

# Ensemble leadership theory: Collectivist, relational, and heterarchical roots from indigenous contexts

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**Grace Ann Rosile, David M Boje and Carma M Claw**

Department of Management, New Mexico State University, USA

## Abstract

We offer an “ensemble” theory of leadership that emerges from contemporary indigenous scholarship and also from the archeology of the prehispanic southwest. We see ensemble leadership theory as starting from a different origin: the indigenous world-view. It provides an emphasis in the leadership context, which is largely missing in traditional leadership literature. First, the ensemble leadership theory casts leadership as a collective phenomenon, and privileges the collective rather than the individual. This moves away from the “hero” leadership views and instead, connects with the recent “relationality” and “shared” views of leadership, breaking new ground in collective leadership. Second, the ensemble leadership theory is dynamic rather than static, as revealed using storytelling and “antenarrative” analysis. Third, the ensemble leadership theory assumes a social structure, which is decentered as well as multi-centered and nonhuman-centric. Fourth, the combination of dynamism and multi-centeredness yields a structure which storytelling scholars call “rhizomatic” and archeologists term “heterarchical.” These ensemble leadership theory qualities of collectivist, relational, dynamic, and heterarchic are all drawn from indigenous cultures. In particular, archeologists have found heterarchical leadership structures in the prehispanic southwest portions of North America. In sum, ensemble leadership theory offers a time-tested model of a more relational and collectivist view of leadership.

## Keywords

Ensemble leadership, relational, indigenous, collectivist, heterarchical, antenarrative

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## Corresponding author:

Grace Ann Rosile, Department of Management, New Mexico State University, 4700 Dunn Drive Las Cruces, NM 88011, USA.

Email: [garosile@nmsu.edu](mailto:garosile@nmsu.edu)

## Introduction: What is ensemble leadership theory?

We use the term “ensemble” to describe a new theory of leadership, ensemble leadership theory (ELT). An ensemble may refer to a group of actors in which no one is the star, or equally, all are the stars of the show. We situate ELT with a spectrum of shared and relational leadership perspectives, as summarized in Table 1. Here we define “ensemble leadership theory” as collectivist, dynamic, decentered, and heterarchic. We see a progression from dispersed leadership on the left side of the table, where each group member is assumed to have some pieces of leadership within themselves. Next is distributed leadership where clearly-defined leader roles are distributed by top echelons to selected individuals. These two cut-up-the-leadership-pie models are distinctly different from the relational models of leadership, which assume that leadership is co-created in the moment by the interaction of individuals. We position ELT on the far right side of Table 1, as clearly a relational model of leadership, yet with a twist: the relations in question are not typically between individuals but rather among all, in a social, collectivist process.

For this ELT concept to be applicable in work organizations and specifically in the leadership context, we must make some key assumptions. The first assumption is collectivity, where we avoid the false dualism of individual–group along with the false leader–follower dualism. Ensemble leadership means every follower is a potential leader. Further, the distinction between leader and follower is blurred, in favor of a more collectivist understanding which avoids the oppositional dualism of individual–group.

Second is the assumption of dynamism. Leadership is not viewed as static and reified but rather as co-created within in-the-moment relationships. This assumption positions ELT away from distributed and disbursed views of leadership and squarely in the realm of relational leadership.

Since the situation is dynamic, our third assumption is that leadership’s center or its power structure is a multiplicity of centers which constitute a decenteredness. Within the decenteredness of leadership power structures, hierarchies may exist. However, there will typically be many hierarchies. Further, hierarchies may appear more like nonlinear networks which foster greater egalitarianism over hierarchical control. This condition we describe using the anthropological term “heterarchical”.

Collectivism, dynamism, decenteredness, and heterarchy all are weak or missing in traditional leadership literature. These four core features of ELT fill these gaps in the general leadership field, bringing insights from the indigenous context. As discussed by Ospina and Foldy (2009), these are ways that indigenous cultures provide insights into general theories of leadership. Ensemble leadership is not just a theory. It existed in the past, and could exist again where people value collectivism and relationality in leadership.

### *Why is the ensemble concept important to the general field of leadership?*

Are collectivism and egalitarianism desired or even relevant to leadership? Traditional leadership theories, especially the heroic-leader models, smack of elitism in an era where egalitarianism is more often espoused (if not actually practiced). How can we reconcile desires for strong effective leadership with current social values of participation, empowerment, teamwork, and even egalitarianism?

The general leadership literature suggests everyone has leadership potential. Further, it is our implied duty as leadership educators to help each person develop that potential. Even followership theories fall into this everyone-a-leader model by essentially defining

good followers as almost identical to good leaders, who merely choose to follow in a given instance.

Followers are essential to any definition of leadership (except perhaps the self-leadership perspective). With everyone a leader, we run the risk of becoming an organizational Lake Wobegone, where everyone is above average, or in this case, everyone is a leader. These inconsistencies seem to represent an implicit desire for a more egalitarian model of leadership, despite the contradiction implied by combining the terms egalitarian with leadership.

ELT offers a way out of this logical inconsistency of egalitarian leadership. ELT does this in part by virtue of its reframing of traditional dualisms like leader–follower. ELT acknowledges not one hierarchy but many hierarchies, in a decentered system of heterarchies. The and/also response to dualisms, and the heterarchical response to hierarchy, are features of indigenous ways-of-knowing within collectivist tribal cultures. In short, ELT is a time-tested model of successful collectivist leadership, which flourished in prehispanic southwest indigenous cultures, and could flourish again where collectivism exists or can be nourished.

We begin in Part 1: Ensemble leadership theory by delineating what is ELT. We describe the four main elements of ELT as collectivist, dynamic, decentered, and heterarchical.

Next, in Part 2: ELT and shared and relational leadership, we place ELT within a context of related streams of shared and relational leadership literature. We summarize these literatures in Table 1. We align ELT with relational theories of leadership, since these theories recognize leadership as a collective phenomenon.

In Part 3: Theoretical building blocks, we offer fuller discussion of three (3) key areas supporting ELT. We “unpack” these concepts to provide a richer understanding of ELT.

- (1) Poststructuralist Archeology: the “systemicities” of rhizomatic, heterarchical social structures
- (2) Native Science: the inclusivity, complexity, and fluidity of indigenous scholarship
- (3) Collectivism

In Part 4: Contribution and conclusion, we consider what ELT brings to traditional leadership theory from ELT’s roots in indigenous values and practices. These contributions to leadership theory include changed roles for humans and nonhumans, the foregrounding of relationships, and nondualistic theorizing around status and power. These contributions are summarized in Table 2. We conclude with assumptions and limitations, and implications for how ELT may benefit groups and organizations seeking more collectivist, flexible, and egalitarian forms of leadership.

