manz and Sims offer no critical analysis of the nature of power in superleadership settings or how the sharing of power might be achieved.

In a later publication, Sims and Lorenzi (1992) do attempt to address power. They discuss it in tangible terms that relate to basis of power, such as positional power, expertise, and charisma as well as the control of resources. They specifically offer an attempt to explain how to share power by suggesting that to empower their followers leaders “must be trained to model the desired self-leadership behaviour on the part of their subordinates” (p. 281). Although this study makes a contribution to the literature, it neglects to address the fact that it is promoting the idea of power being shared from a position of superiority, which sets up a theoretical paradox in regard to the empowerment of followers. Although it is acknowledged that total empowerment may not necessarily be the objective, this paradox is more than just theoretical semantics. If one models and designs the self-leadership behavior of subordinates, one is not empowering subordinates; rather one is shaping and conditioning subordinates to behave in a particular way. As shall be seen in the results of this study, when the empowerment process is conditioned or constrained the actual dispersion of leader power, control, and decision making will also be conditioned and constrained. More specifically, if the self-leadership behaviors of subordinates are conditioned, one must question whether dispersed leadership actually offers anything new; does it actually share power or does power remain centralized in the hands of the modeler and conditioner; does it disperse leadership or simply offer more of the same through a set of
compliant so-called self-led subordinates? If this is the case, will it enhance the organization’s ability to respond to fast-changing markets as claimed?

Sims and Lorenzi at least attempt to address issues pertaining to power. However, they miss this paradox because they treat power in, what power theorists refer to as, first dimensional terms, that is, where power is viewed as something that is tangible and easily manipulated. In doing so, they do not capture the less tangible dynamics and complex workings of power (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). They are not alone in this omission. The leadership literature in general fails to address how less tangible forms of power embedded in an organization’s antecedents impacts on leadership-related initiatives (Collinson, 2009; Gordon, 2007). Accordingly, the theoretical focus of this study is how antecedent forms of power will affect the attempt of an organization, with an extended history of practicing traditional leadership, to introduce a dispersed leadership initiative.

Antecedent Forms of Power

In this section, to gain a better understanding of antecedent forms of power, an interpretative schema that aims to bring these forms of power into view is presented. The schema draws on a range of literatures that address antecedent forms of power; notably discourse analysis (Clegg, 1975; Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; van-Dijk, 1997), forms of deconstruction (Boje, 2001; Martin, 1990), and the principles of storytelling and narrative analysis (Boje, 1995, 2001; Clegg, 1975; Flyvbjerg, 1998, 2001). The objective of the schema is to illustrate how forms of power that are embedded in the narratives and stories that people use to describe their work environments unobtrusively constitute differential power relations (Clegg, 2001).

The schema is an interpretative framework that comprises five key elements. Each element represents a form of antecedent power as discussed in the power literature. The five elements are as follows:

1. *Taken-for-granted realities*, which are historically constituted viewpoints about the nature of a social system. These are underpinned by universalisms and essentialisms. Universalism is an assumed grand principle, law, or totalizing truth (Lyotard, 1984), a historical account that privileges one relatively narrow point of view (Boje, 1995). In short, they are normative statements that outline, on a broad scale, how people should view the world. The problem with universalisms is that they gloss over the microcomplexities of local contexts and ignore the political disparities that
provide an understanding of what actually occurs in everyday life. Essentialisms are similar but are present at a more microlevel as theories that appeal to a universalism (Boje, 2001). They are the sense of reality that underpins the explanations people attribute to phenomena and appearances they talk about (Lyotard, 1984). Most importantly, both universal and essential viewpoints are imbued with assumptions about how power ought to be in social settings—Alternative views of power are not even recognized let alone considered.

2. **Historical delineation of relationships** refers to how people describe the way relationships have been historically delineated with respect to power in their organization. Of interest is how communication within the organization produces differential subject positions (Boje, 1995; Martin, 1990)—ways of being and acting that people can and cannot take up (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Central to this analysis is a search for dualities (Boje, 2001) where historically constituted hierarchical relationships privilege one party while marginalizing another. These are relationships that are unproblematically accepted as the way things are (e.g., leaders are superior to followers). Of concern is whether, over time, the practice of these relationships results in forms of disciplined practice that reflects an organization’s antecedent power relationships. In the case of the police organization that is the focus of this study, the implementation of a dispersed leadership strategy raises the question of whether the nature of relationships between organizational members continues to privilege those who have traditionally held leadership positions despite the introduction of new structures and policies designed to promote the opposite.

