Authority, Power and Distributed Leadership

Professor Philip A. Woods, University of Hertfordshire, UK

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Abstract: A much greater understanding is needed of power in the practice of distributed leadership. This article explores how the concept of social authority might be helpful in doing this. It suggests that the practice of distributed leadership is characterised by multiple authorities which are constructed in the interactions between people. Rather than there being a uniform hierarchy (relatively flat or otherwise) of formal authority, organisational members may be 'high' in some authorities, 'low' in others, and people's positioning in relation to these authorities is dynamic and changeable. The article maps different forms of authorities, provides illustrations from educational institutions, and concludes with implications for educational leadership. A key conclusion is that everyone is involved in the ongoing production of authorities by contributing to who is accepted as or excluded from exercising authority and leadership.

One of the critiques of distributed leadership (DL) is that, although it sounds as if it may be more fair, even democratic, in practice this is not necessarily the case. Many accounts and investigations of DL lack a critical, questioning approach to power. Lumby (2013: 583) concludes that the 'central issue of power surfaces only superficially, if at all, in much of the literature', yet we should not underestimate the power of DL to 'enact inequality' through the unthinking acceptance - as leadership is distributed - of prevailing assumptions, established power differences and the 'banal' everyday marginalisation of certain voices (p592). Research that I have been involved in suggests that the unequal distribution of 'capitals' - such as social and professional capitals - is one important way of understanding how some are positioned less well to participate and exercise influence in organisations where efforts are made to distribute leadership (Woods and Roberts 2016: 152).

A much greater understanding of power and the practice of DL is needed. In this article I explore how the concept of social authority might be helpful in doing this, drawing on some of the ideas generated by the Authority Research Network[1] and a critical understanding of Weber's typology of authority. The article suggests that the greater the extent of leadership distribution, the more it makes sense to view the organisation as being characterised by a social authority in perpetual construction. Such a social authority is formed by the interplay of multiple negotiated and contending 'tributary' authorities arising from the interactions of groups and individuals. The article begins with a brief reflection on authority and types of power. It then explains the idea of social authority, maps different forms of tributary authorities, provides illustrations from educational institutions and concludes with implications for educational leadership.

Authority and power

One view of authority is to see it as a legitimation of top-down control. This is predicated on a certain view of power. Weber's (1978 : 213) emphasis on understanding the different ways of legitimising 'subjection to authority' is framed within a prime concern to understand domination and its reliance on 'voluntary compliance' and 'an interest (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience' (p212). Weber's approach to legitimacy and authority, however, is too narrowly focused on authority as a dominating relationship: domination is only one way of achieving co-ordination amongst people (Woods 2003). I would argue that beginning with the question of co-ordination leads to a more comprehensive understanding of power and the sources of authority. It allows for power to be understood in different ways - as top-down, power over others; as an emergent property, produced through social interactions, struggles and the effects of elements that feature in everyday activities such as texts, talk and the environments we inhabit, highlighted in work such as Ball (2006a: 47); and as power-with, that is shared and co-operative power 'through and with others' (Blackmore 1999: 161).

From this viewpoint, authority is not just the legitimation of top-down control, but is capable of emerging in diverse ways from different organisational perspectives and positions. Its meanings may be interpreted, contested and reframed.

Social authority

Social authority is the *production* of authorities that occurs in modern times where there is no transcendent source of authority and stable meanings, such as a divine being, sacred text or a single powerful political figure. In the field of authority research, Kirwan (2013) argues that authority as a production (i.e. social authority) is a response to the fragmentation of community. The context is the loss of overriding authority, as highlighted in the writings of Arendt and others (Blencowe 2013, Kirwan 2013). The idea of social authority emphasises the continual creation of legitimised power through practice and social interactions.

For the purpose of this article, I view social authority as the constellation of multiple, tributary authorities that emerges from the interplay of complementary and contested legitimations of power within an organisation. Social authority emerges from and shapes the kind and degree of co-ordination actors within the organisation achieve in their practice and decision-making. As the negotiated product of ongoing interactions and the interplay of multiple authorities (forms of legitimised power), it is continually made and re-made over time.

I suggest that this idea of ongoing production of authority is especially relevant to organisations that are characterised by more blurred and open forms of leadership, where authority to take and lead initiatives is dispersed. The essential features of social authority - reconfiguring authority 'as the contingent production of contestations and negotiations' and the need in times of uncertainty to seek 'moments of authority' (p83-84) - seem to resonate with the challenges of leadership that moves away from the traditional certainties of top-down principles of command and control.