### *Part 1: Ensemble leadership as collectivist, dynamic, decentered, and heterarchical*

Ensemble leadership is defined as collectivist, dynamic, decentered, and heterarchic. We address each of these four qualities in turn, below.

**Collectivist.** Contemporary indigenous scholars offer a wealth of recent literature on indigenous ways-of-knowing and other aspects of tribal values and traditions as these practices come into contact with the Eurowestern world (Cajete, 1994, 2000; Deloria, 1973; Deloria and Wildcat, 2001; Fixico, 2003; Vizenor, 2008; White, 1995). One of the main differences between Eurowestern perspectives and traditional tribal ones is the idea of collectivism.

Cordova (2007) explains that when she was in graduate school in New Mexico, she was constantly pushed to express her personal ideas and not those of her tribe. To her, there was little distinction between her views as an individual and the views of the group (tribe) of which she was a member. This sense of collectivism is an important underpinning to tribal society, and to the forms of leadership observed there.

Collectivism is especially relevant to leadership for two reasons. First, in a strong collectivist culture, the belief that the good of the group is more important than the good of the individual is deeply ingrained in consciousness. This can become an effective substitute for some leadership functions, and goes far beyond being a built-in motivation for individuals to benefit the group. In the extreme case, collectivism means the individual sees only the group good, and sees group good as synonymous with individual good, since the individual is a member of the group. To the collectivist mind, the individual versus group opposition is a false dualism. Collectivism is reflected in the lyrics of an old protest song: “none of us is free if one of us is chained”.

*Dynamic.* While some leadership perspectives view relationships in terms of “entities” or attributes of individuals, we follow instead the relational constructivism of Deetz (2013). In relational constructivism, as with relational leadership (Uhl-Bien 2006), meaning (and leadership) is co-created in the moment by the interaction of the parties involved. “Applied to leadership, a relational perspective changes the focus from the individual to the collective dynamic”. (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 662).

This focus on the dynamic over the static characterizes indigenous ways-of-knowing, and also the indigenous emphasis on the collective, and on relationships as of primary importance (Cajete, 2013). Even the composition of tribal languages reflects this underlying dynamism, where most languages have many more verbs than nouns (Cordova, 2007 citing Whorf). With such indigenous roots as these, it is unsurprising that ELT mirrors so much of process-oriented relational leadership.

The storytelling, and the construction of indigenous stories, reflects an emphasis on what Boje (2001, 2008) calls “living story”. Living story is very much like indigenous storytelling. Both have similar antenarrative constructions. But what is antenarrative, and why is it relevant to leadership?

Before the story is the story, there is the before, the “ante”. The antenarrative is like the context-container in which connects to and constitutes the storytelling. Eurowestern stories tend to be static, beginning-middle-end structured accounts with cause-effect linearity (Boje, 2008). For such stories, it is as if they live in a box. Conversely, traditional indigenous storytelling is nonlinear, and more open-ended and ambiguous (Rosile, 2014). It is like they live in spirals or cycles without beginnings or endings. This difference is similar to the difference between “entity” relational leadership and process-oriented relational leadership.

We invoke storytelling theory here to better understand ELT’s ontological roots in ancient indigenous cultures. Those cultures made sense of the world differently, as revealed in the different storytelling styles. This difference is both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to understand, translate, and even to experience the world somewhat in the way those ancient tribal cultures did. The opportunity is to open the door to a different way of seeing our own world, and specifically, the phenomenon we call leadership.

*Decentered.* As a result of the collectivist perspective combined with dynamism, the milieu of ELT is not conducive to focused, hierarchical, rigid structures of control. It is more like what

Will McWhinney called Chinese baseball: just like American baseball with batter, pitcher, first, second, and third bases, and home plate. However, any time the ball is in the air, the other team can move the bases. With such conditions, any point in the system may become the new focus, as the system itself is fluid and changing.

In a decentered system, each node is a potential center. This sort of network some call “rhizomatic”, drawn from biology. Most of us with lawns have experienced rhizomatic plants, whose roots can each become a new center for another plant. It is a very hardy life form. Rhizomatic is the term often used to describe systems with decentered, multi-centered structures. They are fluid and flexible, while yet retaining the basic elements of hierarchical center with nodes. ELT is decentered, and may be sometimes, but is not necessarily always or exclusively, rhizomatic. Instead, ELT is decentered while being heterarchical.

*Heterarchic.* As the term implies, heterarchy encompasses multiple interacting hierarchies. Heterarchy can thus adapt to both stable and dynamic environments. The hierarchies may be more or less egalitarian. Joyce (2010) reports prehispanic evidence in the indigenous southwest of hierarchical as well as more egalitarian models of leadership. This multiplicity of structures has been termed heterarchical (Joyce, 2010).

Here, it is helpful to note that the heterarchy associated with ensemble is not merely multiple hierarchies, nor is it lack of all hierarchy. Rather, in our view, it is the shape-shifting ability of the community to morph into hierarchy or into flatter more egalitarian models. Ensemble does this not by moving around the blocks on the organization chart, but rather, by not being composed of blocks in the first place. Further, our sense of heterarchy is not based on a linear or sequential understanding of multiple hierarchies in different times and places. Rather, heterarchy for us indicates the ability to fluidly shift among types of hierarchies, most but not all of them more egalitarian.

Next we position our collectivist, dynamic, interdependently decentered, and heterarchic ELT within the literatures of shared and relational leadership.

## *Part 2: ELT and shared and relational leadership*

We situate “ensemble leadership theory” (ELT) as a next step in the trajectory of recent focus on relationality models of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). This next step is rooted in the collective identity of traditional tribal cultures, where the individual–group dichotomy is viewed as a false dualism. This sense of collective identity is continuously reinforced by the high value placed on relationships, especially relationships with the natural world, in a nonhuman-centric as well as decentered view of life.

In Table 1, we begin with three types of “shared” leadership. Here, we look to Brown and Gioia’s (2002) review of three categories of shared leadership: distributive, dispersed, and relational. Similar distinctions are further elaborated by Denis et al. (2012) who offer four categories of “Leadership in the Plural”. Their categories of shared/team leadership and pooled top leadership together would fall into our Distributive category. They offer a process-interaction category which fits with our Relational category. Their boundary- and time-spanning leadership is somewhat like our notion of heterarchy, with some of the necessary but perhaps not all of the sufficient conditions for heterarchy. Here, we adopt Brown and Gioia’s earlier scheme as it seems to demonstrate a more clear progression of “shared-ness”.