3. **Historical decision legitimacy** aims to establish patterns in forms of communication that illustrate who can make what decisions and in which contexts. Of interest is whether these historical patterns contribute to the formation of unobtrusive structures of dominancy (Clegg, 1975, 1989; Weber, 1978) in decision making. That is, whether the legitimacy of certain individuals and groups to make decisions in particular settings over time becomes unquestionably accepted.

4. **The ordering of statements** in operational terms concerns the formation, over time, of common discourse patterns in regard to the exercise of power, across functional and hierarchical boundaries of an organization (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). For example, if instructional and/or disciplinary statements are mirrored at each
level of an organization hierarchy, a pervading management discourse may exist. Of interest is how this discourse privileges certain actors and practices at the expense of others. In the case of the police organization that is the subject of this study, of interest is whether such a discourse works for or against the organization’s dispersed leadership strategy.

5. *Boundaries of discursive action* refers to how actors are constrained by unobtrusive boundaries that outline the territories or domains in which organizational members may and may not act (Clegg, 1989). Charting these boundaries will require the analysis of data that provides examples of situations in which organizational members feel comfortable with exercising their voice and where others consider their voice to be legitimate. The organization’s structure, policies, and procedures, and architectural features and social arrangements can also provide insight to the nature of these boundaries (Haugaard, 1997).

**Method**

*The Communicative Framework*

The theoretical focus of this study is how antecedent forms of power impact on dispersed leadership scenarios. Such a theoretical focus demands micro-orientated research and in this respect lends itself to instruments that achieve specific, accurate outcomes. At the same time, the broader context of the study is one of change, where a large public sector organization is attempting to move away from traditional forms of leadership by dispersing leadership power, control, and decision making throughout the organization. Many large public sector organizations have found themselves in similar scenarios in recent times as they grapple with implementation of postbureaucratic forms and changes commensurate with new public sector management. In this regard, but only in a reflective sense, the study’s findings may have a more generalizable impact (Weick, 1999).

With the context of the study in mind, the review of how the leadership literature addresses power shows that traditional approaches to leadership constitute a clear boundary of identity between the leader and the follower, whereas the sharing of power between leaders and followers in dispersed leadership scenarios, at least theoretically, dilutes this boundary.

Clegg (1990) provides a conceptual framework indicative of this shift in power and identity. He suggests, with respect to power relations, that the shift can be conceptually represented as a move from differentiated forms of
identity to dedifferentiated forms of identity (Gordon, 2007). Drawing on Clegg’s work, this study highlights traditional forms of leadership by the concepts of differentiation (clear boundaries of identity between the leader and the follower) and domination (the normalized superiority of leaders over followers). In contrast, attempts to disperse leadership will be conceptually represented by the concepts of dedifferentiation (where empowerment blurs the boundaries of identity in hierarchically based power relationships) and democracy (the sharing of power and control; Gordon, 2007).

Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that concepts used as a priori guides can help focus the research process and prevent the researcher from becoming lost in a myriad data. Furthermore, a priori concepts indicative of a study’s context and theoretical interest allow the researcher to focus data collection and analysis on theoretically relevant data. Accordingly, the concepts of differentiation and domination along with dedifferentiation and democracy are used in this study to guide the data-collection and analysis phases of the research. More specifically, data that is indicative of these concepts has been collected, coded, and categorized with respect to each concept. For example, the code differentiation is allocated to text examples from the data in which power is communicated in terms of clearly defined differential boundaries; the code domination is allocated to those text examples that represent an unquestioned acceptance of a particular individual’s or group’s right to power; the code dedifferentiation is allocated to those text examples that refer to established authoritarian differential boundaries of power being blurred, usurped, or challenged in some way; whereas the code democracy is allocated to those text examples that represent power in more democratic terms.

By using a priori concepts generated from extant literature to guide the inductive study, the research framework draws on both deductive (testing theory in practice) and inductive (theory emerging from practice) theory-building approaches (Langley, 1999; see Figure 1). In this way, the framework takes steps toward bridging the gap between theory and practice (tensions in existing theory guiding the analysis of the adopted theory in practice). The emergent theory is grounded in the tensions and paradoxes between theory and practice—in the case at hand, the theory and practice of shifting power relations in an organization attempting to disperse its leadership.

The Research Setting

When I first arrived at LAC, I was introduced as a researcher from a university that had been working with the organization for a number of years focusing on its reform initiatives. Like I had done in previous research projects with the
police, I initially set about meeting people and immediately realized that I was being treated with some suspicion; this is understandable when you consider that since the government inquiry this was an organization that was constantly under surveillance by internal auditors who were often undercover. On numerous occasions I was asked, “You’re not a spy are you?” I carried my ethics approval documents with me to help validate the integrity of my research and to gain the confidence of the research participants.

