Rethinking crisis leadership through leadership-as-practice: A narrative review and future directions

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ABSTRACT

While crisis leadership has received significant attention, existing scholarship lacks an analysis that can account for the collective, embodied and emergent nature of leadership in times of crisis. In this study, we employ a narrative review methodology as the primary analytic tool to synthesise insights on how leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) theory can be applied to crisis leadership, highlighting critical aspects of crisis leadership that are often overlooked by conventional perspectives. Accordingly, we outline three complementary avenues through which L-A-P can enrich crisis leadership research: by (1) enhancing understanding of the dynamic interplay between routines and improvisation, (2) exploring the intersections of leadership and learning during crisis; and (3) capturing collective forms of leadership that emerge under crisis conditions. As a theoretical foray, this study opens avenues for empirical research and offers insights for practitioners in organisations facing complex crises.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the world has witnessed a number of civil crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the European refugee crisis, the devastating aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the 2004 Indonesian tsunami. More recently, the war in Ukraine has triggered many additional civil crises, such as food and energy challenges, not only within Ukraine but also globally. Our paper explores how the leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) approach [1,2] can contribute to understanding leadership in crises and can be applied to the development of crisis leadership research and practice. Traditional and current mainstream leadership theories have emphasized the traits, skills, roles, behaviours and decision-making approaches of individual leaders or individuals in leadership teams [3–5], yet crises frequently reveal the limitations of individual leadership theories and approaches [6]. In response to these limitations, the L-A-P perspective has gained traction for its ability to shift attention from individual leaders to the collective practices, interactions

and social processes through which leadership occurs [7]. Therefore, in this paper, we consider some promising research streams focused on how leadership emerges in a crisis. As such, the current paper illuminates the ways in which examining crisis situations from a L-A-P perspective may give us a finer grained understanding of how crisis leadership works or does not work.

This paper also hopes to offer scholars some fresh perspectives on crisis leadership. It links existing fragmented findings in both L-A-P and crisis leadership literatures, thereby offering an initial theoretical lens that can be further refined and expanded through future empirical research. We believe that establishing such a foundation is important for several reasons: (1) the field of crisis leadership remains theoretically underdeveloped in terms of capturing the relational, emergent, and collective dimensions that L-A-P emphasizes; (2) without integrative conceptual understanding, insights from practice-oriented leadership research risk remaining disconnected and underutilized in understanding crisis contexts; (3) by establishing initial conceptual linkages, this paper lays the groundwork for systematic empirical research to advance theorization in complex and unpredictable crisis environments.

This approach is timely, since despite calls for practice-based studies in the crisis literature and a useful foray into the subject of crisis as practice [8], there is still very little practice orientation in the crisis leadership literature. Only a few studies have adopted a practice-based approach more generally in the field of crisis and risk management (e.g. Refs. [8–11]) and in the related field of extreme contexts (e.g. Refs. [12–15]).

In this study, we apply a narrative review to explore the various ways L-A-P can be applied in crisis leadership. Unlike systematic reviews, which follow strict inclusion and exclusion criteria and are exhaustive in scope, a narrative review is more selective and interpretative [16,17]. This method is particularly useful for fields or topics in which research is scattered, emergent or interdisciplinary, allowing we, the authors, to creatively integrate diverse viewpoints on the respective research phenomenon. Thus, we have organized the literature on crisis leadership and L-A-P around core themes and interpreted how different studies contribute to these themes and how they interrelate. Accordingly, we have identified three over-arching themes in crisis leadership through the lens of L-A-P: routines and improvisation, leadership and learning, and collective forms of leadership.

Although leadership is generally recognised as being essential in crises and often emerges in crisis situations [18], Wu, Shao, Newman and Schwarz [3] claimed that crisis leadership has not received sufficient recognition as a critical domain of leadership research – a situation that they argue needs to be corrected. We also recognise a need for the crisis management literature to engage with more crisis leadership theories that consider the emergent and multifaceted nature of leadership in crises and recognise the entanglement of people, technologies, material artefacts, learning and knowing in crisis leadership. At the same time, we posit that crises are a fruitful context for studying leadership from a practice perspective because they invoke leadership dynamics, making (inter)actions and decisions more visible [19].

For the purpose of the present paper, we define crisis leadership as the processes and practices employed to prepare for the occurrence of unexpected crises, address the implications of crises and learn from crises (cf. [3,4]). In so doing, our analysis encompasses a broader perspective than most research on crisis leadership, thus helping us obtain the full benefit of the L-A-P perspective for studying crisis leadership and its role in disaster mitigation and adaptation. Several authors have considered crisis leadership to be a narrower subject than crisis management (see, e.g. Refs. [3,4]). Indeed, some definitions of 'crisis leadership' limit the time frame strictly to the crisis management phase during which a crisis is actively occurring, while other views are limited to the responses of individual pre-appointed leaders, thereby ruling out collective and emergent forms of leadership. Crisis management has traditionally been defined as the planned actions that an organisation takes in an exceptional situation to minimise damage and contain the losses resulting from a crisis [20,21]. However, this definition concentrates solely on planned actions and overlooks the importance of improvisation and creativity in response to dynamic and unpredictable challenges. To address this limitation, we broaden the definition by incorporating a flexibility element, emphasizing the organization's ability to adapt, improvise, and engage in 'skilled in situ coping' ([22], p.33) to effectively manage unforeseen developments during a crisis. In the present paper, we use the term crisis *leadership* instead of crisis *management* to highlight the fundamentally social and ongoing nature of confronting crises. Furthermore, the distinctions between leadership and management per L-A-P reasoning disappear when each is considered to be involved in the practice of collective agency in which those engaged in any crisis situation are thought to use dialogical resources to change or disrupt existing patterns based on what they learn together [23].

