

# A Critical Analysis of Rural Community Leadership: Towards Systematised Understanding and Dialogue across Leadership Domains

Sarah Skerratt

Scottish Agricultural College

## Abstract

*Key texts in leadership research outline the attributes and practices of the effective leader, consistently emphasising relationship-building, trust, reciprocity, Emotional Intelligence and effectiveness of leadership styles. In rural community development research, there are descriptions of local leaders engendering and sustaining the confidence, resilience and capacity of 'their' communities. Such leaders are seen as "champions" working with a cohort of "usual suspects". These arrangements are particularly accentuated and fragile in remoter settlements. With limited exceptions, understanding tends to be largely case-study based. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to bring together for the first time the "macro" depictions and recommendations for sound leaders and leadership (from key texts) alongside the "micro"-level findings of rural community leadership literature, to review the extent to which the two sets of thinking and evidence resonate and reinforce one another. My analysis shows that: social embeddedness is consistently identified across both literatures, with extra-local links being a focus of the rural literature; Emotional Intelligence and leadership styles are investigated in the leadership literature, but only in one instance in the rural literature; and individual and collective agency and leadership are identified in both literatures. I conclude by identifying the implications of this critical analysis for leadership investment and training: tailored to complexity and embeddedness whilst also operationalising those transferable components of effective individual and group leadership observable in the literature. My findings contribute to understandings that move beyond the "mystique" of rural community leadership towards analyses that are: more systematic; based on an increasing evidence-base across domains; and likely to lead to more robust outcomes in and for remote and rural communities.*

## Background

Key texts in leadership research outline the attributes and practices of the effective leader (Burns, 1978, 2010; Goleman, 2004; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Their analyses and conclusions consistently emphasise: relationship-building; trust; reciprocity; Emotional Intelligence; and implications of taking a transactional or transformational approach. This literature also points to the importance of locality and socio-cultural context – that is, the embeddedness of leadership. The conclusions from these texts, however, do not cross into rural community development research, but rather remain in a separate analytical domain.

Within rural development, there is an increasing normative shift from development in rural communities towards development *with* communities (Edwards, 1998; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Herbert-Cheshire & Higgins, 2004; O’Toole & Burdess, 2004; Gray and Sinclair, 2005; Woods *et al.*, 2006; Mackleworth & Caric, 2010; Skerratt, 2010a; Skerratt, 2011; Skerratt & Hall, 2011). In such research, the analytical microscope focuses on attributes of communities: their capacity, capitals<sup>1</sup> and assets (Flora *et al.*, n.d.; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003 and 2005; Cocklin, 2005; Tonts, 2005; Henderson & Vercseg, 2010); their governance (Shucksmith, 2000 & 2010; Shortall, 2004, 2008); and their resilience (Hegney *et al.*, 2008; McIntosh *et al.*, 2008; Magis, 2010). A subset of such analyses is rural leadership (reviewed below), focusing on its dynamics, complexity and associated outcomes. My aim is to identify what is observable across these examples through conducting a comparative analysis of research outputs.

By situating rural community leadership research alongside key texts on leadership, I aim to provide a critical analysis of the extent to which systematic, recurring characteristics, prerequisites and dynamics of (rural community) leadership, *can* in fact be identified. This purpose echoes Burns’ (2010) call for: "the study of leadership be lifted out of the anecdotal and the eulogistic and placed squarely in the structure and processes of human development" (p. 3).

## Approach Taken to the Analysis

Within the field of rural community development research, there are a small number of papers and chapters which focus on rural leadership *per se*. These are reviewed below (in the 'rural' section of the paper) and together capture the range of insights into leadership at rural community level. Such analyses predominantly remain particular to their case-study locations, instances, times and data sets. Although some may be comparative within their frame of reference (comparing two locations, for example), they rarely go beyond the rural literature to explore whether findings observable in their analytical locale are in existence elsewhere in the wider sphere of leadership analyses. Through my increasing exploration of case-by-case analyses over many years, I became curious as to whether leadership literature that has no connections with rural or even community was identifying similar themes, or whether the two literatures remained distinct in content. Further, I was curious as to whether rural leadership was being described as having characteristics that are distinct from

non-rural leadership, due to, for example, geography, population sparsity or distance. I therefore examined the main reference texts used in much academic discourse around leadership, and identified three recurring books and their associated themes. These are the three main texts reviewed below. Each text represents a significant substantive area: transactional/transformational leadership (Burns<sup>2</sup>, (1978) and his subsequent reflection text (2010) where he identifies analytical trends over the preceding 30 years); Emotional Intelligence in leadership (Goleman *et al.*, 2004); and Bass & Riggio (2006) whose work significantly developed analyses of transformational leadership in particular (see Bass 1985)<sup>3</sup> and put forward evidence for leadership being “learnable” rather than exclusively intrinsic. In addition to analysing these three main texts, I also explored and cited papers which substantially augment these larger bodies of work, and which elaborate on critical components<sup>4</sup>. This combined approach also acted as a method of triangulation, allowing me to confirm that the main leadership themes had been covered, in both the rural and wider leadership literatures. The findings from this analysis are now presented.