Based on the general area of collective leadership perspectives, we demonstrate a spectrum of shared-ness, with ELT as the most shared, collective, and egalitarian of the models.

**Table 1.** Comparison of dispersed, distributed, relational, and ensemble leadership approaches.

	Dispersed	Distributed	Relational	Ensemble
1. Nature of leadership	Entity/Category	Entity/Category	Interpersonally co-negotiated	Collectively co-created
2. Locus of leadership	Within the person	Shared among individuals	Within the relationship	Within the collective "all"
3. Unit of analysis	Individual	Multiple individuals	Multiple individuals	The community
4. Communication patterns	Not a focus	Between select individuals	Between individuals	All channel
5. Roles	Pre-defined or not relevant	Shared among certain individuals who receive leader privileges	Co-created and negotiated	Dynamic and fluid, more egalitarian
6. Hierarchy	Everyone a leader but still identifies leadership functions	Distributes pieces of leadership but top echelons still on top	Together a leader but still identifies leadership functions	Heterarchy includes all the above and also egalitarian
7. Agency	Individual Each	Can be shared and usually top down	Individual and interpersonal	Collective any and all
8. Nature of the game	Intrapersonal	In-group and out-group zero-sum	Interpersonal	Community non-zero-sum
9. Storytelling structure or antenarrative	Fractal complex repeating patterns	Linear beginning-middle-end cause-effect	Cyclical or spiral	Rhizomatic

We compare each of the four model categories along eight dimensions: (1) the nature of leadership; (2) the locus of leadership; (3) the unit of analysis; (4) the communication patterns; (5) roles; (6) hierarchy; (7) agency; (8) nature of the game; and (9) storytelling narrative structure.

- (1) *Nature of leadership*: In both the dispersed and distributed approaches, leadership is an entity or category. For Relational leadership, leadership is interpersonally co-negotiated, typically not along predetermined categories. For ELT, leadership is also co-negotiated and co-created in the moment, but this co-creation tends to be a collective rather than an interpersonal process.
- (2) *Locus of leadership*: The first row of Table 1 is the “Locus of Leadership”. The first two columns (dispersed and distributed models) involve carving up the leadership jigsaw puzzle. The dispersed leadership puzzle means each person will have their own somewhat unique set of the leadership puzzle pieces. With distributed leadership, top echelons decide which persons will receive which particular pieces of the leadership puzzle.

We find hold-overs from the heroic leadership models in the concept of leader “functions”. We see the first two columns of Table 1 (dispersed and distributed) as depicting leadership as something to be sliced and diced and spread around the organization, in two basic ways. First, a portion of the predefined qualities of leadership may be dispersed within a given individual. Second, each individual is assumed to have some leader-like qualities. With distributed leadership, the top echelons choose to distribute pieces of leadership functions which they deign to share with certain subordinates.

Both the dispersed and distributed shared leadership models present leadership like a jigsaw puzzle, with pieces which may be broken apart and parceled out. These perspectives focus more on identifiable categories of leader behavior. In contrast, relational leadership focuses on the interactive process by which leadership is negotiated in the moment.

The third column in Table 1 is relational, where leadership is co-negotiated, a “social construction” or more specifically, a “relational constructivism” (Deetz, 2013) where meanings are co-created in the moment and in the relationship. This relational approach emphasizes the social and the collective over the individual heroic leader. However, we still see in some relational leadership literature a lingering notion of leadership as “functions”. We follow Uhl-Bien’s (2006) distinction between entity-focused versus process-focused relational leadership. We position ELT in the fourth column of Table 1, as not only process-focused, but also collectively-process-focused. By this we mean that the in-the-moment co-constructed meanings and relationships are interpersonally enacted as well as a collectively social phenomenon.

- (3) *Unit of analysis*: In Row 2, we see that the “unit of analysis” for dispersed leadership is the individual, within whom various leader-like qualities may exist. The distributed models look at multiple individuals, in particular those to whom leadership functions have been delegated. For relational models, the unit of analysis is again multiple individuals. In this case, it is the individuals involved in the co-constructed leader relations. For ELT, the community as a whole is the unit of analysis.
- (4) *Communication patterns*: Communication patterns in Row 3 follow in straightforward fashion from the unit of analysis. Since dispersed leadership looks within the individual leader, communication patterns are not a focus here. For relational and distributed, the

communication patterns of a select group of individuals are the focus. Only with ELT is communication considered at the most macro, collective level of all-channel.

- (5) *Roles*: Roles are largely pre-defined and based on preconceptions about what constitutes leader behavior. Aspects of leader behavior are identified within an individual in the dispersed model where they are distributed among a relatively small group of selected individuals in the distributed model. Then in the fourth column we see a major difference in how leadership is “shared”. We shift from the “pieces of the leadership pie” view, to a co-created process model of leadership. Here is where ELT and relational models are very similar. The difference is a nuanced one of emphasis. Relational models consider the roles to be negotiated and co-created between individuals or small groups. ELT sees this role negotiation as a collective social process which, to outsiders, is likely to appear more fluid and dynamic than relational leader role negotiations.
- (6) *Hierarchy*: Our next category is hierarchy. Hierarchy may be subverted or evaded by the self-leadership aspects of the Dispersed model. As described by Brown and Gioia (2002), “The dispersed view (Bryman, 1996) encompasses self-leadership, empowerment, and leading-others-to-lead-themselves as bona fide leadership examples (p. 410)”. This model seems to recognize that ultimately, each person is their own authority. The critique and dark side of this view is the idea that the “gaze” of external authority has merely become internalized, so that each person, like a trained dog, becomes more imprisoned by the internalized rules for behavior instead of becoming a more free self-leader.

For Brown and Gioia (2002), distributive leadership is “shared leadership within the top echelons” (p. 410). With distributed leadership, again we cut up the leadership pie. However, this time, the top echelons carefully decide who gets a piece of this pie. There is clearly a hierarchy involved and the only question is where do people fit in the hierarchy. Others may receive some pieces of leadership functions, but only at the pleasure of the top echelons, who are still and always on top of the (fairly unitary) hierarchy.