Thus, the current paper seeks to extend the crisis leadership literature by showing how the L-A-P perspective can contribute to crisis leadership knowledge and how the L-A-P approach itself can be extended by uncovering the ways in which it can contribute in a crisis context. Compared to conventional leadership approaches, as we shall see, L-A-P is not restricted to individual action; rather, it encompasses the embodied social processes as well as material arrangements that contribute to leadership change. We argue that the L-A-P perspective can contribute to crisis leadership in multiple ways, most importantly by (1) identifying the dynamic and complex interrelationship between routines and improvisation in crisis leadership; (2) mapping the evolving learning process embedded in crisis leadership; and (3) understanding crisis leadership as a collective, social and continuously evolving practice.

The present paper is structured as follows. In the following section, to provide a theoretical background for the study, we elaborate on crisis and disaster definitions and review the literature on L-A-P. We continue by describing our methodology and why we have selected narrative review. Next, we identify and expand upon the three interrelated avenues in the crisis leadership literature for which L-A-P can provide in-depth insights. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our study for anticipating and responding to crises in contemporary work organisations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Defining crisis leadership

Crisis situations usually include elements of unexpectedness, urgency, unfamiliarity and surprise [24] along with threat and uncertainty [25]. A crisis is a specific, unexpected, non-routine event that creates a high level of uncertainty and a threat to high priority goals [20,26]. A crisis can also be defined as a situation in which something unexpected and undesirable has already happened, but where the risk of even greater damage exists [21,25]. On a more general level, a crisis can be defined as an event or a process [27] or most recently as a practice [8]. For a typology of crises, (see Ref. [28]).

The concepts of crisis and disaster are not identical: 'while all disasters spawn crises, not all crises are disasters' [29, p. 59]. A disaster is 'a dangerous event that causes significant human and economic loss and demands a crisis response beyond the scope of local and state resources. Disasters are distinguished from emergencies by the greater level of response required ([29], p. 59). Disasters spawn crises for individual organisations, which must activate and execute their crisis plans while broader disaster-related communications are being coordinated by relevant authorities or agencies. Disasters can also become crises for governments if they are managed poorly, as the case of Hurricane Katrina illustrates [29,30].

In recent decades, there have been several crises with massive physical and psychological consequences often unbearable for those affected; these crises can also be defined as *extreme events* [31]. Accordingly, the environments in which such extreme events occur can be conceptualised as *extreme contexts* [31,32]. Extreme contexts, similarly to crises, have been defined through three perspectives, as an event, as a situational context and as a practice [33].

Crisis *leadership*, traditionally, refers to the exercise of influence and agency by individuals or groups in navigating periods of acute uncertainty, disruption, and threat. As Boin and t' Hart argue, in times of collective stress, it is a natural for people to expect their leaders to solve the situation. If crisis leadership results in reduced stress and a normality returns, people celebrate their 'true leaders'. If crisis fails to dissipate, leaders become convenient scapegoats. ([34], p.544)

More broadly, crisis leadership has been characterized as a context where leaders must rapidly adapt, support their organisations, and make strategic decisions under extreme uncertainty [35, pp. 381–382]. Leadership during crises often necessitates reconfiguring organizational structures and strategies to ensure survival and create opportunities for long-term success [35]. Leadership is often understood as a relational process of influence, where leader cognition and adaptability play an especially critical role under crisis conditions [36]. While the relational view of influence tends to see leadership as an individual process, we will explore in this study the social roots of agency and thus entertain the collective approach to leadership and to crisis leadership in particular.

Turning next to crisis management, it is often defined as the ability to make appropriate decisions, with the appropriateness of a decision depending on the nature and current stage of the crisis. Among the foundational crisis management models are Coombs' [20] three-stage model (precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis), Fink's [37] four-stage model (prodromal, acute, chronic, and crisis resolution stages), and Mitroff's [21] five-stage model (signal detection, probing and prevention, damage containment, recovery, and learning). Coombs' three-stage model remains the most widely cited. In the precrisis stage, organisations engage in preparation activities such as assembling crisis management teams and developing crisis plans and risk assessments. During the crisis stage, these plans are implemented alongside stakeholder communication efforts aimed at employees, victims, the media, and other relevant audiences. The postcrisis stage focuses on reflection and organizational learning from the event [20,21]. Fink's [37] contribution lies in introducing the prodromal stage, where organisations are encouraged to actively scan for early warning signals of impending crises.

We argue that while these models provide valuable frameworks for crisis planning and response, they tend to conceptualize crisis processes in relatively linear or sequential terms, emphasizing retrospective order-making and staged progression. We believe that at times, this linearity may risk overlooking the recursive, improvisational, and relational dynamics that increasingly characterize leadership during crises. The L-A-P perspective offers one alternative by foregrounding leadership as an emergent, situated phenomenon continually reshaped through interactions with material, social, and temporal conditions. Rather than treating crises as discrete stages, L-A-P invites attention to how leadership practices unfold dynamically, often challenging the staged assumptions embedded in crisis management.

Crises are prepared for constantly and actively in many public and private organisations. However, according to Gilpin and Murphy [38], successful crisis management is not always determined by prescriptive decision-making or by scientific planning, but rather by the nature of an organisation, the environment in which the organisation is situated and the crisis itself. They further noted that crises, being both unpredictable and complex, are often characterised by confusion, unforeseen events and a lack of information [38, p. 4]. We share Gilpin and Murphy's [38] view of crises and suggest that their perspective should be better acknowledged in the crisis leadership literature especially regarding crisis preparation. According to Pearson and Clair, 'effective crisis management involves *improvising* and interacting by key stakeholders so that individual and collective sensemaking, shared meaning and roles are reconstructed' [39 p. 66, emphasis added]. However, despite the need for improvisation and flexible and creative responses and solutions [5,24,40], studies examining such an approach are lacking. Thus, in the current paper, we have explored how a L-A-P perspective could contribute to understanding and analysing leadership in the specific instances of crisis preparation and management in practice.