## What We Learn from Leadership Literature

In this section, I briefly explore the main themes emerging from the reviewed leadership references. These are: the relational nature of leadership; the ability of individuals to engage and empower others; the embeddedness of leadership in social relations; the critique of leadership training as being overly mechanistic; and the belief that leadership is learnable.

Before moving onto these themes, it is important firstly to describe briefly the definitions of leadership. Burns (2010) defines leadership as:

*the reciprocal process<sup>5</sup> of mobilising, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realise goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers...* (p. 425)

For Burns (1978, 2010), Goleman *et al.* (2004) and Bass and Riggio (2006), leadership is understood within the same framework as "followership", with "the flow of specific leadership-followership interactions emerging from the clash and congruence of hierarchies and motivations" (Burns *et al.*, 2010, p. 439). Goleman *et al.* (2004) define leadership as either being dissonant when leaders fail to empathise with, or to read the emotions of, a group accurately (p. 19)) or resonant (attuned to people's feelings, (p.20))<sup>6</sup>. These elements are reflected in leadership styles which are part of the leadership repertoire (Goleman *et al.*, 2004, pp. 53-70), summarised as: Visionary, Coaching, Affiliative, Democratic, Pace-setting and Commanding.

These attributes and the processual nature of leadership are also reflected in Taylor *et al.*'s (2011) paper on champion-driven leadership processes within publicly-managed Australian water agencies. They define leadership as:

*a process of influence that occurs within the context of relationships between leaders and their followers, and involves establishing direction (vision), aligning resources, generating motivation and providing inspiration (p.413).*

They propose 'an idealized process' through which leadership influence takes place, with three phases: Initiation, Endorsement and Implementation (pp.421-422). Their analysis enables them to identify how leadership processes and forms evolve over time, and how the use of behaviours by leaders is highly dependent on the 'phases' in the process (p.428).

### ***The relational nature of leadership and outcomes***

The first of the five main emerging themes from the reviewed literature concerns the relational nature of leadership. Leaders and followers are engaged in a common enterprise (Burns, 2010, p. 426) and are dependent on one another for its realisation:

*Leadership is a collective. "One-man leadership" is a contradiction in terms. Leaders, in responding to their own motives, appeal to the motive bases of potential followers. As followers respond, a symbiotic relationship develops that binds leader and follower together into a social and political collectivity (ibid, p.452).*

These relationships and inter-dependency are enhanced through transformational, rather than transactional, leadership<sup>7</sup>. Transactional leadership is defined as leading through social exchange (Burns, 2010, p. 425), whereby the leader discusses "what is required ... specifying the conditions and rewards these others will receive if they fulfil those requirements" (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p.4). Transformational leadership involves empowering those who are led such that they realise their own skills and assets, identify with confidence how they can contribute to a process or initiative (Burns 2010, p. 425), and develop their own leadership skills (Bass & Riggio 2006, pp.3-4).

Bass and Riggio (2006) concur that both transactional and transformational leadership have a role to play (pp. 5-12) in effective leadership (see also Taylor *et al.*'s (2011) discussion of the augmentation effect of both approaches to one another; p. 414). However, for a link to outcomes (rather than outputs) and higher goals, then transformational leadership is required (Bass & Riggio 2006, p. 12). Further, it is argued that transformational leadership leads to more robust and self-perpetuating adaptive capacity, due to its relational nature.

Concerns over a sole reliance on the individualised transformational leadership model are discussed by Taylor (2008) in his thorough literature review of leadership in the context of champion-driven change within public sector institutions (pp. 109-120). As a counterbalance, a review of Distributed Leadership theory is then provided, defined as: "a process of influence that occurs in groups and involves more than one leader" (p. 117), thus highlighting the importance of social capital and connections. I return to this point in subsequent sections of my paper.

### ***Leaders' ability to engage***

The second theme to emerge from the reviewed texts focuses on the *ability* to engage and empower others – rather than simply transact with them. This is seen as demonstrative of Emotional Intelligence (EI)<sup>8</sup> and is coupled with deliberate personal development (Bass & Riggio, 2006). EI is viewed by Goleman *et al.* (2004) as "primal leadership" (p. ix) where leaders "prime good feelings" in those they lead. They argue that the primal job of leadership is therefore emotional, where EI domains (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management, pp. 253-256) "adds a crucial set of skills for resonant leadership" (*ibid.*, p. 30). Burns (2010) emphasises these personal qualities, stating that "if they are to be effective ... leaders must be whole persons with fully functioning capacities for thinking and feeling" (Burns, 2010, pp. 448-449).