I spent the first 3 months talking with members of the command whose roles spread across management, intelligence gathering, operational (general street policing), traffic control (highway patrol), and criminal investigations (detectives). I watched workers in their everyday work activities and asked them questions about the reform. My objective at this early stage was to identify key players and activities in the reform process and to develop plans and guides for more in-depth interviews.

During this early phase, I established a schedule for visiting the LAC 1 to 2 days (4-6 hr) per week. At times, this schedule would vary depending on my other academic responsibilities and when there were special events, such as...
as meetings being held at the LAC. After 4 to 5 months, I extended my data-gathering process primarily through interviews, observations of naturally occurring interactions, and conversations with key participants and additionally from sources such as organizational memos, flyers, newsletters, and public documents. During this period, my data collection and analysis was iterative. That is, although I was collecting data and becoming more familiar with the setting, I was constantly analyzing my data, which helped with developing a list of key issues and events that could be explored in more depth. When my data collection ended, I had accumulated more than 200 research hours in which I conducted 34 interviews ranging from as short as 10 min to as long as 3 hr, which, along with my field notes, resulted in 14,840 paragraphs of text that required analyzing.

In conducting the interviews, I tried as much as possible, given the constraints of voluntary participation, to interview officers from different teams, positions, ethnicity, and gender. I was particularly interested in interviewing those people in dispersed leadership positions and those who had previously held high status positions (i.e., detectives). During the interviews, I began by asking open-ended questions and at times I asked participants to communicate their story to me about the reform program. As the interviews progressed and key topics related to leadership and power emerged in the text, I probed participants for more detailed examples.

**Data Analysis**

To add methodological rigor to my study, I employed a form of theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is sampling carried out on the basis of concepts that prove to be theoretically relevant. The term *proven theoretically relevant* means that certain concepts become significant in the data because they are repeatedly present or notably absent when comparing incident after incident (Eisenhardt, 1989). Through systematic coding and analysis procedures, some concepts become more relevant than others (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

My sampling procedure, however, was slightly different to what might be considered as pure theoretical sampling, in that I began with the a priori concepts mentioned above. This entailed using NVIVO software to label text examples with the concepts that are indicative of the organization’s move from traditional leadership to dispersed leadership (differentiation, domination, dedifferentiation, democracy). Because I was interested in analyzing examples of text that were theoretically relevant to these concepts, I also coded the data already labeled with these concepts with subconcepts that provide information about structural forms, behaviors, and effects.
The sampling method then involved running a series of search operations that identified those subconcepts most theoretically relevant to the a priori concepts. With each data-collection and analysis phase, the data indicative of those subconcepts with a high frequency of occurrence in the data set were kept, whereas all others were discarded. In short, the data were run through a series of disaggregation and reaggregation processes, based on quantitatively identified dominant subconcepts and relationship patterns between the main concepts and the subconcepts. A single data set resulted, which contained text examples that provide insight into how organizational structures, practices, and effects relate to each of the a priori concepts.

This data set was then labeled with codes that were indicative of each element of the interpretative schema developed to define and operationalize antecedent forms of power. Text examples of each element were then aggregated; all nonaggregated data were discarded. The result was five data sets containing data theoretically relevant to the a priori concepts that provided information about structures, behaviors, and effects and that was indicative of each element of the interpretative schema. Each of these data sets was analyzed qualitatively to ascertain how each antecedent form of power impacted the organization’s attempt to disperse its leadership.

Findings and Discussion

The study findings demonstrate that despite the implementation of structural changes aimed at facilitating the dispersion of leadership, participants continue to interpret their organization as having a traditional approach to organizing. The dominant themes (see Table 1) in the behaviors data set indicate that officers place an emphasis on the need to protect themselves, seeking legitimacy for their relative position, and resisting acts of power on behalf of other members of the organization. The data in this data set also links historical forms of power to surveillance, punishment, and deception. These trends seem to indicate an environment that is consistent with that of a siege mentality. Somewhat unsurprisingly, the dominant trends in the effect data set are fear and reactive policing. Reactive policing is where officers, rather than thinking and acting strategically in regard to policing crime, simply react to crime. One of the key objectives of the organization’s reform program was to move away from reactive policing by emphasizing the need for the introduction of more strategic and proactive approaches to policing.

Although each the five data sets that make up the communicative framework contain responses from officers that are relevant to the research question, the taken-for-granted realities, historical decision legitimacy, and the ordering
Table 1. An Example of Dominant Intersecting Links and Quantitative Trends Between the a Priori Codes and the Subcodes Indicative of Structure, Behaviors, and Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Subcode</th>
<th>Number of Intersecting Coding References</th>
<th>Dominant Coding Reference, Yes/No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Functional division</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hierarchy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policies and rules</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Technological</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Routine</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code of silence</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Managerial dominance</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work schedule</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behaviors</td>
<td>Surrender</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Discipline</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Blowing the whistle</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercising voice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resistance</td>
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<td>Surveillance</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Payback</td>
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<td>Reward</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Deception</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effects</td>
<td>Undermines reform</td>
<td>58</td>
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<td>Reinforces reform</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constraint</td>
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<td>Conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Frustration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demotivation</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adopted from Gordon (2007).
of statements data sets offer the most theoretically relevant accounts. For this reason, only these three will be discussed here.