2.2. Leadership-as-practice and its existing connections to the crisis leadership literature

In the L-A-P approach, leadership is viewed as a practice involving both human and nonhuman agents situated within a particular context [1,41,42]. Thus, L-A-P concentrates on the *doings* of leadership, that is, on the everyday activities and interactions [43] that involve ongoing improvisation, bringing about a change in the direction of the flow of activity [44].

The L-A-P philosophy is rooted in a constructionist paradigm [1,45]. The phrase 'leadership-as-practice' was first used by Carroll et al. [1] in an article inspired by a broader practice-focused turn in social theory starting in the late twentieth century and early years of the new millennium [43,46,47]. This turn was followed by a stream of practice-driven theories and studies on practices, such as strategy as practice (e.g. Refs. [48,49]), entrepreneurship-as-practice (e.g. Ref. [50]), practice-based learning (e.g. Refs. [51–53]), and, most recently, responsible management-as-practice (e.g. Refs. [54,55]).

Practice theory can contribute to social theory on a number of accounts, particularly in its rejection of dualisms - such as mind and body or structure and agency - and has elevated the role of non-propositional knowledge as enacted both within and through practice [56,57]. To understand practices, referring to embodied, everyday social accomplishments, practice theorists seek patterns of behaviour and associated material entanglements, which together in interaction shape human life for variable periods of time [58]. One weakness that is brought up about the practice movement is that there has never been an agreement on a unified theory of practice, but this is due in part to the many fields which it studies [46,47,59–61]. Accordingly, each field or event, such as crisis leadership, yields its own specific contexts, which, in turn, are embedded in the analyses.

On the approaches to practice, L-A-P scholars have focused recently more on what Pickering (according to Ref. [2]) referred to as an in-the-moment emergent entanglement that extends or transforms meaning [7,43,62,63]. Crevani and Endrissat [43] referred to this stream of studies as a strong process or relational approach because it relies on a relational ontology and focuses on collective practices as they unfold, hence paying more attention to the actions and emergence of change rather than to the actors involved. Similarly, Simpson [63] associated practice with a continual flow of processes in which material–discursive engagements produce emergent meaning.

Therefore, some L-A-P studies have concentrated on routine sequences of activities that parallel Pickering's definition of 'practices'. Crevani and Endrissat [43] suggested, however, that when ontological priority is accorded to entities and social states that predate processes, we move into an entitative-soft L-A-P approach. More generally, however, with respect to both approaches, whether we begin with processes or entities, the interest is on a bundle of related activities within a specific context that can also be called 'the work of leadership' [43]. Both of these streams of study could be used in crisis leadership research. For example, the former approach could focus on moments of improvisation as they unfold and change the flow of practices. The latter may involve studying the recurring routinised actions of human and nonhuman actors within a crisis management team, concentrating on how and why – through their interactions – these routines change and redirect actions. So, rather than focusing on appointed crisis leaders or management teams and their qualities or leadership styles, as traditional and mainstream crisis leadership research tends to do, the focus of L-A-P is on a unit's or an organization's practice or practices as they unfold and correspondingly change the flow of those very practices.

Thus, the L-A-P approach can also be viewed as a post-heroic theory of leadership because it addresses the role of individual leaders only insofar as it concentrates on their collective accomplishments [2,19,64]. L-A-P thus offers a fresh perspective on crisis leadership in this regard because it de-emphasizes the role of crisis leaders and their contrary roles (e.g. as heroes or villains) in managing crises. In fact, as will be noted, in unfamiliar socioenvironmental conditions, we need a form of collective leadership that can improvise around the reality that is unfolding. This improvisation cannot come from any single leader because no one person has the capacity to reconcile the complexity and uncertainty surrounding these conditions of a crisis.

Let's consider the social nature of leadership and collective leadership in particular. The field of theories concentrating on collective leadership is growing and becoming more complex and fragmented [65,66]. Among the various forms of collective leadership theories, Denis et al. [65] distinguished four groups of theories: (1) 'sharing leadership', which are theories concentrating on members of the group leading each other; (2) 'pooling leadership', through which multiple leaders share a leadership space and lead others outside their group; (3) 'spreading leadership', which is a form of distributed leadership whereby a variety of leaders across multiple organisational levels or multiple organisations relay leadership responsibilities over time; and (4) 'producing leadership', which is the group in which L-A-P belongs. According to 'producing leadership' theories, leadership is dissociated from individuals, is located in practice and is seen as an emerging direction for action in the form of collective accomplishment.

We agree with the interpretation of Sergi et al. [19] that among other theories that are closely related theories to L-A-P are those that consider discursive and conversational approaches to leadership (e.g. Ref. [67]), particularly relational leadership studies (e.g. Refs. [68,69]) and leadership research anchored even more tightly to process thinking (e.g. Ref. [70]). The difference between L-A-P and relational leadership is that as opposed to interactions, in L-A-P, the core unit of analysis is situated practice, which L-A-P incorporates in its totality, including its technologies, material artefacts, rituals and spatio-temporal arrangements [7,43]. L-A-P also recognises that, at times, people can move beyond the relational to a transpersonal collective orientation in which they may transform their immediate embeddedness [71]. Even though all these approaches can bring value to crisis leadership studies, L-A-P's strength lies in its incorporation of space and time in its applications, which, in its strong form, can have ordering, shaping and directing effects, each of which can play a critical role in crisis leadership [59].