### ***Leadership is embedded in local social relations***

The third theme highlights that all is not straightforward in leadership, due to the embeddedness of leadership in social relations. Bass and Riggio (2006) in particular write of the "dark side of empowerment" (p. 203) and of "leadership neutralisers" (p. 221) which bring many problems, since:

*empowered followers may develop a set of norms that govern group members' behaviour, and these norms may be inconsistent with, or counter to, the goals of the leader and the organisation. These 'empowered' follower cultures can impede group performance and inhibit critical decision-making processes (p. 203).*

The authors see this as an integral facet of the place-based contingency of leadership. They assert that this is why transactional leadership – efficient in delivering tasks – is far less effective in delivering complex, sustained outcomes. They write in fairly strong language of leaders being "locked into relationships" that are "closely influenced by particular local, parochial, regional and cultural forces" (Burns, 2010, p. 429), being "under a microscope", "scrutinised" and "at risk" (Goleman *et al.*, 2004, p. 163). They argue that a leader's EI attributes raise awareness of, and allow for navigation through, such relationships<sup>9</sup>, since they know that:

*... what may seem to some principled leaders to be parochialism, inertia, perversity, or apathy, may be, in fact, highly-charged leader-follower relationships with their own tradition, structure, logic, and morality (Burns, 2010, p. 429).*

Such relationship-awareness is also seen to lead to risk-averse leadership since "knowing that others are watching with a critical eye provokes leaders to judge their progress too soon, curtail experimentation, and decrease risk-taking..." (Goleman *et al.*, 2004, p. 163)

Nonetheless, the reviewed authors perceived a positive side to knowing and being known, in terms of legitimacy in local place. There is empathy, and shared frames of reference, motivations and values imputed by being embedded in the community where one is a leader (Burns, 2010, p. 422 and pp. 448-449).

### ***Deficits in leadership training***

The fourth theme to emerge from the review is the critique of much leadership training (particularly traditional MBAs), which reviewed authors see as operating in ignorance of relationships, emotional intelligence and local contingency dimensions. The dominant model of training is based on simple mechanics and technicalities rather than incorporating the pressures and forces of relationships (Burns, 2010, p. 419). Their major criticism is the presumption that leadership situations are simple, stable and predictable (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 147):

*The vogue of the 'how to' manual still thrives today... Such manuals may be useful for gaining and exercising leadership in highly predictable and structured situations... But they can be impractical and misleading for training leaders in wider and more complex collectivism... (Burns, 2010, p. 446)*

By focusing on "learning topical content: strategy, marketing, finance, general management, and similar abstractions" (p. 233), Goleman *et al.* (2004) state that this perpetuates a partial and misguided understanding of leadership, and can lead to dysfunctionality and inefficiency in its implementation.

### ***Leadership is learnable***

The fifth, and extremely significant, point of unanimity is the reviewed authors' view that leadership, even transformational leadership, "*is learnable*" (Goleman *et al.*, 2004, p. 88). This process is iterative and non-linear, structured in reference to Boyatzis theory of Self-Directed Learning (1999). Bass and Riggio (2006) distinguish *leader* and *leadership* development. In their experience, leader development is often seen through the lens of core leader competencies: critical evaluation and problem detection; envisioning; the communication skill for conveying a vision; impression management; how and when to empower followers (Conger & Benjamin, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1988). *Leadership* development goes beyond "mere skill training" by examining "how leaders and followers can develop shared leadership capacity" (p. 142 and 151).

Bass and Riggio (2006) have sought to address leadership development through their Full Range Leadership Programme (FRLP) which includes feedback and a personal development programme. They have also trained communities<sup>10</sup> and group-level<sup>11</sup> leadership skills acquisition, citing three broad types of collectives (pp. 164-165)<sup>12</sup>: *Unstructured Groups* (typically laissez-faire and reactive, wait for problems to arise and are hesitant to offer ideas); *Structured Groups* (monitor each other's performance for deviations and rule enforcement, risk-averse) who through training become more cooperative and focused on roles and recognition of accomplishments; and *High-Performance Teams* (team members display individually considerate and intellectually stimulating transformational leadership behaviour towards each other). Following training, such groups:

*show individualised consideration, empathy and alertness to the needs of the other members. They coach, facilitate and teach each other and are willing to*

*engage in continuous improvement... They challenge assumptions and question traditional ways of doing things... (p. 165).*

This brief overview of leadership literature has highlighted themes of relational, embedded leadership, associated requirements and approaches, and the extent to which these can be learned. We now turn to the specific field of rural community development leadership research to explore the themes which emerge in this domain.