The nature of the produced social authority will tend to differ between organisational settings, with different degrees of influence being accorded, for example, to overt power-over or power-with. Although there may be an absence of a simple, transcendent authority that overarches all others, this does not mean that there are not dominating authorities or attempts to dominate. Especially significant in contemporary times are technical-rational authority and the rise of performative forms of governance (Murray 2012, Woods 2010). It will help to put these in context by considering the different kinds of authority that can be at play in an organisation, an issue to which I turn next.

Forms of authority

This section draws on earlier work on legitimacies of co-ordination (Woods 2003) and analyses of social authority (Blencowe et al 2013). The aim is to discuss and set out the variety of forms that tributary authorities in an organisation may take.

Building on Weber's classic, three types of authority, and opening the typology beyond the focus on domination, I have argued that there are five types (which I termed legitimacies of co-ordination) (Woods 2003). These are discussed in turn. Each of them has its sub-forms, examples of which are given.

Rational authority. The most familiar form of rational authority is the reliance on a hierarchical order of rules and rights to direct and oversee organisational activities and purposes (legal-rational authority). Rational authority can also be based in expertise that embodies the rational principles of science and technology (technical-rational authority). The latter has a logic that uses systematic and instrumental, means-end approaches that are able to command respect through a claimed power to understand the world in ways superior to other, traditional ways. Professional expertise benefits from claims to knowledge through rational principles, though other forms of professional authority are possible alongside this, such as communal authority (discussed below) earned through deep and caring relationships (Duncan-Andrade 2009: 10).

Communal authority. The emphasis here is on the powerful effect of close ties embedded in social relationships. It includes tradition and charisma (two of Weber's types of authority). The bonds of belonging and respect create a particular impetus to accept certain requirements or sources of advice and direction as legitimate. Examples of such sources are a community's norms and values, its traditions, fellow members of the group (such as a profession which has a bond of shared identity), or the 'great leader'. According to the nature of these sources, power-over or power-with may be predominant.

Exchange. This refers to governance through associative relationships and rational agreement where the authority arises from the acceptance of the rules and norms of exchange. Exchange has, according to Weber (1978 [1956]: 41), its theoretically most straightforward expression in the form of economic markets. Exchange may also be seen as a feature of networks which constitute a form of governance. Blencowe (2013: 21) observes that markets 'bear immense authority' because they are seen in the liberal political economy as a way of testing businesses and policies against what are perceived as the objective forces of life. Weber (1978 [1956]: 213-214) takes pains to distinguish between economic forces that are accorded validity (and hence authority) and economic power which is the exercise of brute force (e.g. where a monopoly can dictate the terms of contracts). Exchange, like other forms of authority and legitimation, may be characterised by different forms of power. For example, markets may act in ways that result in economic forces being experienced as a power-over the self and others. The spread of market principles into everyday working relationships, as in many public services, through policy discourses and building competitive incentives into the structures of public services, exemplifies power as an emergent property affecting people's identities (Ball 2006b). But exchange may also take alternative forms - such as co-operative organisations and networks (Woodin 2015) - that put power-with to the fore.

Democratic legitimation. This is where decisions and actions gain their legitimacy through some kind of participation, dialogue, consent and agreed rights to freedom. Democratic authority may

take numerous forms. It may be minimalist, enabling involvement in narrow terms, such as occasional voting for representatives or intermittent processes of consultation. The liberal minimalist model of democracy confines people to choosing amongst competing elites for who best represents their material interests (Dryzek 2004: 148-150). Other models aspire to more elevating ideas of human potential. One of the most influential developments has been the notion of deliberative democracy. In this, the prime purpose of the democratic process is to enable dialogue and interaction to take place in good faith between people, develop greater mutual understanding and overcome the entrenched ideas and interests that hinder ways of making decisions and acting in co-operation with each other (Kahane et al 2010). I have framed my work on leadership and democracy through a notion of holistic democracy. In this model, central to democratic practice is the opportunity for people to grow as whole people and to participate in ways that are based on principles of mutual respect, critical dialogue and independent thinking and a sense of belonging in their community or organisation (Woods 2005, 2011; Woods and Woods 2013). It incorporates the ideas of deliberative and developmental democracy, reflecting people's capacity to nurture their 'innate potential excellence' (Norton, 1996: 62) through self-development, collaborative learning and holistic growth.