A more recent typology of collective leadership approaches [66] sees L-A-P as belonging to the relational views of leadership, according to which 'collective' refers to a textual lens, such as what might be specified in the related field of the communicative constitution of organisations (CCO). In CCO, talk is not seen as a conduit representing reality, but as a text or artefact that itself constitutes the emergent reality as part of a temporal unfolding flow of activity (e.g. Ref. [72]).

Finally, L-A-P can be seen as part of the post-humanist group of leadership theories because it acknowledges the intertwining of the social and material [73]. Accordingly, as per its flat ontology, agency emerges from the flows of activity that precede the subject. Thus, practice is precipitated not by autonomous subjects but through interpenetration between the self, the other and a whole range of embodied performances that are shaped by sociocultural structures and arrangements [74]. To find leadership, a flow of practices must be investigated to identify turning points in that flow within the relevant group, organisation or network [7,75]. Typically, materiality plays a significant role [76–79] as a nonhuman actor that can take both physical (e.g. written documents or technological tools) and

nonphysical (e.g. norms, rituals, informal rules or spatiotemporal arrangements) forms that either constrain or enable practice [79,80].

The L-A-P approach is still in its relatively early development phase; indeed, more empirical research on L-A-P has been advised [41,81]. In recent years, these calls have been heard, and studies drawing on the L-A-P approach have been conducted in various fields and settings, such as education [42,82,83], sports and artistic organisations [84,85], health care and related leadership training [86, 87], community leadership [88,89], the military [62], international development [77], and strategic meetings [75]. However, to the best of our knowledge, L-A-P has not yet been studied and conceptualised in the context of a crisis or disaster. Such an investigation would not only enhance our understanding of crisis leadership but would also, conversely, enrich L-A-P applications in settings that benefit from L-A-P's understanding of embodied assumptions and practices [1,19,90].

To conclude this section on L-A-P's connection to crisis leadership, crisis situations may exacerbate the tendency to look towards individual leaders to solve a situation; however, by examining the actions of and reactions to potential heroes (or villains), we may fail to see some of the underlying dynamics produced by non-leaders, processes, improvisations and material arrangements. Sergi et al. [19] suggested that plural and decentred forms of leadership may aid in interpreting and 'reading' crisis leadership through alternative perspectives. In line with this, L-A-P highlights the social and material embeddedness of human and organisational action [1,91]. For these reasons, we argue that L-A-P can offer a propitious framework for seeking to understand the issues that contribute to and develop creative responses to crises.

3. Methodology

In this study, we adopted a narrative review approach to synthesise the emerging intersection between crisis leadership and L-A-P. We believe that in selecting among different types of literature review methodologies, it is important to consider the objective of the study, the epistemology of the theory drawn upon and the nature of the research field. Systematic reviews follow structured and replicable procedures for identifying, selecting, and analysing literatures and thus are particularly well-suited to synthesise findings in mature fields where the aim is to generate generalisable insights while minimizing researcher bias. However, we believe that the narrative review is preferable in our case because the goal is to identify novel intersections across multiple literatures and to explore emerging conceptual spaces [92]. In particular, given the empirical aims of the study - to explore theoretical connections between crisis leadership and L-A-P, and to generate directions for future inquiry, we decided to draw on narrative review methodology as these reviews are posited to be valuable for synthesising fragmented or conceptually diverse fields, identifying research omissions, and generating future research directions and questions [16,93].

We initiated our review by consulting three recent reviews on crisis leadership [3,4,94] and one review on extreme contexts [32]. This first step enabled us to identify current themes in the crisis leadership literature and to locate under-researched areas where a L-A-P lens could offer novel insights. Building on this initial phase, we used a snowballing technique to identify further relevant articles.

Next, we developed broad inclusion criteria to guide the selection of future research avenues. Through several iterative rounds of searching, reading. writing, and redrafting, we refined these criteria to focus on two conditions: (1) the topic is recognised as underexplored in the crisis leadership or extreme context literature—identified either through explicit calls for more research or through the general scarcity of empirical work; and (2) the topic has been addressed in L-A-P research (even if outside the crisis context), demonstrating that the perspective brings forward aspects that are often overlooked by conventional leadership theories. Although the inclusion criteria remained broader than those typical of systematic reviews, they provided a structured framework for topic selection.

The iterative analysis of the material led to the identification of three main thematic avenues where L-A-P perspectives offer particular theoretical enrichment for crisis leadership research: (1) the dynamic interplay between routines and improvisation, (2) the intersections of leadership and learning throughout the evolving crisis, and (3) the emergence of collective leadership practices under crisis conditions.

As an example, one theme selected was the interrelationship of routines and improvisation in leadership processes during crises. While the concept of improvisation has begun to receive attention in organisational and crisis-related studies (e.g. Refs. [95,96]), and organisational routines have long been studied in organisational theory [97], we nevertheless believe that the dynamic interplay between improvisation and routines in crisis contexts, remain underexplored. For example, Rouleau et al. [98] and Hällgren et al. [32] explicitly call for more practice-based studies of routines, especially in dynamic and disrupted organisational settings, further reinforcing the relevance of this theme. Sensemaking, on the other hand, has become a well-established area in crisis literature. Originating in Weick's seminal work [99,100], sensemaking in crises has been extensively studied in cases of sudden events, organisational breakdowns and emergency response systems [13,101]. Therefore, we down-played an in-depth engagement with sensemaking in the study.