## **Leaders and Leadership as Viewed from Rural Community Development Research**

In this section, I explore, firstly, definitions of leadership. I then set out the main themes emerging from this international literature. The contingency of leadership on relationships emerges again, with some additional dimensions relating to how stable those local relationships are, and whether local relationships relate only to development projects or wider social situations. A second theme, not appearing in the wider leadership literature, is that of extra-local relations, beyond the immediate community, and their significance for leadership. Thirdly, leadership training again appears as a point of focus, although whether leadership is learnable is not extensively discussed in this literature.

### ***Defining rural leaders***

Rural community development research tends to define leaders according to their functions and approaches. Sorensen and Epps (1996), writing about leaders in rural Australia and Canada, distinguish leadership from mere management (p. 115), indentifying four functions of leaders: formulate a realistic vision of the community's economic and social development; achieve a high level of community acceptance of, if not active commitment to, the vision; motivate key community business-persons, administrators, and social activists to work systematically and in a coordinated way towards the vision; and lead by example (p. 118). Through further exploration with respondents, they identify eight attributes of leaders in rural settings: Intelligence; Knowledge; Respect; Resources (finance and time); Energy; Originality; Persuasiveness; Synoptic thinking (wider vision) (pp. 118 and 124). Their findings show a range of characteristics, such that:

*leaders appeared to be intelligent, knowledgeable, energetic, and capable of earning respect. Their originality, persuasiveness, and synoptic thinking were less impressive. Many leaders did not have a clear (and realistic) vision of the future that they were attempting to translate into action. Where they did, the focus was rather narrow – on the provision of this or that facility. Synoptic and community-wide strategies scarcely existed, even among the most effective leaders (p. 124).*

Thus, Sorensen and Epps (2006) differentiate between the skills to deliver projects and more strategic planning and thinking. This is echoed in Davies' (2007) research into rural leadership in Australian communities. Her evidence shows leaders in the beginning often focus on projects, are more instrumental or transactional, and then

move on to broader transformational approaches over time (pp. 142 and 143). This phasing of leadership approaches is also reflected in Skerratt (2011) in her investigation of community land trusts, where three phases (pre-acquisition of land, 1-5 years post acquisition, and 5+ years post acquisition) require a different combination of approaches.

Davies (2009) and Skerratt (2011) also identify *community*-level leadership, focusing not only on the skills and attributes of individual leaders over time, but also on those present more widely in rural communities<sup>13</sup>. To this end, Davies (2007) outlines how networks are not only between the leader and 'their' community, but also *amongst* people in the communities of place, since "transformational leadership ... was dependent on the social networks and social capital of the residents" (pp. 152-153). Emery and Flora (2006) also note how, through a process of locally led leadership development over a period, local leaders "saw an emerging outcome of the project in that more community members understand that each person can make a difference and a contribution to positive community change" (p. 26), with an increasing number of people being willing to be involved in local leadership<sup>14</sup>.

Gray and Sinclair (2005) and O'Brien *et al.* (1991 and 1998) define leaders and leadership as socially contingent, existing within and between local and extra-local contexts, with effective leadership requiring navigation between these contexts and worlds. Gray and Sinclair (2005) focus their definition of rural leaders on their ability for resistance, that is, to "assert their community's interests in the context of dependency" (p. 40), and on how adept leaders are at navigating and satisfying the calls of local *and* extra-local relations, often contemporaneously. O'Brien *et al.*'s work (1991, 1998) in Missouri USA, examines leaders' networks with organisations outside their communities and with others in their local communities. Their hypothesis is that the greater and better functioning the leaders' connections, the more viable is the community, and definitions of leaders therefore include characteristics such as: their vertical, extra-community ties (and extent of their formality/informality); their ability to navigate local relations; the way in which they relate to others; the extent of efforts to work together on development challenges (thus developing these relationships) over considerable time-periods; ability to resolve differences; and the creation of formal community development associations.

### ***Leadership is contingent on, and developed within, local relationships***

Davies (2007) explores, in-depth, the leadership styles and approaches in endogenous development and capacity-building in six Australian rural communities. She examines the extent to which a correlation exists between leadership style and community adaptive capacity<sup>15</sup>, through an in-depth review of three projects over time. Davies finds that leadership which follows the transactional approach tends to lead to one-off projects. Approaches that follow a transformational approach result in raised capacity in the wider community for adaptation and change beyond single projects, due to the "formation of new social networks and learning opportunities" (2009, p. 384).