**Taken-for-Granted Realities**

Analysis reveals the presence of three key taken-for-granted realities related to power that, over time, had become universally accepted as essential truths. These are as follows:

1. Senior ranking officers (management) have a right to power, which lower ranking officers have a duty to obey.
2. Detectives are superior to other police officers because they have specialist knowledge and skills.
3. Control is maintained through strong discipline and punishment.

For example, a team leader discussed the behavior of the detectives who were now members of his team and formally required to report to him:

Researcher: What do you think about detectives being part of the team? Is there tension there?
Team leader: I really don’t understand why, you know [why they are even in the team and reporting to me]. Because what happens is, you’ve got your detectives’ office, and you’ve got your general duties, and there is no information fed between the two.
Researcher: Distinct boundary between them?
Team leader: Yeah, like a bloody great fence. My personal opinion is that a lot of the detectives, I mean . . . I’ve worked detectives, and you get treated differently by the public, to what you do when you are in your uniform.
Researcher: They have a certain power?
Team leader: Power is the right word for it. And I think that power goes further to the point of . . . well, “We are an elite lot of people.” It is not that we’ve done a course and we are detectives; it’s “We are the elite up here,” and why should we be associating with uniform police [be a member of a team]. And I mean, you listen to detectives talk, a lot of the time, okay . . . [detectives say] send a uniformed bloke around to do that, or . . . you know, I’ll do this . . . everything is talking down [to the uniform police], just because they are wearing a suit.
Researcher: So that . . . the idea of them reporting to a . . . general duties officer [team leader] really gets up their . . .
Team leader: Laughs.
Researcher: How do you find it? Telling them what to do when they are on your team?
Team leader: I see . . . I haven’t had a problem with them because really, on our shift, I don’t see any of them walk in. Our two blokes, D1, I think he’s been doing a bit of work over at the other command, but yeah . . . they walk in the door and . . . but, they walk in the door, they listen to what is going on, they go back to their office, and that’s the end of that.
Researcher: You mean, at the change over?
Team leader: Yeah.
Researcher: So the whole thing [detectives belonging to the team and reporting to the team leader] sounds like a façade or something?
Team leader: Well, it sounds good on paper doesn’t it?

In the above transcript, the team leader makes note of the differential in power between the detectives and general duties officers. It is important to note, these differences are reinforced spatially: The detectives’ office is located in an entirely different building at the LAC’s site. The team leader refers to other historical practices that have also contributed to detectives acquiring an elite status. He refers to their use of plain clothes as a symbolic form of differentiation from normal police; the use of plain clothes has enhanced their discretionary power. The team leader adds that the detective’s specialist status gives them a dominant role at crime scenes and, through the historical practice of this dominant role, an assumed right to power has been established. The superiority assumed by detectives has become a taken-for-granted reality both within the eyes of other police and the general public. Other officers also referred to forms of popular culture media, such as films, television series, and news broadcasts, as media further enhances the differential power of detectives by romanticizing their role in policing. Despite the LAC’s reform agenda, there were numerous examples of detectives, who have been told formally that they now report to a team leader, continuing to do as they like, paying the reforms little heed. Interestingly, the team leader, despite his formal leadership status, appears to allow this to occur, indicating that either his ability or willingness to exercise power over detectives is severely constrained by their historically constituted power.

Another officer made the following comment during an interview:

When I first started in the job, when the senior sergeant called out, you said, “Shit, what have I been called for; Christ I am in trouble here.” When an inspector called, you would tremble in your boots. When a
A team leader made the following comment during a tearoom conversation with colleagues:

Thomo [a team leader] sought advice from our legal department in regard to charging those juveniles, who did that arson attack you know. They told him to run one of these new perpetrator/victim conferences. [Which he did] XXXX [the chief of detectives] objected. The media got hold of it and blew it up. The commissioner put pressure on YYYY [regional commander], who then put pressure on ZZZZ [local area commander] who pressured Thomo to change his decision—Thomo stuck to his digs [wouldn’t change his decision] and because he did, ZZZZ [local area commander] sacked him, relieved of his higher duties.