Following the selection of the avenues, we continued conducting searches across Scopus and Web of Science, combining Boolean search terms such as 'crisis leadership,' 'crisis management,' 'leadership-as-practice,' 'collective leadership,' 'learning,' 'routines,' 'improvisation' and different version of terms concerning practice theory. We aimed to capture a comprehensive view of practice-based and other closely related studies relevant to crisis leadership. Final articles were selected based on their relevance to L-A-P, crisis leadership, routines and improvisation, collective leadership, and leadership and learning processes during crises.

4. Three avenues for applying the L-A-P approach to crisis leadership

In reviewing the literature, we identified three understudied aspects of the crisis leadership literature that the L-A-P approach could

address to expand existing academic and, potentially, practitioner knowledge: (1) the interrelation between routinised actions and improvisation regarding crisis leadership, (2) the response to calls to extend crisis leadership and learning studies to all phases of crisis management and (3) collective and social forms of leadership in crisis. Our rationale for the selection of these three are as follows. In the first instance, L-A-P's phenomenological roots have revealed that habits and routines have complementary relationships to agency in the sense that when they fail, there is an opportunity for improvisation to revitalize agency [102]. In the second instance, longitudinal inquiry has become natural in L-A-P as past and future turning points become integrated during change processes and, overtime, become interconnected [103]. In addition, L-A-P research highlights in-situ learning as a central and inseparable aspect of leadership [2,104]. In the third instance, in L-A-P annals, leadership is consistently referred to as a social process and thus materializes within the company of others; accordingly, L-A-P, as noted earlier, is accomplished through shared know-how among those engaged in embodied and practical collective accomplishments [105].

4.1. Discovering the interrelationship between routines and improvisation in crisis leadership through practice

Beginning with our first avenue applying L-A-P to crisis leadership, according to prior studies, routines are central to crisis management [13,15,32,106]. In the practice theory literature, practices have been shown to be recurrent and, thus, operate as routines; on the other hand, they can also be adaptive and subject to change because of such dynamic unfoldings as improvisation, reflexivity and flexible structures [107]. Accordingly, practice studies can help deepen our understanding of the routines followed by an organisation under crisis conditions, how these routines influence the direction of activities and how they change because of situational demands. A few practice-based studies have focused on the maintaining and redirecting of activities because of emergencies and disruptions. For example, Bechky and Okhuysen [15] studied how organisations sustain activity during a disruption, while Barton and Sutcliffe's [12] and Schakel and Wolbers' [108] main interest was how individuals and organisations redirect ongoing action in these situations. Studies of extreme contexts have also been valuable in identifying how sensemaking can precipitate the adaptation of routines [12].

Bechky and Okhuysen's [15] study on changing routines and improvisations demonstrated that effective responses to unexpected events rely on material and sociocognitive resources that have already accumulated during regular day-to-day work. The authors defined sociocognitive resources as 'the collectively held knowledge about how a task is performed and how activities advance' [15, p. 241]. Through studying a SWAT team and a film crew, the authors demonstrated that these sociocognitive resources allow organisations to creatively respond to unexpected situations and continue regular activities by shifting roles, reorganising routines and reordering work. Researching wildlife firefighters and their microlevel social processes, Barton and Sutcliffe [12] identified two additional practices on which the process of redirecting action relied: voicing concerns and actively seeking alternative practices. In their studies of high-speed police pursuits, Schakel and Wolbers [108] concluded that success in these pursuits requires responders to regularly transition between various modes of organising, each of which is characterised by practices that shape resource allocation and command structures.

Hanén [109] using complexity theory studied the unexpected leadership situations that occur in disasters, crises and catastrophes and concluded that the complexities of these situations might call for leadership approaches that conflict with classic notions of leadership. According to the study, it is essential to find the right balance between mechanic (bureaucracy and routines) and organic (spontaneous and improvised) actions, in other words, between utilizing old ways of doing things and inventing new ones.

L-A-P studies can open this interrelationship between routines and improvised actions. Given that the borders between routines and improvisation are blurred in the process of managing crises, routines are thought to be needed to provide structure and stability in crisis situations [32], but because crises are often unexpected and sudden, they also require improvisation. According to the L-A-P perspective, changes in routines often occur through a set of incremental improvisations needed to cope with a situation, often resulting in a modified routine. Descriptive Fig. 1 demonstrates how these improvisations influence routines and lead not only to changes in routines but also to changes in the trajectory of routinised practices and actions.

Further to L-A-P's underlying focus on turning points and trajectory change, L-A-P studies can probe into collective meaning-making processes through detailed analyses of the emergence of leadership through turning points or changes in the flow of practice [110]. In the event of a crisis, a shift occurs because of a dramatic change of course that then requires a corresponding shift in
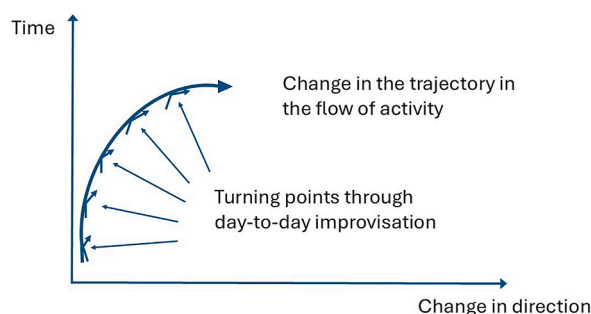

Fig. 1. Changes in the trajectory in the flow of routinised practices.

direction, one that is likely to be too complex and interrelated to other phenomena to be controlled by the manager in charge. As a result, what is needed is a collective response that can negotiate ongoing and evolving practices as well as relationships and materials to manage the 'turning points' as a way to meet the challenges raised by the crisis.