O'Brien (1991) also investigates the ways in which people lead, and particularly how conflicts are overcome (pp. 712-713). Based on evidence from two studies conducted in the same locations six years apart, they observe:

*It is not the characteristics of leaders per se which appear to make the difference, but rather, the way in which leaders relate to one another. These relationships place the more viable communities in an advantageous position vis-à-vis other rural communities, even though their material resource base may not be appreciably better than that found in other places within the same general economic and ecological niche (p. 712).*

Authors note that leaders have to be able to navigate power and social relations within often-divided communities, and are "forced to put their scarce energy into resolving local disputes ..." (Gray & Sinclair (2005, p. 50). O'Brien *et al.* (1991) notes that the ability for repeated conflict resolution becomes, in fact, a key component of community viability. In their investigation of leaders in low and high outcome rural communities, they highlight patterns of issue resolution, suggesting that:

*The more viable communities, over the years, had found ways of creating, maintaining, and reinforcing linkages between leaders, while in the less viable communities there was a history of contentiousness and inability of leaders to work together (p. 713).*

Emery and Flora (2006) cite these qualities within their Community Capitals Framework (CCF) whereby human capital "addresses the leadership's ability to lead across differences, to focus on assets, to be inclusive and participatory, and to act proactively in shaping the future of the community or group" (p. 21). They see this as an essential component in the "spiralling-up" of community assets (pp. 22-23).

A number of authors take analysis of community social relations further, by querying the extent to which hierarchies, social strata (Gray, 2005, p. 237) and associated norms on the ground can change as a result of community development projects (Sorensen & Epps, 1996; Healey *et al.*, 2003; Woods, 2006; Brennan & Lullof, 2007; Mackleworth & Caric, 2010). For example, Healey *et al.* (2003) questions our understanding of the 'pliability' of such community relations<sup>16</sup>:

*... micro-analysis of governance change needs to identify how much of the struggling is merely ripples on the surface of a settled modality of governance, what is shifting the parameters of established discourses and practice relations, and what is unsettling the whole culture of governance relations (p. 67).*

Mackleworth and Caric (2010) found that the 'gatekeepers' involved in sustainable development initiatives in rural Croatia behaved according to local accepted power structures that pre-dated sustainable development projects. Such projects were seen as a threat to the status quo of established relationships and leadership, particularly in more isolated communities (pp. 476-477). Sorensen and Epps (1996) highlighted how the "culture of rural Australia" meant that people were bound by "fairly rigid formalities" relating to traditions of seniority, respect, dominance of landed interests, suspicion of outsiders, and "divisions between town and bush" (p. 124), with result

that: "leaders' activities should not breach conventional behaviour ..." (p. 124). Emery and Flora (2006) also point to the importance of changes in the "traditional leadership structure and actors", without which "the community could not have mobilized citizens to support changes" (p. 25).

These observations resonate with Cleaver's (2001, 2004) research into the "non-project lives" of people in rural communities<sup>17</sup>, which directly inform how hierarchies are collectively operationalised in community settings. Cleaver observes that such day-to-day community life can lead to many outlets for leadership and innovation, that is, not simply through a 'recognised' (project) leader (p. 275). This is a further extension of embeddedness – that is, leadership is not only exercised in relation to projects, but in the many, varied, single and repeated events in a community's life (Cleaver, 2004; Brennan & Lullof, 2007, p. 59), in which not all community interactions are viewed as necessarily productive or positive (in a developmental sense) and should not necessarily expected to be so<sup>18 19 20</sup>.

Such dynamics are likely to be 'magnified' in smaller, remoter rural communities. As Mackleworth and Caric (2010) observe from their research in Croatia: "In geographically isolated island communities, the influence of dominant and charismatic leaders may be more significant than in less marginal communities" (p. 467). Further, small community numbers can lead to less dominance by one leader (for good or ill), due to the need for those who live in the community to perform a range of leadership roles (Argent, 2008, p. 247). There is a situational imperative due to population sparsity. Argent (2008) observes that "declining population densities can 'open up' social space for those perhaps less forthright and overtly confident individuals to assume important and more public roles" (p. 259).

### ***Leadership is contingent on extra-local relationships***

The significance of *extra-local* connections for community adaptation and survival is developed by a number of authors. Sorensen and Epps (1996) observe that "some of the region's most effective leaders appear to have strong extra-regional connections" (p. 123), although geographical remoteness can and does impact on the feasibility of such connections, due to the "relative lack of external contacts" (ibid, p. 124). How leaders navigate and manage extra-local networks alongside local networks and their associated priorities, mindsets, drivers and perceptions, is seen as a key dimension of rural community leadership. As Gray and Sinclair (2005) observe:

*Leaders are at the intersection of the forces of dependency, globalisation and local culture... They can suffer under conflicting forces as they become the bearers of change (p. 38 and p. 50).*

O'Brien *et al.* (1998) describe extra-local connections as being one of two components of resource mobilisation<sup>21</sup> (p. 109). Such connections serve to gain access to resources outside the community such as government programmes (State and Federal), potential employers, funding sources, and information. O'Brien *et al.* highlight how *repeated* efforts at development and extra-local networking increase the viability of rural communities over time by directly increasing the stock of vertical, linking social

capital<sup>22</sup>. O'Brien (1991) sound a note of caution in relation to their findings, since they do not, conclusively, show the *direction* of causality, that is: does greater community viability lead to greater working together, networking, co-production, or do leaders' greater social networks lead to greater community viability? In spite of these reservations they are able to conclude that communities' viability is "associated with the extent to which their leaders have ties to persons or organisations outside of their community" (1991, p. 711).

