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Article Title: Toward "Socially Constructive" Social Constructions of Leadership

Year of publication: 2010

Link to published article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0893318909359086>

Publisher statement: None

**Towards ‘Socially Constructive’
Social Constructions of Leadership**

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Submission to the MCQ Special Issue on
‘Communication and the Social Construction of Leadership’
October 12, 2009

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Towards ‘Socially Constructive’ Social Constructions of Leadership

Introduction

In their introductory editorial essay for this special issue, David Grant and Gail Fairhurst have done us a great service by valiantly producing a ‘Sailing Guide’ to the Social Construction of Leadership (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). As with rounding the Capes, this is not a task for the faint of heart. A sailing guide is designed to provide vital knowledge about a particular sea or coast, providing us with charts, warnings about potential hazards and an indication where we might find safe havens in a storm. Their sailing guide does this to great effect as it skilfully ‘boxes the compass’ by revealing all of the potential directions that one might set one’s sail by if one was sufficiently foolhardy to embark on a cruise of the social construction of leadership!

The four empirical essays that are featured in this special issue pay tribute to the range and quality of work that is being undertaken by a growing number of leadership scholars who have chosen to set sail on this journey. The authors graphically point to the fresh and novel insights that can be yielded by taking this perspective. All four articles make a useful contribution towards the goal of providing a more balanced, more complete and, dare we say it, a more realistic understanding of the phenomenon of leadership.

However, it has not all been plain sailing, as the refreshingly frank yet constructive exchange of letters between Dennis Tourish and Kevin Barge that precedes this essay attests (Tourish & Barge, 2010). We appreciate their willingness to candidly speak of the kinds of doubts and concerns that all of us who work in this field harbour. In sum, we share their concerns that our work lacks a sense of historical continuity; that it tends to be written in an

impenetrable prose that is well nigh inaccessible to many leadership scholars (let alone those who might choose to learn from it); and that it generally fails to engage with practitioners in anything other than a token way. But most of all, we share their concern that, individually and collectively, leadership scholars are not doing enough to address the rarely asked but vital question posed by Dennis Tourish: ‘How can social constructionist perspectives on leadership help to make the world a better place?’ Or, following Kevin Barge’s suggestion regarding the need to move from a third-person to a first-person perspective: ‘How can *I* make *my* work help to create a better place?’

The Problem

Social constructionist approaches are often tarred with the same brush that afflicts Critical Management Studies (CMS) and that reflects Marx: great on critique but thin on alternative. Marx insisted this was because the future could not be written except by those engaged in writing it. But the consequence of this ‘misunderstanding’ was that his heirs claimed all kinds of futures could be legitimised through his communications. In effect, saying ‘nothing’ actually facilitated one of the greatest heists in history because Marx had already said enough to undermine the status quo without recognizing the law of unintended consequences. As Burke never actually said but should have, ‘It only takes the good ‘man’ to do nothing for evil to prevail’. So providing a critique without an alternative is not a position of moral supremacy but moral illiteracy.

But Social Constructionist approaches are notoriously diverse as the opening essay to this special issue attests and while, some may be willing to approach and play in the moral quagmire

of relativity (since everything is relative nothing can be known, or solid, or true, or right), it is more useful to understand why certain discourses prevail over others rather than naively claim that since everything is equally subjective nothing should prevail. If we take this line our interests might focus upon how more successful leaders construct situations and processes that seem to prevail while less successful leaders do not. What is it about the communications between leaders and followers and with all these groups that makes a difference? If we treat Symbolic Constructionism as a technology for understanding how and why leadership works, or doesn't, then this technology should enable us not just to dissent from existing successful schemas that we find obnoxious but to also construct alternative schemas that we believe should prevail instead. It isn't good enough to bewail the actions of the world's bankers but have no alternative in place. What we need to uncover is how the leadership of the banking system works if we seriously want to construct something better and what role does communications have in all this?

