

# **THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE**

**An investigation into the distribution, practice  
and discursive processes of leadership in  
universities and other large organisations**

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of Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership Studies, **February 2010**.

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis outlines a personal attempt to explore leadership in a holistic manner that recognises the contribution of both individuals and the collective whilst remaining sensitive to contextual factors. It endeavours to do this through presentation, analysis and discussion of two empirical studies of leadership, informed by distributed and practice perspectives, which regard leadership as a shared and contextually situated social process. The thesis begins with an overview of leadership theory and research, proposing that the time is right for a reframing of the field of leadership studies in order to redress the balance accorded to individual and collective accounts of leadership; review how we recognise, reward and develop leadership; and revisit our methodologies and approaches to leadership enquiry. The first empirical study investigates perceptions and experiences of leadership in the UK higher education sector, proposing that whilst leadership may be considered as widely dispersed, the notion of ‘distributed leadership’ also carries a powerful rhetorical function that may mask an uneven distribution of power, resources and rewards. The second empirical study explores the notion of ‘leadership-as-practice’ in three large, complex organisations outside the HE sector, and reveals the significant impact of discourse and sensemaking in shaping perceptions, experiences and the accomplishment of leadership for middle-senior level operational managers. The discussion chapter draws together the various themes explored in the thesis, in particular demonstrating the significance of issues of discourse, identity and purpose in making sense of the elusive nature of leadership practice. It is argued that a holistic representation of leadership remains difficult to achieve because of the manner in which grand Discourses and micro-level discourses of leadership interact to attribute the social process of leadership to the actions of individual leaders. The thesis concludes with a series of recommendations that highlight the value of a somewhat eclectic approach to leadership theory, research, practice and development that facilitates the emergence and recognition of contextually-appropriate ‘hybrid configurations’ of leadership.

Keywords: distributed leadership, leadership-as-practice, discourse, identity, power, rhetoric, sensemaking, leadership research, hybrid

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# FOREWORD

The subject of leadership has been of interest to scholars and practitioners for over two thousand years. Since the writing of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* and Sun Tzu's *Art of War* in 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC China, through the works of Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, Machiavelli in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Conrad and others over the following centuries, to the plethora of management and leadership gurus whose books now fill airport bookshops, numerous people have endeavoured to convey what it takes to be a great leader and the contribution that good leadership can make to groups, organisations and societies. Despite the level of attention given to the topic, however, there remains a certain mystery as to what leadership actually is and how to develop or nurture it, such that in 1985, in an article entitled *The Romance of Leadership*, Meindl et al. concluded that:

“It has become apparent that, after years of trying, we have been unable to generate an understanding of leadership that is both intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying. The concept of leadership remains elusive and enigmatic.” (Meindl et al., 1985, p. 78)

This thesis recounts the fruits of a personal journey, from 2004-2010, in which I, the author, endeavoured to explore and understand the elusive nature of leadership practice. During this time I was employed as a Research Fellow (and for the last 18 months as a lecturer) at the Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, and was fortunate enough to work alongside some very experienced and insightful colleagues who joined me for part, and in the case of Professor Jonathan Gosling all, of the journey that is presented here. Throughout this period of time I was involved in a number of leadership research projects, several worthy of a PhD in their own right, however in compiling this thesis I decided that the greatest contribution would come from focussing on two of the most significant of these projects through their ability to reveal something of the underlying processes of leadership and the manner in which it is constructed.

The focus of this thesis is on the distribution and practice of leadership in large and complex organisations, in particular universities, but also drawing on data from other sectors, including the military and private sector. In exploring these ideas, however, my aim is not to capture an objective account of how leadership occurs in these contexts (for I do not believe that such an account is possible) but rather, through consideration

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of the various ways in which leadership is described, experienced and enacted, to gain a greater appreciation of why it remains so elusive and what this elusiveness might tell us about the nature of leadership itself and the implications for leadership practice, research and development.