Relational views of leadership come closer to ELT and to indigenous-compatible views of leadership. Since relationships are “almost sacred” (Cajete, 2013) in indigenous cultures, they play a key role in every aspect of indigenous life, including and especially in something important like leadership (or what approximates leadership). We find aspects of authentic leadership (Ladkin and Spiller, 2013) may reflect a relational style of leadership that is compatible with traditional tribal practices, with an emphasis on shared values and trust.

Our premise with ELT is that anyone could become the top echelon. Further, such shifts in the “top” are an essential part of the process, not a disruption. All roles would be relatively equally valued.

In the role negotiations of relational leadership, we still see hierarchy as one of the main areas over which negotiations might occur, especially negotiations about the relative egalitarianism of the relations involved. As with the process-type relational leadership models, ELT breaks free of preconceived leadership notions, avoiding even the “entity” (Uhl-Bien, 2006) or potential functionalism of some relational approaches. Instead, as with the roles category (above), the distinction in this hierarchy row is the level at which hierarchy is negotiated: interpersonal, group, organizational, or societal.

We adopt the term “heterarchy” to reflect the nonhierarchical qualities of ELT. We define heterarchy as almost the opposite of hierarchy: i.e. heterarchy involves nonranked elements.

However, heterarchy, as we see it used by anthropologists (Joyce, 2009; Mills, 2000), may also include multiple and transient rankings. The key is that there is no one particular ranking or hierarchy rigidly in place over time. With ELT, hierarchy may be nonexistent, where organizational elements have no rank ordering, or else multiple types of rankings may exist.

With heterarchy, we see the fluid dynamic nature of ELT as it morphs into various structures, typically with unranked (nonhierarchical) organization. When occasional forms of hierarchies appear within heterarchical societies, it appears they are more egalitarian than we see in typical leadership hierarchies (Mezza-Garcia et al., 2014).

How does heterarchy relate to other concepts in Table 1? With heterarchy, the “top echelons” may vary from context to context. In the heterarchy, any node may emerge to create a new center. The “distributed” privileges are not fixed. Also, any function is relatively equal to any other function. The key difference between ELT heterarchy and traditional hierarchy is in the malleability of the ensemble. Here, the work of Gladstone and Pepion (2016) is instructive.

- (7) *Agency*: Who has agency in these models? Each individual has agency in the dispersed model, especially as self-leaders. The agency of nonleaders is not addressed. In the distributed model, agency can be shared in a top-down fashion. Again, nonleaders are not recognized as having agency.

In the process-oriented relational model, the negotiation of leadership may occur anywhere, in any shape, in the organization, with no prior preconception of what constitutes leader behavior. These negotiations are typically viewed as interpersonal, and are rarely addressed at the organizational or societal level. For ELT, such role negotiation occurs first at the societal level.

ELT adopts the indigenous perspective that all elements of the planet, including plants and animals and rocks and rivers, are alive. Because they are alive and in our stories, they have agency. When a flood washes out a bridge, that is agency. ELT’s material storytelling recognizes the agential role of the material world in our stories. (See further discussion of material storytelling under item #9 below.)

- (8) *Nature of the game*: For dispersed leadership, leadership is an intrapersonal game, especially the self-leadership versions. For distributed leadership, there are in-groups and out-groups in an inter-group zero-sum game. Relational leadership is the ultimate interpersonal game, where the whole point and meaning of the game resides not in individuals but in the between-ness of co-creation. ELT’s game is a non-zero-sum communal game of all for one and one for all.
- (9) *Storytelling*: The same leadership story may be told in different ways, depending on the format, or “antenarrative” structure chosen. Leadership stories may have antenarrative structures that are linear (A to B to C), cyclical (A–B–C, A–B–C), spiral (A–B–C, A–B–C–D), or rhizomatic (A1–B1–C1, B1–D1–E1, etc.). There is also typically a fractal aspect of large-scale repeating patterns in most storytelling.

The antenarrative is the container which holds the story. As such, it can affect how inclusive the story is, how stable the story is, whose voice is heard, and other such factors. How we choose to construct our story influences how we make sense of our experience.

Further, our story can change our experience of a situation, and transform the experience from, for example, a romance to a comedy, or a comedy to a tragedy. We might recognize we are stuck in a repetitive dysfunctional cycle, and then open up our story to new elements, creating a positive upsurging spiral (Boje, 2008).

We observe a tendency towards different types of antenarrative structures in the categories of leadership models in Table 1. Dispersed leadership storytelling is fractal, seeing “the universe in a grain of sand”, or all of leadership within one person. Fractal stories involve large scale repeating patterns. Distributed models have storytelling contained by the beginning-middle-end (BME) format, fixed and rigid, typically with linear cause-and-effect plotting. Relational storytelling is cyclical, as when people repeat cycles in their relationships, whether desired or undesired. Relational storytelling, because of its more flexible process-orientedness, can also be spiral storytelling, involving upward or downward spirals as relationships improve or deteriorate.

### *Part 3: Theoretical building blocks*

- (1) Poststructuralist Archeology: the “systemicities” of rhizomatic, heterarchical social structures
- (2) Native Science: the inclusivity, complexity, and fluidity of indigenous scholarship
- (3) Collectivism

In this section, we elaborate on key concepts which support ELT as a dynamic, process oriented, relational leadership model. We find historical evidence of this model in more recent archeological studies of the prehispanic southwest (Joyce, 2010; Mills, 2000). We see that poststructuralism in archeology opened a door for a new understanding of leadership and organizing in this ancient region of the Americas.

When archeologists were faced with contradictory indications of egalitarianism along with chiefdoms, they found the egalitarian-hierarchical dimension alone unable to explain the diversity they saw. One step to addressing this limitation in older conceptualizations was through more poststructuralist approaches to archeology (Feinman, 2000). These newer approaches also led to the introduction of the concept of heterarchy to aid our understanding of those ancient cultures.

*Poststructuralist archeology.* Rather than the traditional theories of functionalism, open systems (including complex adaptive systems, CAS), and neo-evolutionary history, the prehispanic Chaco Canyon to Oaxaca Valley is being retheorized from a poststructuralist perspective (Joyce, 2009; Mills, 2000). This section considers the storytelling systemicities and the post-structuralist implications of this retheorizing for relational leadership theories and for ELT regarding collectivism and egalitarianism.

“Given the influence of systems theory and cultural evolutionism, archaeological theory has tended to view the past as the unfolding of general laws of social process and evolution (e.g. Flannery, 1972: 32). Poststructural theory challenges the idea that history is predetermined, “involving a sequence of episodic transitions from one stable system to another, which minimizes historical transformation and contingency” (p. 32).