In the above transcripts, the team leaders give examples of the historical prevalence of punitive action in organization. The first transcript provides an historical and hierarchical frame for such acts. The second describes what happened when a team leader exercised his newly granted authority and refused to give into pressure from his superiors. As the transcript outlines, the arresting officer was pressured to change his decision in regard to the charges and hence the means of punishment for two juvenile defenders. Because of negative media attention, this pressure flowed down the hierarchical chain of command; when the officer would not change his decision, he was relieved of his team-leader duties by the local area commander. What message does the severity of this punishment send to other officers in the command about the reform initiatives? What was noticeable when sitting and listening to this conversation was the nonchalant reaction of the participants. Their reaction suggested that such punishment could only be expected. There were numerous examples where the reaction of other officers toward acts of punishment indicated that such acts were normalized. It was considered only natural to be punished for going against your superiors.

**Historical Patterns of Decision Legitimacy**

The analysis of numerous officers’ accounts revealed historical patterns of relationship delineation and legitimacy in decision making that reflected the taken-for-granted realities mentioned above. Officers continually refer to the dualistic nature of their relationships—relationships that existed within the organization’s previous structure, characterized by clear differential
boundaries that privilege rank, specialist officers, as well as seniority and operational experience. Of particular interest, in regard to the research question, is a tension between the historically constituted patterns of legitimacy in decision making and the decision-making legitimacy formally proposed by the dispersed leadership initiatives:

Team leader: Once you have two people acting as sergeant, as far as I am concerned, the most senior bloke calls the shots, and that’s the way it has always been.

Researcher: And the most senior bloke is . . . if they are both sergeants . . .

Team leader: Realistically, their station manager.

Researcher: Okay. Why?

Team leader: Why?

Researcher: Yeah, why the station manager and not the team leader?

Team leader: I don’t know. It’s always been the one in the station.

Here the team leader shows how his understanding of historical decision legitimacy undermines the command’s reform agenda. The command’s reform agenda is aimed at transferring decision responsibility to frontline police operations: The team leader is meant to be the key decision-making operative. Yet, irrespective of the way things should be, the above transcript suggests that the team leader historically understands how decisions are supposed to be made. In short, decision legitimacy in the service privileges those officers recognized as the station manager, even when it is now meant to be the operational (in the field) team leader.

Later in the discussion, this team leader provided further insight to his thoughts by introducing an additional historical dimension of differentiation and privilege as well. He mentioned the concept of seniority. Historically, merit has not been the basis on which officers were promoted; rather, officers were promoted on the basis of their seniority, that is, length of time in the service. By way of explanation, if two officers with the same rank were going for a promotion, the officer with the longest time in the service would be given the promotion. Thus, the concept of seniority resulted in senior officers (those with the longest time in the service) also being given a right to power and, consequently, legitimacy when it came to decision making. Although the seniority system has been phased out for more than a decade now, a large proportion of the officers currently in service operated under this system and, as is shown in this transcript, they are still constrained by the social codes of order its practice constituted.

Another team leader provides insight into how those who have historically been recognized as legitimate decision makers influenced other officers’ perceptions of the legitimacy of the reform agenda:
These people [the old guard], the amount of influence and pull that they have in the workplace was incredible. And people would often, I see, would run off their [the old guard’s] doubt in doing something. They had great doubts in the path that we might have been going down [the reform agenda]. So it [the old guard’s doubt] legitimized other people, junior people, having doubts in that path as well. So it was a crucial thing that caused us [reformers] barriers, continues to cause us barriers, because the hangovers [in regard to decision legitimacy] are still there from those people as that generational thing . . . they have been there for so long. These other people have been in the area for a shorter time, but they have picked up on that chain of the way things should be. That has caused us a lot of problems over the time. So it is the power that those people . . . would be influencing over a long period of time; it is still there; it is still there.

In the above transcript, the team leader introduces the dualism of the old and new guard. The old guard comprises older senior middle management officers who, over time, have acquired a degree of power and, subsequently, comfort in the system as it had been prior to the reform. Those officers who are driving the reform process make up the new guard. The team leader refers to how the old guard influences other officers, the basis of this influence being a legacy of past legitimacy in decision making. The influence of the old guard manifests itself, in large part, in forms of resistance against the reform process.