It should be noted that improvisations to cope with a crisis need not be extraordinary. Sonenshein and Nault [111] studied the practices of two orchestras during COVID-19 and demonstrated that even in crisis situations, incremental adjustments can help organisations adapt and eventually innovate. Even if we believe this to be true, we also believe that these incremental adjustments, or 'turning points', can accelerate in crisis conditions because of the need for more drastic actions. In this way, leadership in an L-A-P sense becomes more visible because turning points are often more impactful in crises, leading to quicker changes in trajectories and, correspondingly, more opportunities for leadership to emerge. In this way, leadership in a L-A-P sense becomes more visible because of the need for trajectory change, as Fig. 2 illustrates (and which readers might wish to compare to Fig. 1, which presents routinised conditions). As seen, turning points are often more impactful in crises, leading to quicker changes in trajectories.

In sum, L-A-P studies focusing on practice as it unfolds can reveal improvisations –resulting from in situ coping within a crisis situation – required for the management of crises. Thus, L-A-P studies can contribute to the crisis leadership literature by illuminating ways to improvise [39]. These practices generally incorporate several human and nonhuman actors that are included in the crisis management process. Focusing on the flow of action can help find answers to research questions such as how and why improvisations emerge and shape the flow of practices in a crisis.

4.2. The role and importance of continuous learning throughout the evolving process of crisis leadership

As described earlier, the most well-known crisis management approaches describe effective crisis management through different stages [20,21,37]. According to most crisis process models, organisations learn from their crisis experiences during the postcrisis phase when the crisis is over and time is taken to reflect and learn from what is often an overwhelming experience [21,112]. However, despite numerous efforts to incorporate individual and organisational learning from previous crises into crisis management models [21,113], it has been claimed that organisations often fail to learn from crises [113,114].

More recently, creative action has been recognised as necessary for the management of crises and disruptions, which requires improvised action and situated learning throughout a crisis [13,114–119]. For example, Berglund et al. [115] demonstrated that COVID-19 enabled improvisation that resulted in learning at individual and collective levels and that sharing and reflection on experiences is critical in organisational (and collective) learning. Christianson, Farkas, Sutcliffe and Weick's [13] study explored the link between rare events and learning and discovered that rather than learning from the interruptions, the learning occurred during the interruptions through practices of interpreting, relating and re-structuring.

Since L-A-P views leadership as a change in the direction of the flow of practice involving adjustments to day-to-day action through improvised coping to the situation at hand, we claim that the L-A-P offers opportunities to indirectly reply to the calls to study leadership and learning across the stages of a crisis. With this claim we are not suggesting that the L-A-P perspective sees these stages as independent, hence requiring different predetermined leadership activities. Rather, we refer to the core idea of the stage models that a crisis does not just happen – it develops, and that L-A-P offers possibilities to study crisis leadership throughout the evolving crisis. In fact, the practice view challenges the view that crisis processes follow linear and sequential progression [8], but rather views the process as more complex and inter-laced.

In our view, the L-A-P approach helps individuals and groups accept this complexity and provides tools for managing leadership through professional learning throughout crisis situations. More specifically, in L-A-P thinking, because leadership is seen as a situated process [1,91], context is not a fixed structure that shapes how leadership occurs; the way leadership is accomplished varies across contexts [120]. Crises are also socially constructed, as opposed to being a function of various factors within an objective environment [4,33]. Leadership is not only contextually influenced, but also represents a context-producing practice, whereby leadership practices and context need to be considered concurrently [121]. The practices are often so embedded in context that much of leadership practice is embodied or unspoken [1,2]; such nuances can be better revealed by considering all the contextual factors as they evolve in situ.

Generally, crisis leadership studies have recognised that learning plays a vital role in crisis leadership. As a practice-based approach, L-A-P theory views the flow of practices as a locus for learning [52] and thus central and inseparable part of leadership.
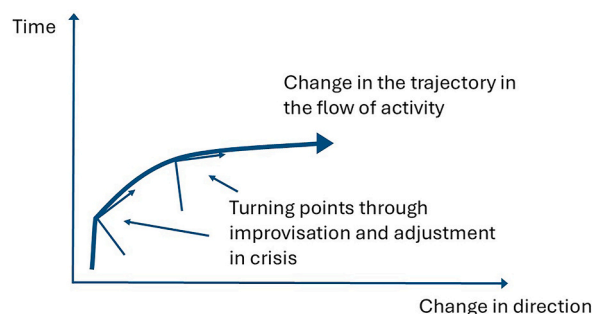

Fig. 2. Changes in the trajectory in the flow of practices under crisis condition.

Leadership learning occurs mainly from collective reflection among those who work together and less so from vertical instructions from above [7]. Because leadership practices are embedded in a specific organised context and the social relations therein, a highly context-dependent form of knowing is required [46]; this puts learning at the very core of the L-A-P process, because participants must reflect on their actions concurrently and collectively [104] to learn from their experiences. Time needs to be set aside in the course of practice to actualize this form of learning. Indeed, the importance of experiential workplace learning is underlined in the L-A-P approach [2,77,122]. Kempster and Gregory [123] demonstrated that even learning about leadership in situ can be tacit and that a new leadership practice can be developed by absorbing and converting this tacit learning into everyday knowing. Moreover, tacit collective learning can occur through participation. Even without a specific articulation or explicit agreement, the collective knows that 'when we do it next time, we do it differently' ([123], p. 509). Gold et al. [124] found that at times, in the midst of practice, actors improvise to maintain the flow of an activity and, in doing so, they learn and improve their practice. Studying crisis leadership and learning through a L-A-P lens can help increase our knowledge about where, how and why learning occurs in crisis leadership.