Grand narratives of systems theory and organic evolution ignore the interplay of the lives and living stories of people, their material conditions, practices, and meanings.

Poststructuralism (Bourdieu, 1977; Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1979; Latour, 2005; Sewell, 1992), on the other hand, addresses the fragmented, contingent, fractured, and contested actions of people. Grand narrative (the story of macro trends) is focused on issues of chronology and normative ideas. “Norms were seen as reflected in the distribution of different suites of artifacts across space, such that the lives and actions of people were often minimized in archaeological explanations of the past” (Joyce, 2010: 18).

So, for example, when archeological studies identify the distribution of rare and presumed valuable clay pots, and see that such distribution is very limited, the archeologists begin to construct a story of privilege. When the remains of a community give evidence of large-scale ceremonies due to the housing available and storage for large quantities of foods and pottery, archeologists might see a society where more status is accorded to spiritual life than to economic possessions. However, such perceptions may have been distorted by the structuralist tendencies to look for “the” story and “the” hierarchy and status structure. With poststructuralism, this has changed.

We see a difference in how archeology tells its stories today. In reaction to “holism of systems theory, archeologists equate agency with western notions of individualism and economic rationality” (Joyce, 2010: 25). Instead, processual theories reject the normative approach that unites systems theory, ecological functionalism and cultural evolutionary theory. This poststructural shift in archeology is parallel to the shift in leadership theory to process-oriented relational co-creation leadership perspectives.

Current science has gone beyond interpreting such change from a systems theory or functional approach. Joyce (2010) notes the shortcoming of systems approaches and functionalism. The story that emerges from systems theory assumes a bounded “whole” identifiable system, with hierarchically driven change from the power elites as they rationally seek predictable functionalist outcomes. (Does this start to sound like our structuralist theories of leadership?) This sort of abstract rationalist storytelling seeks a “coherence” which may be divorced from the material conditions of everyday life.

Quantum storytelling includes material conditions (Boje and Henderson, 2014). “A cave is considered sacred because of a combination of material features like how it projects beneath the surface of the earth and its darkness, along with the meanings that have been given to these properties as passageways to the divine world of deities and ancestors” (Joyce, 2010: 22). In short, as Barad (2007) puts it, there is intra-activity of the materialism *with* the discourse of the storytelling. We find this materialism missing in most leadership theories. ELT brings in materialism by rejecting the false dualism of materialism versus idealism or discourse.

Poststructuralism is evident in quantum storytelling, which admits material objects into our stories as well as human subjectivities. Quantum storytelling is sustained in a place, over time, as material resources are enacted with the storytelling practices. “Poststructural theory therefore rejects the dualism between materialism and idealism, instead material resources and cultural principles are seen as mutually constituting, which is what we refer to as materiality” (Joyce, 2010: 22).

Quantum storytelling and material storytelling reject the dualism of materialism and story. Rather material resources and storytelling are seen as mutually constituting. This contrasts with system theories that view materialism and discourse as distinct, or causally privilege the ideational coherence of system over fragmentation and becoming.

**Systemicities.** Systems theories often make neo-evolutionism assumptions, and view human activity as caused by abstract high-level forces such as functioning of ecological systems or

unfolding universal laws of history (Joyce, 2010: 288). Systems theory assumes a static, synchronic mode of ontology and analysis. Systemicity is an alternative to whole systems thinking, where systems and structures are always in a state of becoming. The ELT approach is based on systemicity, on recursivity of social life, where systems are in a state of becoming rather than coherence and wholeness.

Joyce (2010: 284) says “Rather than assuming that social systems are integrated and coherent, a hallmark of functionalist theory, I view societies as fragmented and contested to varying genres such that there is never complete closure to any system of social relations”. Joyce (2010) traces the communal leadership in the Valley of Oaxaca before the centralized leadership took root (p. 209, 22), and then after when local communities and/or barrios were largely excluded (p. 197).

Ancient Oaxaca (Joyce, 2010) is an example of how a web of fragmented affiliations of men, women, children, elders, farmers, merchants, potters, weavers, priests, soldiers, rulers, scribes, architects, and many other social personae—changed dramatically through the prehispanic period (Joyce, 2010: 288). The village and family were loosely affiliated with a few practices that created a sense of shared history and identity (p. 288). There were minimal inequalities in wealth and power. Then there was a period of more centralized leadership (Joyce, 2010: 209).

Joyce (2010) rejects the typical evolution and climatic change explanation of cultural and social change observed in this ancient society of Oaxaca. He points out example after example of the ways hereditary influences and corporate institutions, despite egalitarian symbolism on monumental buildings, were eroded. Instead, the material conditions of wealthy and commoner were becoming apparent in the Valley of Oaxaca.

Joyce (2010: 292) describes the importance of adapting large-scale rituals, controlling access to ceremonial roles, making decisions within nucleated centers of corporate federations, and a “loosely affiliated, unstable, and prone to fission” collectivity. The conflicting identities, growing inequalities, and changing status of subject positions of the ancient Southwest Mesoamerica, called for a more participatory, distributed, and relational approach to leadership than is in the old functionalist accounts.

Social systemicities (Boje, 2008) are defined as “instantiations of ongoing social practice simultaneously embedded in and both reproducing and transforming historical traditions” (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992). Systems theory privileges integrated coherent cultural and social evolution. The alternative that Joyce offers is highly fragmented and contested practices, meanings, and institutions (Joyce, 2010: 288). This systemicities approach recognizes that nonelites such as farmers, craftspeople, children, elders, and so on have agency.

In summary, by going beyond systems theory and functional approaches, the archeological studies of the prehispanic southwest reflect poststructural, nondualistic perspectives. From this viewpoint, material conditions intra-act with discourse. Outcomes are less deterministic, more processual, and more compatible with historical transformation and change. These qualities are also compatible with process approaches to relational leadership theories (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Ensemble leadership theory is poststructuralist rather than functionalist. “Poststructural theory does not assume that societies exist as social wholes as in a systems theory and other functionalist accounts” (Joyce, 2010: 288). People’s affiliations are webbed, nested, overlapping, complex, and partially contradictory, and change through time (Joyce, 2010: 288).

Next, we consider how the burgeoning field of indigenous scholarship contributes to our understanding of collectivism, relationality, and heterarchy.