Another officer refers to how decision making in groups, coalitions, and networks revolved around a dominant few:

Researcher: Would they [members of the networks or group] ever go against the group?
Officer: No.
Researcher: In other words, they might have a great idea . . .
Office: They wouldn’t take any action, which disagreed with the way that person [the dominant individual in the group] thought . . . Not, if it would upset the way things are done.
Researcher: So the relationships become very, very . . .
Officer: Everything they do would be referred back to them [the dominant individual], and they would run off that person . . . And that’s probably where I had problems, where I haven’t been willing to accept that. I have gone my own way and gravitated toward people that I have seen that have their own way of doing things, as opposed to fitting into line.
The significance of the above transcript is that it suggests that a select few dominate decision scenarios. The problem with a select few dominating decision scenarios is that over time others recognize that it is in their best interests to align themselves with the viewpoints and preferred courses of action of these select few. This is an empirical example of how the rule of anticipated reaction (Friedrich, 1937) works to create a mobilization of bias (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, 1963; Clegg, 1989; Newton, 1975). Due to a fear by others of anticipated reaction by those in dominant positions, there is no need for those in dominant positions to exercise power: The dominance that they enjoy ensures others will only too willingly try and second-guess them to fill in any gaps, and their bias (power) is thus mobilized.

Through this bias, the viewpoints and preferred courses of action of those in positions of dominance more easily acquire legitimacy. Flyvbjerg (1998) argues that because those actors in positions of dominant power go largely unchallenged, they are free to rationalize their own version of rationality. In sum, those in positions of dominance construct the version of rationality that is considered legitimate through which subordinate others constitute what they take to be rational. Arguably, this might not be a problem if those in positions of dominance existed independent of context and time, but they do not; they are always subject to their own self-interests and other contextual pressures. This is very much in line with Nietzsche’s power-makes-stupid thesis in which he emphasizes the problematic nature of people in positions of dominance rationalizing their own versions of rationality. Such a view of power, although not explored by the major government inquiry into the corruption in the police organization in question, goes a long way toward explaining how new recruits, when subjected to dominant individuals and groups that have rationalized corrupt practices as rational, right, and just, find it difficult to speak against these practices.

The above transcripts are indicative of numerous others, all of which indicate officers remain unobtrusively constrained by forms of historical decision legitimacy. Despite the formal dispersion of leadership power, officers who have historically held positions of power continue to dominate decision making.

**The Ordering of Statements**

In regard to the ordering of statements data set, the analysis revealed a discourse of dominance, a discourse that reflects the essentialisms that underpin social interaction within the organization and the differential boundaries that have historically governed legitimacy with respect to decision making and
discursive action. Reinforcing this discourse of dominance is the behavior of the organization’s most senior officers in what is titled the Operations Control and Review (OCR) meeting:

Senior officer: Yes, that’s right. Exactly! . . . I mean, even when you look at the OCR review, the Operations Control Review meetings . . .

Research: It’s funny, I’ve heard that . . . people seem to have real fear of this thing called an OCR. What is an OCR?

Senior officer: Well, it’s an Operations and Crime Review where the commander [commander of each LAC] is held accountable purely by statistical data, as to how the command is progressing. And they look at . . . a variety of crime categories or crime areas. So they will do a variance check between your current status, where you are now, where you were last year, and where you should be to match the crime figures.

A team leader provides additional insight to the nature of the OCR:

Team leader: What . . . the OCR . . . it is a XXXX initiative, where you take down [to headquarters in Sydney] the LAC, . . . the boss [local area commander], the crime manager, intelligence officer, and a couple of other people . . . and he [the commissioner] grills them on all the different parts of why things are happening in your LAC.

Researcher: I have heard people say too that they just deliberately, they go out to get them or catch them out or something.

Team leader: Yes, yes, they do.

Researcher: The local commander and his team appear to have a real dread, a real fear of that meeting.

Team leader: Yes, they all do. All commanders do because that’s their pact; you know . . . they sign a contract saying I’ll do that, do this, or whatever.

Research: They sign a contract, do they?

Team leader: And XXXX says, you are not performing, you are out the door. And that’s where the dread comes, up at that echelon there.

Another team leader adds,

Researcher: It [the OCR] may have benefit, but once again, the method of it . . . what I . . . what I got a sense of . . . was fear.
Team leader: Hell oh gosh yeah! Look at the structure of it. We can probably give you some police TV videotapes of what it looks like inside the room where the OCRs take place . . . The place has two tables along the front; they [commanders waiting to be questioned on their performance] are the heads on the block; you’ve got the chiefs [commissioner and his executive team] are out at the front and facing them [the commanders with their head on the block]; the rest of it is all audience and on the fringes there are people around the edges; this guy is putting these huge big bloody graphs up on the walls saying ah, what have you done about your robberies in this area? And the guy just sits there; it is just a big magnifying glass.

Researcher: See, the thing is, though. I see that fear . . . this is as an outsider . . . then moving down the line, and actually pervading the organization. And what I said before, it reinforces the informal rule that “you must toe the line.”

Team leader: It is certainly the safest way. You’ll continue to get paid every second Thursday.