At the same time, this doesn't mean all our work should be dedicated to the construction of alternative systems or improving the lives of existing populations because (a) what these entail is always contested and (b) we often do not understand how this might occur anyway. So the notion of a 'socially constructive' social construction of leadership does not imply that we have the interests of everyone at heart because clearly we do not - in a contested political system there are very few occasions when anyone could claim homogeneity of interests and purpose. What we are suggesting here is that it is possible to generate a critique of the status quo and simultaneously provide alternatives that might be more equitable, or more efficient or even less equitable for the sake of efficiency etc.

This is nicely captured in the current claims about 'identity' at work and 'authentic leadership'. It is quite plausible to suggest that many of the current writings in these fields are designed to tie employees ever-tighter to the bosom of their employers - and also plausible to suggest that this might, in certain circumstances, be a good deal for all concerned. Of course, it might also be a manipulative ploy to extract even greater effort and to crush all thoughts of legitimate resistance. But the point is that Social Constructionist approaches are capable of examining how leaders manage to achieve these strategies, whether they are for their own selfish purposes or because they have the collective interests of their followers at heart.

A Proposal

So, how might leadership scholars of a social construction bent move forward in a quest to make the world a better place? We close this special issue we hope on a suitably constructive note by providing some initial thoughts about how this might be done. Following our co-editors' fine example we will also draw on a metaphor but, being both dedicated 'land-lubbers', we will move away from the nautical theme and draw on a territorial metaphor that reflects our background and interest in military leadership. We recognise that for many the notion of turning to the military for guidance as to how to make the world a better place will be highly problematic and deeply anathematic. However, in response we would submit that many of those who work in the military have grappled with this question for a considerably longer period than have and have done it in the knowledge that how they choose to resolve it has very real, very permanent life-and-death consequences.

The notion that we choose to draw upon is that of ‘Military Doctrine’. We want to raise the possibility that those leadership scholars who genuinely want to make their social constructionally-informed research count in other than the academic realm can learn something from this influential and enduring piece of social construction. A military doctrine is the concise expression of how military forces contribute to campaigns, major operations, battles and engagements (Posen, 1984). It is a guide to act, not a set of hard and fast rules. Doctrine provides a common frame of reference across the military. It links theory, history, experimentation, and practice. By way of example, the Canadian army defines military doctrine as:

A formal expression of military knowledge and thought, that the army accepts as being relevant at a given time, which covers the nature of conflict, the preparation of the army for conflict, and the method of engaging in conflict to achieve success... it is descriptive rather than prescriptive, requiring judgment in application. It does not establish dogma or provide a checklist of procedures, but is rather an authoritative guide, describing how the army thinks about fighting, not how to fight. As such it attempts to be definitive enough to guide military activity, yet versatile enough to accommodate a wide variety of situations (Canada Department of National Defence, 1998: iv-v).

‘Mission Command’ is the contemporary doctrine of many western forces and perfectly encapsulates the difference between a sailing guide and a mandated course: subordinates are asked to achieve a goal and educated as to the reasons for the goal, but not told how to achieve it (Grint, 2005). Military doctrine, then, is distinguished from military strategy in that the latter

provides the rationale for military operations whereas the former provides a common conceptual framework for a military service which endeavours to answer the following four questions:

- What the service perceives itself to be (“Who are we?”)
- What its mission is (“What do we do?”)
- How the mission is to be carried out (“How do we do that?”)
- How the mission has been carried out in history (“How did we do that in the past?”)

We obviously recognise that leadership scholars are by no mean neither a formalised or regimented ‘service’ nor should they wish to be. Nor are we advocating creating such an entity as the academy is already sufficiently institutionalised. However, we advocate that we are in ‘service’ and, it is clear from Fairhurst and Grant’s introductory essay, that the ‘we’ is now quite a growing and a substantial potential force especially when those who have chosen to conflate leadership with management are taken into account. To *whom* we serve and for *what* purpose is something that might best be determined by a doctrine of our own creation.