*Native science.* We consider three topics from the perspective of indigenous scholarship: relationships, dualisms, and status. These three topics are viewed differently within the context of indigenous ontology. Understanding these differences contributes to understanding the context and indigenous roots of ELT.

Work by Vizenor (2006) on survivance attests to the materiality of storytelling, to how the stories of a tribe are the oral record of where to find food, how the culture itself survives. Cajete's (2000) *Native Science* focuses on the ways in which the practices of the community in relation to its environment, is a kind of indigenous science of the ecology and how the tribes live in relationship to it. Both these Native American scholars contribute to our understanding of the importance to storytelling of place, and of landscape. These elements are critical to any indigenous theories, and also to our theory of Ensemble Leadership; they are notably absent (except for Ropo et al., 2013) in leadership literature.

Relationships are different in indigenous perspectives, and not only because they include relationships with the natural world. Traditional leadership not only limits our cast of characters to humans, but also limits the focus to power relationships. These relationships are important primarily as they are seen as the means to common goals and outcomes. In contrast, relationships are goals in themselves in indigenous cultures (TwoTrees, 2014). The primary goals are the harmony and balance within the relationships. This plays out in ensemble leadership as the view that leadership emerges as co-created from relationships. This co-creative aspect is compatible with Latour's (2005) Actor Network theory. Further, it is reflected in the newer "relational" approaches to leadership.

Dualisms feature prominently in traditional leadership theory: leader–follower, individual–group, first–last, etc. Indigenous thought avoids dualisms (Jojola, 2004; Waters, 2004), and instead focuses on multiplicity and integrative complexity (Cajete, *Native Science*). ELT features a nonbinary view especially regarding hierarchy as opposed to egalitarianism, discussed next.

Status is different in heterarchical structures. Hierarchies in traditional leadership theories are usually stable structures with powerful on top and less powerful below them. Indigenous thought, being more circular, gives rise to values and practices that are more networked, and especially more rhizomatic, where any node may become the center.

*Collectivism.* The dualistic nature of Eurowestern thought gives rise to many cross-cultural misunderstandings (Jojola, 2004; Waters, 2004). The individual/group dualism is central to the leader concept and to the very word leadership. Leadership traditionally focuses on "the" leader. In contrast, Ladkin and Spiller (2013: 1) say that "... leadership is a relational phenomena, not something that can ever be distilled down to the actions of one 'leader' ... that involves taking up the leader 'role'". This is in contrast to other authentic leadership literature, which "focuses on the individual 'leader'" (p. 1). This is also a sharp contrast to the more recent trends in collective leadership such as relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006, 2009), where leadership cannot occur without the between-ness of a co-created relationship.

From an indigenous view, the individual/group dualism is irrelevant or possibly nonexistent as a dualism (Cordova, 2007). Indigenous peoples may see the self as the same as the tribe, just as holons each incorporate the whole system within each part. This less-important concept of the "self" or the "individual" contributes to the high importance placed on relationship and respect (Rosile et al., 2011) within indigenous cultures.

Instead of the individual "hero" leader, leadership is enacted, in many tribes, throughout the tribe. However, historically, the Western colonists, the Federal government, and the

military, expected that there be one, male leader of each tribe, rather than some ensemble of leaders, both male and female. This history altered the expressions of tribal leadership which survive today.

An aspect of indigenous collectivism is the valuing of relationships “as almost sacred” (Cajete, 2013). We find resonance between this indigenous emphasis on collectivity and relationship in the recent interest in collaborative leadership (Denis et al., 2012) as an aspect of relational leadership theorizing. Raeline’s (2014) relationship model avoids the individual-hero leader as well as the leader–follower dualism by “reframing leadership as collaborative agency”. This is a shared or collective leadership practice activated by social exchange. The model is collaborative with the involvement of partners, including community, as opposed to individual perspectives (Raeline, 2014).

The relational leadership model is very compatible with indigenous values and practices (Uhl-Bien, 2006, 2009) of collectivism and collaboration. These relational views of leadership provide an interesting harking-back to Follett’s (in Boje and Rosile, 2001) power-over versus power-with. Follett surfaces again in relation to “collaborative” leadership models (Mendenhall and Marsh, 2010). The increased interest in collaborative leadership is apparent in innovative efforts to enhance leaders’ collaborative skills, including theatre (Boje et al., 2015; Gagnon et al., 2012; Kupers, 2013) and action research (Raelin, 2006).

While Raeline may be collaborative, still, nonhumans are not seen as agential. With the notable exception of Ropo et al. (2013), most leadership theories overlook the nonhuman world. These authors (Ropo et al., 2013) assert physical spaces can stand in as leaders because spaces can lead people by inciting sense-based experiences which create unique environments. This is somewhat similar to indigenous conceptions of place (Basso, 1996). ELT extends the groundbreaking work of Ropo, Sauer, and Salovaara with a strong core of material storytelling, whereby material and discursive conditions intra-act (Barad, 2007).

#### *Part 4: Context, application, limitations, and conclusion*

We have discussed above many missing pieces which ELT brings to traditional leadership from ELT’s indigenous roots. In general, we see ELT as a more collectivist, relational, decentered/rhizomatic, and egalitarian/heterarchical model of leadership than most traditional models. Next, we place ELT within the context of its indigenous-based heritage and the Eurowestern traditional leadership field.

**Context.** Indigenous cultures are highly contextual. The implications of the indigenous context, like other racial and ethnic contexts, have been largely overlooked in leadership literature (Ospina and Foldy, 2009). Yet it is essential that we understand the indigenous context. Otherwise we run the risk of being like the white tourist woman who commented on an American Indian’s alligator tooth necklace. “I suppose it’s like pearls to us”. “Oh no”, said the Indian. “Anyone can open an oyster”.

To bolster our understanding of context, we provide an overview and comparison of traditional leadership, indigenous values and practices, and ELT according to 11 categories, as follows: (1) Roles of humans; (2) Roles of nonhumans; (3) Relationships; (4) Theories; (5) Dualisms; (6) Status; (7) Power; (8) Processes; (9) Antenarrative structure; (10) Story cast of characters; (11) Plot trajectories. These dimensions are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Traditional leadership theory, indigenous values and practices, and ensemble leadership theory.