Even the command’s crime manager (most senior detective) made the following comments:

Crime manager: Yes and I think I’ve never been to one [an OCR meeting] either because where I came from we had a . . . the general consensus of how people with such high rank, like you’ve got, inspectors and superintendents going to these OCRs and being belittled by higher rank, and they come back embarrassed and belittled . . . you know, like . . . and comments that I’ve heard is that, if we as police spoke to members of the public the same way senior officers speak to other officers, we would have a complaint brought against us.

The problematic nature of the OCR was not lost on the command’s senior officers. As one commented,

Researcher: But my question is, and maybe you can enlighten me on it, . . . why does the regional commander react that way . . . I know it [demands made by the regional commander] came from someone higher than the regional commander, and the regional commander then reacted when it came down [the hierarchical line].

Senior officer: Well, yeah, it’s always been like that, I’m going to kick your ass, and then I’m going to kick your ass [indicating a cascading effect].
Researcher: Well, it seems more to do with discipline and punishment than operations review?
Senior officer: Yes, yes—as much as they are trying, can’t get away from it—they can’t get away from commander control.

Later he added,

Senior officer: I’ve got no problems with the process, provided they modify it to some degree to . . . don’t see where . . . at the moment we just seem to be living from one OCR to the next.
Researcher: Well . . . that’s the impression I get.
Senior officer: We are OCR driven.
Researcher: The OCR is the central part of the commands and instructions and decisions or how instructions are delivered and how, if you like, decisions are made, are based upon. These OCRs have a tremendous impact.
Senior officer: Well we are OCR driven. Because the OCRs are every 4 months, 5 months, 6 months, whatever they are. But even on the way home, in the car from the first . . . from that OCR, you are thinking about how you can make sure that the next one you’re going to cover all your bases. And you really . . . you are trying to put into place short-term strategies to cater for long-term problems.

The above transcripts are indicative of numerous accounts of OCR. Indeed, such accounts dominated the data. What is revealed in this data set indicates that the behavior of the police organization’s most senior officer and his executive team in this meeting has resulted in the constitution of what Kendall and Wickham (1999) refer to as an ordering of statements. That is, the way things were said and done in the OCR, particularly in the form of orders, commands, and instructions, were mirrored by officers in management and supervisory positions at lower levels of the organization. What helped to create this cascading effect is the fact that although officers are being grilled (many officers referred to as ridiculed, belittled, and abused) during the meeting, the proceedings were being video recorded, and these recordings were transmitted to all other LACs. These transmissions help to constitute an ordering of statements which, over time, has reinforced a prevailing discourse of dominance: The OCR meeting is a medium through which officers in management positions throughout the service are made aware of what constitutes legitimate management practices in the service. In regard to
the reform agenda though, such management practice and behavior do little by way of dispersing leadership power, control, and decision making.

Conclusions

Before drawing some conclusions from the research, it is important to point out some limitations to the study. First, it is a study of just one police organization, and although no claim for generalizability is made, in a reflective sense, the study findings may have broader impact. For instance, it presents the results of research carried out in a highly significant organization, one of the largest police organizations in the world. It is thus not unrepresentative. There is little evidence to suggest that the organization was an aberration because its catalyst for change was corruption. Police organizations in Australia, not to mention the Metropolitan Police in the United Kingdom, the Hong Kong Police, the New York City Police Department, and the Los Angeles Police Department, have had to deal with corruption at various stages in their histories. Furthermore, police organizations are not the only type of coercive organization that governments use to maintain order. There are many military-style organizations, including customs and immigration services, fire fighters, and coast guards. Such organizations often struggle with the legacy of their quasi-militaristic past and seek to change to flatter; more empowered organization forms as they adopt technologies that demand such change.

Although the limitations of the research participant’s particulars are acknowledged as it being a police organization and a solitary case study, its findings can be used to understand other organizational contexts in different industries and countries. The arguments and methods highlighted are not confined to coercive organizations because antecedent forms of power are at play in all organizations. Hence, it is proposed that the adoption of dispersed leadership initiatives in other corporate and public organizations will also be framed by antecedent forms of power.

The article has by no means set out to privilege any one form of leadership and management over another; it is acknowledged that hierarchical structures as well as authoritarian and discipline-based control mechanisms are customary for many organizations, particularly police organizations. Rather, this study has focused on making a contribution to the theory and practice of leadership in general and dispersed forms of leadership in particular: The right or wrong of dispersing leadership is not the concern, enhancing the knowledge of how to do so is.