Their findings are echoed in Emery and Flora's (2006) analysis of how particular rural communities in Nebraska enhanced their own situation through extra-local networks:

*They also had to mobilize bridging social capital to link themselves to technical assistance and to those outside the community willing to invest in the community's future... relationships that create access to resources, particularly financial resources and political influence, play a critical role in sustaining the effort (p. 31).*

Dibden and Cocklin (2003) also highlight the significance of "extra-local and vertical links to government and non-government agents at State level" to the dominant leaders in the community, and how these, in fact, can marginalise those in the community without these links, and weaken their decision-making legitimacy (p. 195).

### ***Leadership training***

Leadership training *per se* is cited by Davies (2007 and 2009), Emery and Flora (2006), and Dibden and Cheshire (2005), although other authors discuss the less specific practice of community capacity-building (Shortall, 2004, 2008; Skerratt 2010a, 2011). Davies (2009) highlights leadership training in the context of the neo-liberal trajectory of development policy, whereby investment in community leaders is required in order to deliver development by and through community<sup>23</sup>. Davies concludes that "these programmes have had a spatially variable and mostly limited impact on the socio-economic viability of rural communities" (2007, p. 151) because of their: "tightly structured focus on developing the skills of the individual, with little genuine consideration to the context in which leadership is based" (ibid, p. 151). Davies (2009) concludes that rural leadership programmes are designed in the mode of transactional leadership (p. 384), and that greater attention should be given to transformational leadership components since these enhance the adaptive capacity of rural communities (p. 388) rather than simply their project proficiency. This is a point reflected in wider rural community resilience literature, most notably Magis (2010) and Hegney *et al.*, (2008). However, on whether such leadership can actually be taught, Davies (2007) remains sceptical, arguing that while simpler traits can be orchestrated, "other influential factors such as the social networks and resources of 'followers' cannot be" (p. 153). Emery and Flora (2006), however, specify that effective leadership training was, in their case-study exploration of the HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) Programme in rural Nebraska, "explicitly tied to community capacity development rather than focused on developing the human capital of individuals" (p. 28). Thus, the focus on individual or community in leadership training

also appears significant. Dibden and Cheshire (2005) raise the further point of the need to train 'latent' and potential leaders, including women, rather than only those who might be naturally self-selecting (pp. 222-223).

## Synthesis

I began my paper by reviewing key texts in leadership and leadership development. I then reviewed the wider rural community development literature, with a particular focus on those texts that explore the nature of rural leadership. There are some themes that resonate across both sets of literature, and some distinct differences. Table 1 provides a summary of where themes are evident in one or both literature domains.

As can be seen, both sets of literature consistently define leadership in terms of its social embeddedness and complexities, rather than focusing only on strategic thinking, management competencies and task delivery (critical though these are). These dimensions are evidenced in other rural research texts<sup>24</sup>. Specific to the *rural* leadership literature, however, is the significance of vertical, extra-local networking, variously termed bridging social capital or political capital (Flora *et al.*, n.d.). This is seen to be integral to high-outcome communities and is echoed in wider rural literature<sup>25</sup>.

Secondly, Emotional Intelligence, and Transactional and Transformational approaches, are investigated in the leadership literature. However, with one exception (Davies 2007, 2009), these concepts do not appear as distinct fields of inquiry in rural leadership literature, although the ways that people lead and associated outcomes are explored (O'Brien *et al.*, 1991, 1998). Interestingly, the leadership literature is fairly explicit about a persistent 'darker side' of social embeddedness, whereas reference to struggles, durable hierarchies, and the public nature of leadership, have not been *systematically* explored in the rural leadership literature. They are explored on a case-study basis, but the range of community relations – from light to dark – is not overtly or widely developed.

Thirdly, there is agreement across both domains (leadership and rural leadership) that both individual and collective leadership can be identified and supported. There is also agreement that the leader as individual, socially isolated and operating in abstraction, is not tenable. The leadership literature describes leader-follower relations, and collective or group leadership. Rural leadership literature cites individuals as leaders, and community-as-leaders. The language of "follower" is not readily used in the rural leadership literature, perhaps due to its potential pejorative connotation<sup>26</sup>.

