

Echoes, Images and Words: Exploring Autoethnography's Capacity to Show Power Relations within Leadership Practices

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My proposal explores how the qualitative perspectives afforded by visualization, story making, and theoretical knowledge came together to illuminate new ways of understanding leadership power dynamics. Without these alternative forms to approach my doctoral studies, I doubt I would have been able to adequately penetrate four core areas of exploration: how leadership occurs, how others may be foregrounded (or not) in thought and action, how co-evolving relational processes emerge and lastly, how relational leadership theory (RLT), autoethnography (AEG) and critical reflexivity can come together to create moments of praxis.

It all began in the winter of 2012 when I was confronted with a research problem. It was invasive and inescapable. Not only was the subject area of my research under scrutiny, but the methodology as well. Initially, I had set out to study innovations in leadership development using a grounded theory approach. I had *almost* been lulled into the false security that occurs when leaders become the ultimate developer of leaders (Collinson, 2005, p. 238) – a vicious circle explicated by Jackall's moral mazes (2010) that opened up a new way to contemplate leadership. You can imagine my dismay, or to be blunt, horror, at having to face up to the reality that two and half years of work had only led me to...start again.

But that's where I found myself on a cold, Canadian night, skyping with my advisors who were in the sunnier climes of Australia. That moment, as I was to later name it, was a *shatterpoint*. A no turning back moment that needed to be dealt with even if I couldn't completely resolve it. With it, a process of understanding leadership and its power dynamics emerged through story making, one that was filled with echoes, images and words.

Starting with the subject area, the *echo* of a phrase encountered during the literature review provoked me: I kept asking myself, "What does it mean to become a 'philosopher leader'?" (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 88). An anachronistic question for someone to ask when they had been ostensibly leading for over twenty-five years. The second came during the methodology review where I encountered the concept of 'possibility space' (Hosking & Plutt, 2010, p. 62). As I experimented with *images*, "safe places" emerged. Ultimately, these different lenses would 'show', rather than 'tell' new ways to see, feel, act, hear, think and do (Holman Jones, 2002, p. 207).

A third wakeup call inspired a re-think of the power of *words* as they mingled with, and shaped,

the many voices within the writing itself. I realized that in taking writing for granted, I was taking leadership behaviours for granted; in failing to ask who I was writing for, I now saw myself concocting 'manufactured' (Lather, 1991, p. 167) responses to suit the moment and

myself. I was using language as a power tool rather than a way to connect with and understand others.

It was at this point that I became acquainted with a new term, ‘gap spotting’ (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p. 251) causing me to question what my research might contribute. With this unsettling, my old research question seemed inane. It was at this time that I also realized I had fallen into another leadership trap, defining it as ‘person’, ‘position’ and ‘results’ without ever really considering the role of ‘process’ (2010, p. 7-9). With Grint’s and Alvesson’s prompts, a new question surfaced, “How does leadership occur among and between people?”

In this way, a query, a concept and two alerts came together to not only change my subject area and methodology, but how I learned to learn.

In this submission I seek to illustrate, literally and figuratively, the learning curve that helped me to move from compartmentalized “analysis” to holistic explorations of leadership behaviour. As I now see it, the ways in which I approached the subject area and methodology was a direct reflection of my individualistic views of leadership power. Neat and tidy, categorized and reflective of binary approaches to leadership. Over time, I began to see how this approach helped me embrace the relatively new thinking around relational leadership theory. I began to see leadership not as *a thing to do*, but *a way to be*.

This insight only emerged when I embraced autoethnography, which acted as a portal to illuminate ‘culture as seen in the rear view of memory’ (Bochner cited in Chang, 2008, p. 45). As I began experimenting with AEG, new language emerged like *shatterpoints*, and new ways to approach collaborative story making (an alternative to the misuses of power within the *storytelling and story selling* I practiced in my leadership). This experience showed me how to see power in the context of ‘multiphrenia’ (Gergen cited in Clark, Brown & Hailey, 2009, p. 326) and I discovered ways to appreciate it, in all of its complexity and subtlety.

Through stories and illustrations, the concepts of other and othering came alive. Over time, I became less tentative about venturing into these wild and disorganized marketplaces of voices and viewpoints. During these moments - when theory, story, and reflexivity met – I was able to work with processes that inspired me to behave differently as a leader. Praxis often surfaced in micro form, with small, incremental changes making bigger differences than anticipated.

But even these two promising concepts – RLT and AEG – were not enough. An aggregating force was required to bring them together. It was here that critical reflexivity entered my world and I developed a beginner’s capabilities to bend back on myself, facilitating more ‘collaborative, responsive and ethical ways’ (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 408) to think about how I practiced leadership.

With an unconventional interweaving of RLT, AEG and critical reflexivity, I gained insights into how to deepen my appreciation of others and with these, saw glimmers of the emergence of co-evolving leadership processes. Exploring and practicing these ways emerged as one of the most profound contributions to my personal and professional life.

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