A critical review of what the mainstream management literature has to say about dispersed leadership shows that it adopts a normative, apolitical
approach to power. More specifically, the literature neglects the impact that antecedent forms of power might have in dispersed leadership scenarios. This impact is the theoretical focus of the research. An interpretative schema was developed to operationalize antecedent forms of power, and a communicative framework was also developed to illustrate how such forms of power are embedded in various forms of organizational communication. The framework also illustrates the link between the theoretical focus, the research methods, and the data handling and analysis techniques. Central to the communicative framework are concepts, which with respect to power relations are indicative of the organization’s attempt to shift from traditional forms of leadership (differentiation and domination) to dispersed forms of leadership (dedifferentiation and democracy). Theoretically, the traditional leadership concepts are in tension with the dispersed leadership concepts. The communicative framework uses these concepts as a priori codes to guide the data-collection and analysis procedures. In consequence, although the framework draws on grounded theory, the emerging theory is not strictly grounded; that is, it does not simply emerge from the data; rather, the theory that does emerge is grounded in the a priori codes and thus the theoretical tensions, with respect to power relations, between traditional and dispersed forms of leadership.

The qualitative analysis reveals that embedded in what officers say and do is evidence of taken-for-granted realities, historical forms of decision legitimacy, and an ordering of statements. These antecedent forms of power have, over time, resulted in the superior power of certain organizational entities being constituted as the natural order of things. For instance, the superiority of specialist officers, such as detectives, is simply accepted as part of everyday police life. Furthermore, punishment for questioning those with power is also accepted as the natural order of things. More to the point, through an ordering of statements, a managerial discourse of dominance pervades the organization. The behavior associated with these antecedent forms of power, such as detectives ignoring the formalized power of team leaders and the transmitted acts of belittling and domination by senior officers in the OCR, does little to facilitate empowerment and the dispersion of leadership.

The data also revealed that officers in this organization formed networks for protection brought about by fear and a need for security and safety within a punitive management system. These are very different in purpose to the well-documented police networks based on mateship and a sense of brotherhood (Gordon, 2007; Van Manen, 1988). In the face of a punitive discourse, one that pervades the entire organization, they look out for only those whom they are closely associated with rather than looking out for each other.
Officers openly talk about their fear of retribution from dominant individuals and groups in the organization and the need for them to protect themselves against their own—which is in contrast to a culture of mateship. Senior officers and detectives in particular, through a variety of means, some of which are paradoxically aimed at empowering officers with leadership skills and responsibilities, continue to practice acts of domination and punishment.

By way of emphasizing the problematic nature of acts of domination, the works of Clegg (1989), Haugaard (1997), and Flyvbjerg (1998) show that it is those people in positions of dominance, unchecked by their obedient followers, who are the more likely to fall victim to rationalizing their own version of rationality. For the organization in question, such rationalizations were at the heart of the corruption that acted as the catalyst for reform—The government inquiry documented how officers openly referred to various forms of inappropriate and criminal behavior as “noble-cause corruption.”

The study makes a contribution to the leadership literature by illustrating how antecedent forms of power unobtrusively undermine an organization’s attempt to disperse it leadership. Although in theory the power of previously dominant entities should be devolved, in practice the initiative appears to be little more than a structural façade. Rather than dispersing power and enhancing democracy, antecedent forms of power continue to legitimize domination on behalf of those groups and individuals (senior officers and detectives) who previously held formal positions of power. The study demonstrates how normalized approaches to power gloss over the complexities associated with the workings of power in organizations. Instead, it suggests researchers and practitioners need to employ methods that bring the impact of antecedent forms of power to the fore. One may even argue that the continued normalization of power by leadership researchers is untenable. Power and leadership can be both decontextualized and recontextualized within acts of communication. Communicative action not only embeds and enacts power relations but also forms the framework for their institutionalization, politicization, and contestation. Leadership implies power as much as power implies leadership, and thus leadership innocent of power is leadership ignorantly normalized: Power is always implicated with the discourse and practices of leadership. Indeed, one might as well speak of leadership/power/discourse for they are indissoluble.

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Notes

1. A local area command (LAC) is a geographical region that contains several police stations and approximately 100 to 150 staff.
2. It is acknowledged that a growing body of literature is emerging in the field of leadership that does not fit within these categories. However, the article is concerned with dominant trends in the literature which, as Collinson (2009) noted, is United States based and psychologically informed.
3. The research framework and data used in this presentation here was designed and collected respectively by the author as a part of a broader ethnographic study. Nvivo search operations have been used to extract data relevant to several related research questions with each resulting in different articles. As a result, the research framework and parts of the data presented here may also appear in the following publications: Gordon (2007) and Gordon, Kornberger, and Clegg (2009a, 2009b).

References


Bio

Raymond D. Gordon is currently dean of the Faculty of Business, Technology and Sustainable Development at Bond University, Queensland, Australia. His major research and teaching interests are in the field of organization theory and organization behavior. More specifically, he is interested in power in organizations as well as ethnographic- and discourse-based methodologies.