Interior authority. The idea of interior authority directs attention to the various possibilities for authority to be grounded in the person. It is a particularly important dimension of authority in contemporary times because of the greater individualism that has come to characterise governance, and so more space is devoted to it here. I suggested it as a type of legitimacy (Woods 2003) in part because of the concern with how the self in organisations was being shaped by changing forms of governance. Critical studies show how governance reforms can act to re-form people's identities - as competitive, enterprising agents, for example - so that they exercise control over their selves and others (Rose 1999). It is a form of emergent power which has the effect of implanting authority in the person, but within a re-socialised identity. It is a moot question - though by no means a new one - whether the self is entirely shaped by external conditions or exercises some degree of autonomy. This was another reason to suggest interior authority, so as to ask

within the typology of legitimacy: To what extent is there *authoring* by individuals, as distinct from their internalising, transmitting and enacting given social norms, ideas and modes of behaviour (Woods 2003)? Blencowe (2013: 13) refers to authority as a way of deferring responsibility to something else, rather than exercising will or reason. My view, however, is that the capability to examine legitimacy claims critically and decide which should command respect is a form of authority. Interior authority, then, is not necessarily a determined outcome of external forces. I think it is helpful, for example, to distinguish between performative autonomy (heavily shaped by market-based and performative philosophies of governance) and democratic autonomy (critical, independent thinking as a rounded person)[2].

I would emphasise two points on interior authority since putting it forward over a decade ago. Firstly, the interior experience is not only inward-focused. The individual is not a separate entity from social relationships, but is interconnected in a dialectical relationship with social structures and relationships (Archer 2003); not an 'isolated knot' in the web of relationships, but a person who constitutes the fabric woven around the knot which 'calls forth' family, friends, ancestors, successors (Dallmayer 2016: 103-4, drawing on the ideas of Panikkar). To refer to areas internal and external to the person is to use convenient markers rather than binary concepts. Interior authority is a personal engagement with the inward and the outward, and the development of interior authority is a social process.

Secondly, following from the first point, the interior experience is inherently connected to the person's lived experience of the outward. It is not just about internal reasonings, feelings and so on, but is impacted by practical interactions with others, with the physical environment, and so on. Blencowe's (2013: 13) highlighting of a kind of experiential authority is therefore relevant to interior authority. She highlights, amongst other forms of authority, authoritative understandings by those 'who have encountered the edges of life - moved close to death, created new lives' (p21). Dawney (2013: 30) examines a form of experiential knowledge that 'can and does claim legitimacy in the public sphere, and … has led to the emergence of figures of "experiential authority": figures who

have undergone particular life-changing experiences and are positioned as experts through these experiences'. I see experiential authority as existing too in more ordinary, everyday forms: for example, where experience of dealing with educational problems in a particular community lends to the person an acknowledged authoritative character about that community. This is what I term lived-experience authority, which becomes part of the person's interior authority - the sense of who they are and who they are seen as being. This does not necessarily mean that the lived experience is valid or better than other forms of authority. It may be; it is also true that those with long practical experience may give credence to practices that are honoured more by their durability than their value or effectiveness.

Illustrations of authority and distributed leadership in educational organisations

Table 1 shows the tributary authorities and the examples of sub-forms discussed above. This gives an idea of the breadth and range of forms of authority that are potentially part of the forging of social authority.

Table 1: Authorities

Tributary authorities	examples of sub-forms		
rational authority	bureaucratic (legal-rational)	scientific/technical (technical-rational)	professional expertise
communal authority	traditional	charismatic	professional identity
exchange	market	network	co-operative
democratic legitimation	minimalist	deliberative	holistic
interior authority	performative autonomy	democratic autonomy	lived-experience

Organisational members may project and be accorded various *individual configurations of authority* which are shaped by personal factors and the person's interaction and relationships. The most recognisable or readily acknowledged authority in most organisations is the formal hierarchical

authority vested in the head of the organisation and other senior leaders, a form of rational authority. Legal-rational authority provides a formal legitimacy for the hierarchy of institutional roles and associated rights and powers within organisations. A senior leader may also benefit from other kinds of authority, such as charismatic presence, a recognised professional expertise, or the legitimation that can arise from lived experience. But so too may others outside the senior positions: in educational institutions, these include students, teachers and support staff, as well as community members and parents.