4.3. Leadership as a collective and social accomplishment in crisis situations

Crisis leadership studies have mainly concentrated on traditional leadership theories, that is, on individual leaders, especially their characteristics, in particular, their charisma and leadership style [3,4,94,125]. There are exceptions, such as the study by Powley [126], which demonstrated that social interaction is critical in the construction of safety amid chaos during and after crises. However, research on collective and social forms of crisis leadership remains scarce [3,5]. This is somewhat surprising, considering the increased interest and research, on the one hand, on collective forms of leadership [19,66,127] and, on the other hand, on crisis management and leadership [3,33,128,129].

Some of the studies have focused on top management teams and boards [3], considering either team characteristics, such as the size or number of external directors on the board, or team member characteristics, such as educational level and other demographic information. Studies on collective forms of crisis leadership thus far have centred on top management or crisis leadership teams guiding the focal organisation and other actors during a crisis. Based on the typology proposed by Denis et al. [65], these studies can be seen as falling mainly under the 'pooling leadership' heading, with only a few in the 'distributing leadership' category (e.g. Ref. [130]). Therefore, the L-A-P viewpoint can provide a fresh perspective for studying leadership as a collective accomplishment based on Denis et al.'s [65] typology of the 'producing leadership' concept and on Ospina et al.'s [66] conception of leadership as a lens. This is also where our research builds on crisis-as-practice [8], in which the involvement of operational level actors are included in crisis management study. In addition, L-A-P decentres the role of individuals, concentrating instead on the collective and their practices as a whole.

From this practice perspective, leadership can be seen as a product rather than a cause of collective action [79], in which leadership can emerge through a flow of social practices involving stakeholders from all organisational roles and levels or even beyond the organisational boundaries within a network of organisations or agencies. Earlier studies on the topic from a practice perspective have been scarce but can reveal unexpected situations in which leadership occurs or does not occur. For example, in their study of two professional orchestras' actions during COVID-19, Sonenshein and Nault [111] discovered that the adjustments needed to proceed in crisis situations required the involvement of musicians, who are ordinary members of the organisation, not managers, working together and with other stakeholders. This finding is in line with Oscarsson and Danielsson's [10] view that concentrating on crisis managers risks minimizing the contributions of peripheral actors. In their research of a municipal refugee housing during the refugee crisis in Sweden, they studied the mundane actions through which the operational staff and managers solved the problems caused by the high number of incoming refugees, and discovered that the practices to manage the crisis and problems at hand were used mostly at the operational level, even if the managers at a higher level of the organisational rank were considered to be the crisis managers.

Even if it is the case that L-A-P is less interested in asking about the 'who' in the leadership equation, L-A-P studies are also interested in asking 'who all were involved in the change in practice?' but even more so 'what caused the change in a collective's practice and how?' Answers to these questions might reveal different insights from the popular view focusing on individual leadership in crisis situations. For example, in Finland, the COVID-19 response was most commonly associated with the heroic leadership of Prime Minister Sanna Marin or in its collective form by 'the five' (the five female leaders of the government parties), as depicted in the public press as well as in the mainstream crisis literature. However, it would be interesting to study how and why the universities tended to move to a remote learning mode before the government made the official decision to undertake remote work and study, along with examining who was involved in this change because, in some cases, the shift happened even before the university administration decided to close their campuses and shift programmes and ongoing courses to distance learning. In this instance, the L-A-P approach could be seen as challenging the thinking that the top leadership was making the decisions, recognizing that, instead, the changes occurred because of a complex manifestation of a range of material–discursive practices.

One explanation for what could have happened in the COVID-19 example is the shift in collective sentiment towards emergencies. The Finns proactively physically distanced themselves from others. It may be that government crisis communications played an important role in altering the public's collective sentiment. However, another recent shift in collective sentiment worked in the other direction. The Finnish overnight collective change of heart regarding NATO membership after Russia's aggression in Ukraine occurred well before the government put out any strategic communications on the matter. After public sentiment changed, politicians had the 'after-sight' to make the decision to apply for NATO membership. These types of events call for collective and social leadership studies, for which L-A-P can provide an appropriate framework.

5. Discussion

5.1. L-A-P and the three avenues in future empirical crisis leadership enquiry

The aim of the present paper has been to present an analysis of the potential contribution of the L-A-P perspective to crisis leadership research, a context in which L-A-P has not previously been applied. Based on our narrative review and analysis, we identified three aspects through which crisis leadership research could be extended and deepened through the application of a L-A-P perspective: (1) adding to the knowledge on the interrelationship between routines and improvisation within the process of crisis leadership; (2) identifying where leadership and learning intersect and build upon each other; and (3) capturing and examining collective and social forms of crisis leadership.

In the first conceptual aspect, the L-A-P approach highlights that effective crisis leadership involves oscillating between structure and spontaneity based on situational demands. Future research should investigate how groups navigate between established routines and improvisation in crises. L-A-P research should also take advantage of the opportunity to explore how learning fosters adaptive leadership and resilience and where and how learning occurs during a crisis. Finally, research should investigate how and why collective practices change during crises. This last avenue is also consistent with the growing recognition that crisis management is not a solitary endeavour. It is a collaborative process involving diverse expertise, viewpoints and actions, all of which can coalesce in managing complex crises.

The appraisal of individual leaders used in standard entitative leadership methods, such as packaged assessment tools, are often deprived of the contexts in which the leadership actually takes place [131,132]. In L-A-P, in contrast, with its reliance on a social constructionist paradigm, leadership is seen as an emerging social process in which people strive to make meaning together through a continuous flow of practices [133,134]. Leadership is accordingly studied at multiple interacting levels beyond the individual levels of analysis. In the case of crisis leadership, in particular, there would be an acknowledgement that organizational responses are likely to be socially embedded within industry protocols, company standard operating procedures, and technology requirements and applications, such as artificial intelligence [135].