Finally, the reviewed leadership literature points to aspects of leaders and leadership that are observable across place, and in many different settings. The texts also have a central tenet that "leadership is learnable" (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Rural leadership literature, however, tends to focus on the particular, the significance of context, and leadership as contingent on place, people and time. Indeed, as Davies states: "... leadership has been widely recognised within research as being both

**Table 1: Summary of "Leadership" in Wider and Rural Literatures, with Consequent Key Areas for Further Focus**

Themes from Leadership Literature	Themes from rural community leadership literature	Consequent key areas for future focus
<b>Definitions</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership as processes</li> <li>• Leadership as relationship-based</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined by function and tasks, and whether operational or strategic.</li> <li>• One paper only: defined according to approaches (transactional or transformational)</li> <li>• Socially contingent</li> <li>• Importance of connections</li> </ul>	-
<b>Characteristics</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centrality of relationships</li> <li>• Transformational more effective than transactional for engagement and outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Combination of leaders and followers; connections</li> </ul>	-
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to engage and empower others (Emotional Intelligence)</li> </ul>	-	Emotional Intelligence is established as integral to effective leadership approaches and outcomes. <b>Focus:</b> understanding this in rural context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Leader as individual" is not functionally possible because leader is integrated into place and relations.</li> <li>• Embedded, place-based, contingent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader not only individual, but part of community;</li> <li>• Significance of local relations amongst/within communities, not just between leader and community;</li> <li>• Solidity or pliability of local relations?</li> </ul>	-
-	Significance of non-project lives and relationships of people in communities	The importance of life beyond the frame of projects and project leadership is appreciated in much rural communities' analysis. <b>Focus:</b> its relevance for organisational or other project/development contexts
"Darker", challenging sides of embeddedness	-	Explicitly and repeatedly examined in wider leadership literature. Only one case study in rural community leadership literature. <b>Focus:</b> systematic analyses to assess significance for on-the-ground rural leadership experiences
-	Critical importance of extra-local relations to leaders' effectiveness	Rural community leadership analysis highlights connections beyond place as being critical to enhanced sustainability and/or resilience of rural communities. <b>Focus:</b> significance of extra-local in range of wider leadership contexts
<b>Enhancing leadership capacity</b>		
Leader and leadership training: critique of dominant mechanistic approaches	Leadership training: critique of dominant focus on tasks not on relationships	-
Leadership is learnable, at individual and community levels	-	In rural community leadership literature, leadership remains intrinsic and particular; management is considered learnable, but not leadership. This is fundamental difference between the two literatures. <b>Focus:</b> explore implications especially in remote areas
<b>Units of analysis and reflection</b>		
Generic, transferable observations that also take account of (and train for) context	Case study based; focus solely on leadership in specific places, contingent on particulars of context (time, people, place etc)	Transferable patterns versus context-dependent/unique to place. <b>Focus:</b> potential for exchange of learning, especially in/for/with remote rural areas.

contextually derived and bounded ..." (Davies, 2007, p. 152). So, we see a contrast between patterns that are observable across settings, and the contextualised, embedded leadership roles, behaviours and outcomes. This then sets up a paradox of sorts: rural leadership is embedded and contingent (as seen in the reviewed rural leadership literature), yet general rules and patterns have been identified which appear, at one and the same time, to transcend context yet take deep account of it (the reviewed leadership literature).

## **Implications for Rural Community Leadership Research and Practice: Areas of Future Focus**

The critical review of both literature domains points to areas that require additional investigation (see Table 1). These are now briefly explored.

Firstly, there is scope for systematic investigation of Emotional Intelligence and Transactional/Transformational leadership styles within a rural context. These fields are extremely well-developed in the leadership literature, and further investigation of their robustness in rural settings would give greater insights into effective leadership for community resilience.

Secondly, significance of non-project lives is evidenced in the rural community development leadership literature but appears relatively absent from the wider leadership analyses reviewed in this paper<sup>27</sup>. This could be because leadership is analysed 'in situ' in rural research, whereas wider leadership research is predominantly situated within organisational (work) contexts. However, it would be interesting to explore the subtleties of organisational, and extra-organisational, drivers on leadership behaviour, and whether the findings echo those of rural-based research.

Thirdly, almost unique to the wider leadership literature is the explicit stating and exploration of the "darker" sides of social embeddedness. Only in three cases of the reviewed literature (Cleaver, 2004; Mackleworth & Caric, 2010; Skerratt, 2011) does this emerge in relation to leadership. This would suggest a need for rural community leadership research to learn from the substantial understanding within wider leadership research, and to explore the degree to which such findings may have significance in rural community contexts.