Dimension/Viewpoint	Traditional leadership	Indigenous values and practices	Ensemble leadership
1. Roles of humans	Humans are center	Nonhuman-centric	Latour's actor network theory; quasi-objects (Serres) as centers of networks of power
2. Roles of nonhumans	Nonhumans are the (nonagential) Setting or Situation, the acted-upon	Nonhumans are actors and characters in the story, and sources of wisdom	Wisdom from the natural world and voices of ancestors
3. Relationships	Based on the power to influence upwardly or downwardly among ranked humans; linear; based on common goals or outcomes	Sacred in themselves; emphasize harmony and balance with non-humans and humans; networked	Relationships are co-created and relatively egalitarian
4. Theories	Cause-effect linearity	Nonlinear	Rhizomatic
5. Dualisms	Lead/follow	Integrative complexity; nondualistic	Morphing, nonbinary
6. Status	Individual/group (Cordova)	Heterarchical (Mills) and rhizomatic	Dynamic, egalitarian, heterarchical
7. Power	Power-over concept with marginal consideration of power-with (Follett)	Power-with concept is embedded in tribal cultural context	Harmony and balance
8. Processes	Seek the norm, manipulate variables	Seek the exception, observe natural world	Organic emergence
9. Antenarrative structure	Linear, cyclical, spiral	Linear, cyclical, spiral, and rhizomatic assemblage	Linear, cyclical, spiral, and rhizomatic assemblage
10. Story cast of characters	Humans in defined roles and power relationships within a given BME story	Nonhumans and humans in networks of nonhierarchical relationships of mutual reciprocal behaviors (Cajete)	Inclusive of non-humans and responsive to resources and situations
11. Plot trajectories	Focused, goal-oriented	Diffused, circular, with multiple simultaneous directions	Tamara-land with multiple and simultaneous plots

- (1) Roles of humans. The indigenous world is nonhuman-centric. This implies that for leadership and for change, humans might not be the primary driving force in a given situation. Latour (2005) positions human actors within networks, which include ideas and material objects. Such views are underrepresented in leadership literature.
- (2) Roles of nonhumans. Nonhumans are barely recognized in traditional leadership literature, and at best, merely part of the furniture, the stage or the set, for our human actors. Indigenous wisdom (Cajete, 2013; Eder, 2010) not only recognizes nonhuman life, but accords the natural world a starring role in providing wisdom and guidance to us ignorant humans. Thus, ELT's collectivity is different from most collectivity leadership because ELT includes nonhuman voices.
- (3) Relationships. We recognize that for many indigenous cultures, relationships are ends in themselves (Cajete, 2013; TwoTrees, 2013). Achieving harmony and balance in relationships, including nonhumans as well as humans, is a primary goal of life for some indigenous cultures. In contrast, traditional leadership literature categorizes relationships as upward, downward, or lateral, based on relative power, and on common goals or outcomes. This has changed with the recent emphasis on relational leadership, with its focus on the process aspects of relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006, 2009). We applaud this direction in leadership research, and see ELT contributing to further development of co-created and relatively egalitarian leader relationships.
- (4) Theories. Most traditional leadership literature still reflects cause-effect linearity, and the search for same-ness and generalizability (with the notable exception of some process-oriented relational leadership theories). In contrast, "Native Science" (Cajete, 2000) is nonlinear, and seeks the anomaly and the exception. ELT is nonlinear, and rooted in the rhizome, a complex adaptive network in which any node may become a new center. Here, we follow Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Rhizomes are the structures of heterarchy, discussed above.
- (5) Dualisms. Dualisms characterize Eurowestern thinking overall, and leadership theorizing especially is typically dualistic. Lead/follow, individual/group, top/bottom, management/employee, are all typical of the black-white way we try to know one thing as it exists in contrast to its opposite. Since one half of a dualism (usually the first-mentioned term) is usually considered superior to the other half, dualisms are the building blocks of rank and of hierarchy.

Indigenous ways-of-knowing are quite different. They reflect nondualistic integrative complexity and dynamism (Cajete, 2000). What is important is not what category we can put something into, but rather what and how something moves and changes. ELT is focused on the changing, the morphing from one thing to another, and the other is not necessarily the either-or opposite. This avoidance of dualistic rankings is a key component of heterarchy.

- (6) Status. Status in traditional leadership literature is linked to the leader-follower dualism, and thus also to hierarchy. Hierarchies tend to be static and rigid. In contrast, indigenous cultures often reflect heterarchy. Heterarchy is more egalitarian and avoids rank ordering, or employs multiple rankings which change rapidly. ELT reflects the dynamic, egalitarian, and heterarchical characteristics of indigenous cultures.
- (7) Power. Power, in traditional leadership, is most often power-over, with only marginal consideration of power-with (Mendenhall and Marsh, 2010). In contrast, with the above-described focus on relationship and the lack of dualistic concepts of

individual–group, the indigenous context most often exhibits a tendency toward a more egalitarian power-with (Mendenhall and Marsh, 2010). The goal of power-with is harmony and balance.

- (8) Processes. Eurowestern science of leadership manipulates variables to seek the norm to determine “truth.” Indigenous science seeks the exception, and seeks to unobtrusively observe the natural world to find wisdom. ELT adopts this organic emergence of wisdom within the context of the collective.
- (9) Antenarrative structure. The “ante” narrative is the story before it has become “the” story. At this “before” stage, antenarrative structures have a strong influence on the resulting story. Traditional leadership literature is composed of stories which are typically linear, cyclical, or spiral in their antenarrative structure. ELT, like indigenous storytelling, is nonlinear and often reflects a rhizomatic assemblage (see Theories and Status discussions above).
- (10) Story cast of characters. The traditional leadership stories feature humans in well-defined roles of power, in stories with clear beginning-middle-end (BME) linear structures (see Antenarrative Structure above). Our cast of characters for indigenous stories includes nonhumans in networks of nonhierarchical relationships with mutual reciprocal behaviors (Cajete, 2000). With this expanded cast of characters, ELT is more responsive to resources and situations, to the material conditions of co-created storytelling.
- (11) Plot trajectories. The traditional leadership literature’s BME story lines tend to have focused, goal-oriented plots which are neatly wrapped up at “The End”. In the indigenous world, life is experienced as more diffused and circular, with multiple simultaneous directions. In this world, ELT is a Tamara-land with multiple and simultaneous plots. (Note: Tamara is a famous play taking place in many rooms simultaneously, as the play-goers chase plot-lines from room to room at will, each play-goer co-creating their own sequence and story. See Boje et al. (2015) for more on organizations as Tamara-land.)

With ELT’s roots in prehispanic Mesoamerican cultures and southwestern US indigenous cultures, the inevitable question arises: what is the viability of ELT in today’s world? This is clearly a potential limitation.