The preferred methodologies in L-A-P would consequently need to be for the most part qualitative, longitudinal, and phenomenological in which, in the latter case, the researcher would engage in collaborative dialogical inquiry with the respondent as fellow learner. The longitudinal research approach of L-A-P fits well with those crisis researchers' views that consider crises as streams of social interactions that call for researchers visiting sites and actors for extended periods of time [113]. In addition, L-A-P researchers would rely on non-textual and embodied processes, in particular, narrative, multimodal, and sensory ethnographic methods, such as autoethnographies, diaries, and the use of symbolic, video and sound technologies [136–138] to capture the practice in its totality. Overall, practice-oriented research would need to be inclusive of the artefacts, spatial arrangements, interactions, time, language, technologies, emotions, and rituals, each of which would be relied upon to seek an understanding of the practice in question [45].

5.2. Advancing practice through the contributions of the three analytical avenues

Our study has made a number of practical contributions to all three introduced research avenues. First, in crisis situations, it is important to continue with preset tasks and routines while also making fine-grained adjustments [15]; this is often done through improvisation and adaptation [39]. Korin et al. [139] demonstrated that past practices influence routines in strategic planning. The same can be expected to happen in crisis leadership because in crisis situations, people tend to adhere to their previous knowledge and ways of working. Accordingly, practitioners need to consider the cultural, historical and political conditions that are embedded in their leadership relationships [45] and thus enable the improvising and adapting of routines to meet the situational demands of crises.

Second, we re-emphasise that learning plays a central role in the L-A-P approach based on a practice epistemology in which new knowledge is derived from practice interventions and a concurrent reflection on practical experience, leading, in turn, to the expansion of knowledge and improvement of practice [50]. L-A-P views the flow of practices as a locus for learning [52]. Thus, learning can – and should – happen throughout the evolution of a crisis. In other words, learning is embedded in leadership practices as crises unfold. L-A-P theory reminds us that crisis situations provide potent learning grounds through which individuals collectively create meaning, adapt practices and reconfigure strategies in real time. Because leadership practices are embedded in a specific organised context and the social relations therein, L-A-P requires a form of knowing that is highly context-dependent [46]. This puts learning at the very core of L-A-P because participants need to reflect on their actions together [104]. Because learning is so central in the L-A-P approach, it is not surprising that the most common practical implications relate to learning and development. Being also a situational approach, L-A-P scholars refrain from any orientation that purports to teach how to lead [104,140]. Rather, the focus is on how to learn within and from the practice. Thus, even crisis leadership development interventions should concentrate on enabling and supporting the learning and development of practices in situ, where and when the practice is unfolding [122,141].

Third, viewing leadership as a collective and social phenomenon through a L-A-P lens can spotlight practitioners' new and even unexpected views on their crisis leadership practices and those involved in them. This can help identify and develop new practices for crisis management – such as promoting diversification of responsibility or encouraging critical team reflection during phases of a crisis. Typically, this would involve practitioners in different roles at all levels of the organisation [140], not just the organisation's board or crisis leadership team. Moreover, supporting collective leadership in crises enhances an organisation's capacity to respond to developing crises because no one alone would have the capacity to reconcile the complexity and uncertainty surrounding crisis conditions. This being said, moving towards a collective view of crisis leadership in organisations would typically require specific developmental interventions because the general tendency in a crisis seems to be to rely on individual leaders [142,143] telling others

what to do. This tendency is unfortunately strengthened by current mainstream leadership theories, which encourage appointed leaders to concentrate even more power in their own hands as a crisis evolves [6].

6. Concluding remarks

In the present paper, we have demonstrated that in treating crisis leadership as emergent and multifaceted, the L-A-P perspective can contribute to crisis leadership research in multiple areas, especially by focusing on leadership practice as a dynamic interplay between improvisation and routines, by researching intersections of leadership and learning throughout evolving crises and by concentrating on leadership as a collective accomplishment.

We recognise that our study has some limitations. First, our selection of the method of narrative review can be subject to reviewer bias, especially since it does not have detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria but rather relies on authors' reasoning and judgement. Second, in our analysis we concentrated on areas that, based on our searches, are understudied in crisis leadership but which we believe L-A-P could make a contribution due to its explanatory power in varying contexts. This approach has left out some other promising streams of L-A-P research. Thus, we are not claiming that the identified three promising avenues for future studies are exhaustive. On the contrary, we believe that there are further potential directions for L-A-P – crisis leadership research.

In particular, since other practice-based studies on sensemaking have demonstrated that the practice approach can offer a renewed outlook even in the well-researched areas of crisis leadership, one of these potential research streams could be examining how L-A-P dynamics and collective sensemaking processes co-evolve during crises, highlighting emergent and recursive patterns. While sensemaking research has traditionally emphasized retrospective meaning-making and cognitive processes, L-A-P studies could explore how concurrent embodied, material, and relational practices shape collective sensemaking during crises.

Additionally, we believe that the methodological approach of applying L-A-P to crisis contexts warrants further exploration. While our study focuses on the theoretical and practical contributions of L-A-P to crisis leadership, we acknowledge that a methodological discussion merits attention beyond this focus. In particular, future studies might explore how diverse forms of data—including ethnographic fieldnotes, media materials, online data, and digital communication—can be combined to capture the complexity of collective leadership practices during crises. We thus hope that this paper inspires researchers to experiment with new conceptual and process approaches, such as L-A-P, when studying crisis leadership. This would help to increase our understanding of those nuances of crisis leadership that are often overlooked in conventional research.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Salla Lehtonen: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Hannele Seeck:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Methodology. **Suvi Satama:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Joseph A. Raelin:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Aki-Mauri Huhtinen:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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