Throughout this period of enquiry, and from my initial registration for an MPhil/PhD in Leadership Studies, a number of common threads have run throughout my work. Specifically, I have been concerned with the following perennial issues in leadership and organisational studies: the links between the individual and collective, structure and agency, and theory and practice. Consequently, the fundamental question behind this thesis is *how to explore leadership in a holistic manner that recognises the contribution of both individuals and the collective whilst remaining sensitive to contextual factors*. It aims to go beyond a static representation of leadership practice and the process(es) of studying leadership to give an insight into how an understanding of aspects of leadership can emerge over time.

The pieces of research chosen for this dissertation represent two distinct and independent pieces of work connected through the primary involvement of myself in determining the research questions, approach and working through from data collection to analysis and interpretation. Whilst each could potentially be discussed and analysed in many ways, within this thesis I have chosen to focus specifically on a sub-set of findings from each study that gives some insight into a different yet significant facet of leadership practice and theory. Whilst both of the studies drawn upon in this thesis were conducted in association with collaborators in each case I took a principal role in the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and write-up and, in binding them together with a connecting narrative and integrative discussion, I believe that I can justifiably argue that the resultant thesis is my own unique contribution to the field - credit will be given where this is not the case.

An additional aim of this thesis is to reveal a 'behind the scenes' account of leadership research. It would have been entirely possible to focus on a single theoretical lens for this thesis - to articulate and present a clear rationale as to why this topic was worthy of enquiry, how my research method fitted with the aims, and to argue a strong case for the resultant conclusions. In so doing, however, I believe that I would have glossed over some fundamental issues. Our lives as researchers are not clearly delineated from one enquiry to another – we do not 'solve' one problem before moving on to the next. Rather our enquiries generate new questions that require further investigation which, in

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turn, lead to further questions... with the occasional illuminating insight along the way if you're lucky! Over the past six years I have come to realise that research into leadership should be considered not so much as a quest for truth but as a quest for understanding - a quest which may require the acceptance that there may well be multiple 'truths' and no final destination.

A similar conclusion was drawn by the authors of the book *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership* (Goethals and Sorenson, 2006) which arose from a five year process of enquiry and debate between an interdisciplinary group of leading US leadership scholars. First convened in 2001 by James MacGregor Burns, the group aimed to explore whether it would be possible to create an integrative theory of leadership. To cut to the chase, the aim of articulating an overarching theory of leadership studies was (for good reason) ultimately unsuccessful - there was no Holy Grail of leadership waiting to be found – however, like many quests the group soon realised that the journey was as important as the destination. What this book uncovers is the *process* of searching for a grand theory of leadership - the discussions, agreements, disagreements, brief moments of clarity and intractable dilemmas - rather than the *product* itself. As Joanne Ciulla concludes in the final chapter:

“I wondered if Burns was being coy about his real goals for this project[...] maybe the idea of finding a theory was just a ruse to get people talking[...] I think this project demonstrated, first, that you don't have to have a theory to be legitimate; second, a grand theory would not be helpful.” (Ciulla, 2006, p. 232)

In presenting the studies contained in this thesis an analogy comes to mind of snapshots from the banks of a river – they are static representations, fixed-in-time, of something that is, by its nature, continually shifting and ultimately beyond our grasp. Yet even a single vantage point from the river bank offers a changing collage of images as time passes, day moves into night, and the seasons change, revealing new information and experiences that may help inform our appreciation of the dynamics of the environment. Quite how useful this learning will be depends on our aims and intentions – whether we wish to study the inhabitants of the river, the aesthetic qualities of the image, the potential for commercial development, the volume and flow of the water, or if we simply seek some form of experience – relaxation, calm, adventure, etc.

In approaching this thesis I, like all researchers, bring a host of beliefs and aspirations with me that shape my engagement and render me an integral part of what is being studied. Thus, like the observer from the river bank I can not hope to capture leadership

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itself but, through time spent observing and reflecting upon its form, process and potency, invoke in the mind of the reader something of its splendour and mystery. Overall this is a thesis about 'Leadership Studies' as much as a particular study of leadership. It is inevitably somewhat autobiographical in tone, recounting my endeavours to come to terms with this slippery notion and my attempts to find meaning and purpose from this work. It is a story of my professional journey as an academic researching leadership and my various interactions with other leadership scholars and practitioners. In reading this thesis I invite you to sit with me a while and ponder on the nature of what remains one of the most significant yet contested phenomena of our times – the nature and purpose of leadership.