Through personal configurations and ongoing interactions a dynamic *organisational configuration of authorities* is forged - that is, the organisation's social authority. To illustrate what dynamic organisational configurations may look like, an insight is given into two schools with distributed types of leadership culture, drawing from published accounts. I indicate in these brief summaries where I believe the authorities in Table 1 can be seen.

The first is the account of a school developing a collegial and co-operative culture, given by its vice principal (Jones 2015). Successful co-operative activity in its school improvement groups (SIGs) is evident (p81), benefiting from co-operative legitimacy. The school mobilises experience (lived-experience authority) to support newer members of the SIGs, where more experienced teachers mentor less experienced colleagues (p80). Over time shifts in relative authority are seen to occur, as the mentees develop and start to challenge some of the ideas of the more experienced, leading to tensions and sometimes 'genuinely-heated arguments between colleagues' (p82). Willingness amongst teachers to make decisions and take risks (to exercise the democratic autonomy of interior authority) can be stalled, however, by a felt need to seek directions from the senior leadership (i.e. to rely on bureaucratic authority) and by external pressures (p81). A peer appraisal system found difficulties in maintaining confidence as some preferred returning to 'a hierarchical system where they could show their progress to someone who "mattered" ' (p82). Individuals could be seen to accumulate bureaucratic authority through being adept at sticking to procedural rules

and meeting deadlines, though Jones notes that this is not necessarily an indicator of contributing to transformational change (p83).

The feeling of belonging in groups - the traditional, communal authority identified by the idea of bonding (Field 2008: 36) - could be exclusionary as well as inclusive: some could 'find it difficult to "break in" to existing partnerships and sub-groups… [or feel] "excluded" ', with some even rejecting a group 'claiming that it was an elite team' (Jones 2015: 81). The latter situation suggests that an amalgam of professional, technical and perhaps scientific authorities, founded in the authority of lived-experience, was built up in some teachers over time and led to their being set apart. Through this, a hierarchy of experiential and professional authority is produced. Sometimes 'more experienced members could easily undermine the effort and initiatives of the less experienced who were not always valued unless supported by more senior participants' (p81). In contrast, as noted above, it can be seen that such hierarchies may be disrupted. This occurs as the balance of claimed authority shifts through the accumulation of lived-experience and a greater sense of interior authority and democratic autonomy amongst those who began as less experienced.

This is by no means an exhaustive analysis of this school's social authority and its ongoing production. I would suggest, however, that it shows the social authority produced in this school as one in which co-operative legitimacy is privileged and promoted, and lived-experience and mutual enhancement of professional authority encouraged. Its growing pains and tensions include the appearance and challenging of micro-level experiential and professional hierarchies, as well as a persistence amongst some of the attraction of bureaucratic authority.

The second account is a case study of teacher leadership in a school (Scribner and Bradley-Levine 2010). The researchers found a 'logic that afforded some teachers more authority than others' (p505). The administrative experience of one teacher in a previous setting was seen as giving him a certain legitimacy in dealing with disciplinary issues with students. That prior role was seen as one where he was a 'pseudo-boss' as one teacher put it, and this lent him a degree of

authority in the new teacher leadership culture (p505). Here we can see both experiential and a bureaucratic authority, borrowed from a previous setting, leading to a particular influence amongst teachers. That teacher was seen, for example, redirecting staff conversations in ways that reinforced the reform model that the school was participating in. Another teacher was seen as a commended, highly awarded teacher and hence as 'the lead teacher' (p506): this augmented professional authority gave him legitimacy to exercise influence in terms of the development of new curriculum content. Teachers' subject knowledge was viewed by teachers as an important factor in the priority and respect they were given in co-developing new courses (p507-8). In each project of course development, the teacher possessing the subject knowledge relevant to that course exercised priority over the colleague who had 'process' expertise (in new technology to enhance student engagement). So each project might be said to have its own professional authority hierarchy. A gender-based difference in authority was also noted. The male gender was perceived to have an advantage in disciplinary matters with students. As one female teacher explained: 'The guys will run the office if [the principal] is out… Absolutely nobody disagrees. In fact, we've even talked about it saying, "Thank God that we have three strong male figures in the school"… It's more difficult for women to get respect from boys' (p510). This exemplifies how authority is a social product that is accorded through shared practice. It also illustrates how ideas of co-leadership can be interceded by a particular form of communal authority - in this case, deeply held cultural assumptions concerning gender relationships that these teachers perceived as characteristic of the community in which the school was set and of family life. The female teachers were constructed and described as giving support (to the technology-based reform), rather than as leaders (p511-2).