*Application.* As an example of ELT in action, we offer the story of Peterson Zah. Zah is one of the best-known and most-respected leaders in the history of the 200,000-member Navajo Nation. The Arizona State University web site (<http://www.asu.edu/feature/includes/spring05/readmore/zah2.html>) reports that Zah was elected the Navajo Nation’s first President in 1990 when the tribe changed its leadership structure away from a tribal council Chair. He had a long history of leadership in many tribal organizations. In 10 years at Arizona State University, he doubled that school’s native student enrollment, and perhaps more impressively, increased the native student retention rate from 43% to 70%. While President, he created a tribal trust fund which has grown to over a billion dollars. He was selected as one of the 100 most important American Indians of the last century.

Traditionally, in Diné (Navajo) leadership principles, the role of authority is bestowed with sanctity by the people, for the best interest of the people, and only in response to specific issues requiring resolution. Historically, there were different leaders for times of peace and times of war; there were multiple leaders from various families. Often grandmothers were the primary speakers. This was very different from the single male “leader” expected by Euro-Westerners.

Leadership for the Diné according to former Navajo Nation President Zah (2013) has changed. Zah contends he was just fortunate enough to have served as the highest authority at the direction of “visionary” leaders during his presidential tenure. He speaks of tribal delegates working together in honesty for the children of the tribe, and with such forethought and prudence that he was lucky to have witnessed such leadership. He speaks of a time then these leaders truly listened to one another without imposed time limits and honored the authority they were given. Examples of egalitarian leadership qualities are evident in grandmothers as decision makers and leaders selected based on various qualities as opposed to family or class ties.

For tribes in the southwestern US today, the impact of “contact” with non-Native peoples has been dramatic, and not always for the good. Unfortunately, some of the fluid, de-centered, and nonhierarchical qualities of ensemble leadership that existed in tribal cultures are changing or have changed fairly quickly to match dominant Eurowestern society’s expectations and conventions.

We see Peterson Zah as a tribal leader (and not the only one) whose success embodies the best of traditional tribal values and practices, even as he laments the deterioration of these traditional values that he claims contributed to his success. We take to heart his concerns, as they constitute the preconditions necessary for the success of ELT. These preconditions include true collective consciousness, so that individuals have sensitivity to the good of all in the human and nonhuman worlds. These preconditions include placing priority on harmonious and balanced relationships. We paraphrase this as people and planet over profit, with decisions negotiated in processes of co-creating a relational leadership. Finally, the third and final precondition is more egalitarian, nonhierarchical, flexible, and fluid organizational structures termed heterarchies.

There are already movements underway within the leadership field to promote these three preconditions of a collectivist, relational, and more egalitarian heterarchical societies. If we wish to promote these values in society, we must also promote them in our conceptions of leadership. We propose ELT as a time-proven way to lead that reinforces collectivism, relationality, and heterarchical values in society.

*Limitations.* To address and minimize the limitations of ELT, we have carefully described the context of the prehispanic indigenous cultures which gave rise to this model. In particular, we focused on collectivism, relationality, and egalitarian heterarchy as three key and interdependent features of ELT arising from its indigenous roots. These three features of ELT are also the critical assumptions necessary for conditions conducive to ELT. Due to their interdependency, we believe one will not work without the other two in this trio. Meeting these three conditions is a tall order, yet possible (based on Zah’s example) and worth pursuing. While these three preconditions pose a serious limitation to the viability of ELT today, we are reassured by the recent growth in areas sympathetic to ELT: collective leadership models, process-oriented relational leadership theories, and rhizomatic network theories. As each of these areas continues to blossom, ELT is ready with a leadership model suited to that world.

*Conclusions.* Is ensemble leadership a utopian romanticized view of the past? Is there really a need, or even a use, for Ensemble leadership in today’s less-than-ideal world? We found an answer in an unexpected place: in the *Journal of Sociocybernetics* (Vol. 12, No.1/2, 2014) in “Computational Aspects of Ancient Social Heterarchies: Learning how to Address

Contemporary Global Challenges". This study looks at how centralized hierarchical controls may limit information processing capacity, as well as the ability to take action in crises. Instead:

...some older cultures whose political structure was more heterarchically organized, such as found in pre-Hispanic Colombia, were adaptive even without advanced scientific knowledge and without powerful top-down control.

The authors recommend further study of these ancient heterarchical processes of management, which they feel will promote

... social systems with a balance of flexibility and robustness, i.e., systems that do not rely on the current ideal of rule-based control of all systemic aspects. (Mezza-Garcia et al., 2014)

We hope the above article, and related articles in the Indigenous Leadership Special Issue, herald a new appreciation for indigenous wisdom. We offer ELT as a model of an alternative way for society to conceptualize leaders and leadership, based on that ancient wisdom. It happened before, we catch glimpses of it today, and it can flourish again.

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### Author biographies

**Grace Ann Rosile** (PhD), Professor of Management at New Mexico State University, studies organizational storytelling, ethics, and pedagogy. She was the lead co-author on “Storytelling Diamond: An Antenarrative Integration of the Six Facets of Storytelling in Organization Research Design” (2013) in organizational research methods (ORM). She is the principle investigator and writer on a half-hour film “Tribal Wisdom for Business Ethics,” aired on KRWG public television. The film and her six related shorter films with instructor teaching notes are all available for free at <http://business.nmsu.edu/research/programs/daniels-ethics/tribal-ethics/>. She is editor of the 2016 book *Tribal Wisdom for Business Ethics*. Rosile sits on three academic boards, has articles in a dozen scholarly journals, and many book chapters. She also created training in embodied leadership, teamwork, and communication using structured experiences with horses called “Horse Sense At Work” ([www.horsesenseatwork.com](http://www.horsesenseatwork.com)).

**David M Boje** holds the Wells Fargo Professorship, Distinguished University Professor, and Bill Daniels Ethics Fellow in Management Department at New Mexico State University. Professor Boje also has an honorary doctorate from Aalborg University, with a special affiliation to the Material Storytelling Lab. His new book, *Organizational Change and Global Standardization: Solutions to Standards and Norms Overwhelming Organizations*. He is the president of Veterans Theater Foundation that does work with veterans including the homeless veterans. This is combined with Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Events. His specialty is storytelling theory and research. <http://davidboje/vita>

**Carma M Claw** is a doctoral student at New Mexico State University studying Organizational Behavior and Leadership. She is a contributor to the 2016 book *Tribal Wisdom for Business Ethics*.