It is likely given our scale and the stage in our development that the guerrilla tactics that we have employed to date against the functionalist establishment within leadership scholarship that is so elegantly described by Tourish and Barge (2010), while personally satisfying, may need to be revisited and re-cast. It is possible after all that we may have been focusing on the wrong enemy. Indeed, we might even consider joining forces with our ‘auld foe’, as proposed by Fairhurst (2007), to tackle a much greater and far more menacing enemy that is characterised by ignorance, tyranny, fear and oppression. The creation of a ‘leadership scholarship doctrine’ for leadership scholars of *all* methodological persuasions might provide a usefully constructive

means to bring those individuals and factions together who, as it turns out, may share a common purpose yet pursue different methods to reach that purpose. This doctrine would obviously need to be focused and yet inclusive, idealistic and yet pragmatic, forward-looking and yet solidly founded on our past approaches and achievements.

In advocating the need for a doctrine to guide our collective purpose we are suggesting that leadership scholars might have to consider the prospect of exhibiting and exerting some kind of leadership not only among our selves but also for a much wider community that we choose to serve. As with all leadership, this would entail making some sacrifices and trade-offs. For example, we may have to give up some of our much cherished autonomy. Collection action requires both active and courageous following as well leading (Chaleff, 2003). We will have to find ways to engage with bigger, issues of local, national and global import in real time – such as health care reform, human trafficking and global warming – and not be perennially chasing after the horse long after it has bolted because of ridiculously long publishing deadlines. This will require us to be ‘ready, willing and able’ to engage with the media rather than stand on the sidelines bemoaning the poor quality of media coverage or ridiculing those of our colleagues who have been had the gumption to work within rather than outside the media machine (Guthey, Clark & Jackson, 2009).

Perhaps most dramatically, developing a doctrine that will truly focus our efforts on making the world a better place, might put us in a position where we have to work *with* versus *against* those who are actually holding formal leadership positions. We have developed a remarkably sophisticated facility to critique on many levels every thing they say or do but what would be say to them directly by way of advice to change their ways. An implicit assumption runs through much of our work on the social construction of leadership that followers (i.e. those

who are not currently leading) are the true repository of leadership wisdom by virtue of the fact that they are not innocent (Shamir et al, 2007). We could, therefore, be accused, somewhat ironically of romanticising the follower, while demonising the leader, and yet, what would we discover if we were to apply the same degree of critical scrutiny to followers that we routinely apply to leaders?

Finally, if we choose to adhere to a purposeful doctrine, we may have to make some hard choices about how we dedicate our time and to whom we dedicate it. Instead of singularly devoting ourselves to the pursuit of getting published in top-tier journals, we may have to be prepared to walk away from the publishing production line for prolonged periods, to lend a hand in our respective communities and get directly involved in real life, consequential leadership challenges in either a leadership or an advisory capacity. The ‘Service’ section of our annual reports will begin to receive as much, if not more scrutiny, as the ‘Research’ and ‘Teaching’ sections. Sabbatical leaves spent in quiet contemplation in far flung, well-appointed academic institutions might also become a thing of the past. Instead, we will be judged by the severity of the leadership challenge that we took on during the leave period and the impact we were able to make upon it, not the length of the list of publications that were produced. We realise that this substantial change of tack runs very much against the wind and is unlikely to unleash unbridled enthusiasm among our colleagues in business schools and departments of communications around the world. However, if leadership scholars aren’t prepared to challenge the status quo and initiate long overdue change within in the academy, then who will?

Conclusion

We began this special issue with a sailing metaphor. As the Sailing Guide demonstrated we currently have an impressive array of powerful nautical craft from which to choose to sail in and the seas have never been as full or as inviting. By way of contrast, we closed the special issue with a military metaphor. Drawing on the notion of Military Doctrine our purpose was not to provide a guide to the terrain or give orders as to how to engage in that terrain. It was instead a plea for leadership scholars us to think seriously about *why* we choose to sail and *where* we need to sail to. We submit that it is time, given the stage that we are at our in our development, and, more importantly, given the worrying state of the world that we live in, that we begin to develop a clearer and more compelling sense of our collective purpose as leadership scholars. We worry that, if this task is ignored and placed in the ‘too-hard’ or ‘I’ll get to it later’ basket, we will be in grave danger of sailing around in ever-decreasing self-reflexive circles (as we currently are). It is time to realize that we need to change the purpose of our travels, be prepared to sail against the wind and head for more enlightening yet more hostile waters.

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