Although again not a comprehensive account, the case study offers an insight into the social authority produced by the dynamics of this school. It is one where the group of male teachers is accorded greater legitimacy as influencers and (non-positional) power holders, and this is generated through the amalgam of greater professional authority and the cultural authority accorded to males in discipline and control.

These examples illustrate that configurations of authority are contingent and not settled. To a great degree social authority is emergent and not amenable to top-down control. This does not mean that social authority is completely indeterminate. The case of the co-operative school shows how clear and agreed principles (in that case, co-operative ones) can play an important role in shaping what happens.

It is also evident that social authority and the emergence of configurations of tributary authorities are not simply the product of cognitive or intellectual perspectives, debates and agreements. Emotions, personal experience and the aesthetic sense of what creates good or bad feelings in relation to the sources of authority play a strong part. They are inherent, defining features of communal authority, for example. Arguably, democratic authority and leadership are embedded in an aesthetic rationality in which mutual affirmation, an intrinsic concern for others and a sense of deep trust characterise the ideal-type of everyday action[3]. But even legal-rational authority does not achieve approval simply through explaining the value or importance of the assignment of defined posts in a hierarchical order. It may be underpinned by feelings of security and tradition, for example. For Brigstocke (2013: 108), 'Authority works by establishing specific affective bonds between authorities and those who obey them. In order to understand how authority works as a technique of power, then, it is necessary to study the ways in which these affective relations are secured'.

Concluding Remarks

This article began with the observation that a much greater understanding of power and the practice of DL is needed. The idea of a social authority that is in perpetual production is one way of beginning to appreciate and analyse the complexities of power and how it is legitimated when attempts are made to make leadership more distributed. There are fundamental implications for anyone interested in DL.

Firstly, to understand how DL is played out in different settings, it is necessary to come to grips with the configuration of complementary and competing authorities that characterise those settings. Understanding the types and forms of authority is essential. Setting them out systematically, as this article has sought to do, gives an indication of the range of possibilities.

Secondly, aspiring to the goal of fair and inclusive DL does not mean requiring that all equally share authority. Hierarchies may emerge, based on different forms of authority. Not all organisational members will or should be accorded equality in each form of authority. To evaluate the distribution of authorities, several issues are pertinent. For example, one is the ethical judgement made of the basis for an authority. Authority that reflects professional expertise may be judged as admissible, whereas a variety of other bases for distinguishing authority (gender, age, familial relationship with students, and so on) may be contested and raise issues for consideration and debate. Some may be unfairly excluded from being accorded or sharing fully in certain forms of authority. An example might be teachers whose professional expertise is recognised but judged to be less relevant or worthy than others, such as the 'process' expertise of teachers in the second school account above.

Thirdly, following from the last point, awareness of the complexities of social authority helps in addressing the question of power and DL critically. It leads to questions such as: What authorities predominate? How and where is authority constructed and generated, and by whom? What forms of authority are considered ethically justifiable? It puts on the agenda alternative forms of authority, such as democratic authority and the interior authority of democratic autonomy, alongside familiar forms of rational and communal authority. It poses the question of where and whether the authority of exchange - especially the authority of market-type relations - does and should fit into an organisation's social authority.

The final implication is that everyone is involved in the ongoing production of authorities. Even if some are predominantly involved through reacting or deferring to others - and hence through acceding or withholding consent to authority - all are engaged in some way in determining who is included in or excluded from exercising authority and leadership.

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[1] http://www.authorityresearch.net

[2] These are ideas are set out in an unpublished working paper - Woods, P. A., The Sociality Grounding Democratic Leadership: Holarchic aesthetic rationality, 2015 - which is developing ideas first shared in Woods, P. A., The Struggle for the Soul of Leadership in Future Organisations: Aesthetic rationality and holistic well-being, a paper presented at the Focal Meeting of the World Educational Research Association, Edinburgh, UK, 19-21 November 2014.

[3] This is discussed further in the working paper referred to in footnote 2.

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