Fourthly, evidence from reviewed rural leadership literature identifies the critical nature of extra-local links. Greater systematic understanding is required of their developmental significance, particularly pertinent for remote locations, where such links may be harder to initiate and maintain, but are evidently critical (O'Brien *et al.*, 1991 and 1998; Skerratt, 2011). The significance of extra-local links has been recognised formally since 1973, with the publication of Granovetter's strength of weak ties (SWT). Granovetter emphasises the importance of distinguishing between weak ties and *bridging* weak ties (1973, p. 1370) when exploring the network of Ego (individual level). Bridging weak ties can provide access to information and resources "beyond those available in their own social circle" (1983, p. 209) and "serve crucial ties in linking otherwise unconnected segments of a network" (1983, p. 217) – segments existing at local and extra-local levels. Granovetter's research did not focus specifically on the significance of extra-local ties for efficacy of *leadership*, however, and this is therefore an area for further exploration.

Fifthly, the evidence that leadership is *learnable* is fundamental. The near-absence of this discourse from the rural leadership literature represents a foundational issue and challenge, both for theory and for practice. I propose that there is a need to explore the applicability of leadership training (as reviewed above) in and with rural communities of place, rather than maintaining a belief only in the serendipity of local

leadership capacity and skills. I suggest that this is particularly pertinent in remoter rural communities (Argent, 2008), where reliance on the "champion" and "usual suspects" is more fragile and potentially unsustainable (O'Toole & Burdess, 2004, p. 442; Sorensen & Epps, 1996, pp. 121-123; Tonts, 2005, p. 206).

Finally, the contrast between the two literatures, of generalisable versus contextually-*bounded* leadership, is at the heart of these analyses, and, I would argue, has significant implications for leadership in remote rural communities. If rural community leadership continues to be researched, understood and described *only* as place-specific, people-specific and non-transferable, then remoter rural communities will continue on the current trajectory of "hot spots" and "not spots" (Skerratt, 2010b) of activity and resilience. We will continue to see a Darwinian outcome of development, where those with local capacity and extra-local resources survive and thrive. In contrast, those locations where such resources do not exist continue in stasis<sup>28</sup>. Thus, in addition to intellectual rigour as a driver to enhance both domains of leadership research, I would suggest that such cross-domain research is integral to a wider process of moving beyond the "mystique" of rural community leadership into an understanding that is: more systematic; based on an increasing evidence-base; and likely to lead to more robust outcomes in and for remote and rural communities.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Flora *et al.* (2004) define capital as "any type of resource capable of producing additional resources" (p. 165).
- <sup>2</sup> Burns is often referred to as the "father" of transformational leadership research.
- <sup>3</sup> See also Taylor (2008) who, in citing Bass' work, states that "Transformational leadership has been the dominant theory in leadership research since the 1980s" (p. 116).
- <sup>4</sup> See Taylor's (2008) extensive literature review of leadership theories in organisational settings.
- <sup>5</sup> The process dimension is also echoed by Russon and Reinelt (2004) in their examination of 55 leadership development programmes.
- <sup>6</sup> Burns (2010, pp. 9-30, 422-444) presents a thorough discussion of power and moral aspects of leadership, providing important context for the sometimes relatively neutral writings of Goleman (2004). He writes of "authentic" (moral) and "inauthentic" (amoral) transformational leadership. Bass and Riggio (2006) write of 'pseudotransformational' leaders who "may exhibit many elements of transformational leadership... but have personal, exploitative, and self-aggrandizing motives" (pp. 5, 12-16).
- <sup>7</sup> Also termed Participative (transformational) and Directive (transactional) leadership.
- <sup>8</sup> Being intelligent about emotions (Goleman, 2004, p. ix)
- <sup>9</sup> See also Taylor's (2011) review of Complexity Leadership Theory (p. 415) which identifies the need to manage tensions between colleagues at times of change within their organisations.
- <sup>10</sup> This focus echoes to some extent the research of Militello and Benham (2010) on collective leadership: "a dynamic process that engages a diverse and intergenerational group of people who learn together... Leadership cannot be narrowly defined as the purview of individuals" (p. 3), since it requires "building trusted relationships and alliances, as well as managing tasks to achieve goals... it is a lifelong commitment..." (p. 12).
- <sup>11</sup> See also Taylor's (2011) discussion of the distributed leadership model, which "conceptualises leadership as a process of influence that occurs within groups and involves more than one leader, and is one of several forms of collective leadership" (p. 414).
- <sup>12</sup> Taylor (2011) observed the broad shift from 'focused' (individualistic) through to 'distributed' (group-based) leadership, as the process moved from Initiation through Endorsement to Implementation (p. 428).
- <sup>13</sup> See O'Toole and Burdess (2004) on legitimacy and sustainability of local development groups in Australia.
- <sup>14</sup> See also Dibden and Cocklin (2003), who highlight the development of human and social capital (including trust) through community fund-raising events over time (p. 192).
- <sup>15</sup> That is, broader capitals (Flora, n.d.) and skills required for a trajectory of ongoing adaptation and growth, rather than simply operational project delivery.