Undoing leadership in the shadow of a colonial legacy?

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Introduction and conceptual basis of the paper

This paper aims to surface some of the challenges experienced by people of different race in relation to discourses and practices of leadership in a UK public sector context. Notwithstanding the huge variances in cultures, identities and experiences, we shall refer to them collectively as 'global majority' people (Johnson & Campbell-Stephens, 2010). The term acknowledges that GM groups are neither minorities numerically nor subordinate on the global stage or within the urban context of western countries as three quarters of the world's population are of Asian and African extraction and their footprint is a large one, (Portelli & Campbell-Stephens, 2009:1). It is with this context in mind, that we apply the term 'Global Majority' as a more positive terminology – itself an acknowledged self-identity construction on the first author's part - for individuals in this group to make amends for the difficulties of identification, belonging and agency experienced by non-white people in the UK (Ang, 2014; Banerjee & Linstead, 2001) and that they may also share similar traditions and value orientations different from the dominant ideologies associated with the euro-centric society in which they live and work. We shall explore their experiences in relation to those found in similar post-colonial, organisational contexts as addressed in extant literature. To that end, we go beyond challenges to draw out some of the creative and resilient ways in which individuals seek to craft their own, distinctive leadership practices and identities, thereby 'undoing' leadership (Butler, 2004). Drawing on both interview data and an auto-ethnographic account, it enriches understanding of the dualistic and abstruse identification of GM leaders with the discourses and practices of leadership.

For some time, it has been recognised that there are a number of groups that have been marginalised on the periphery of society, particularly those from GM (Johnson & Campbell-Stevens, 2010 and 2013) backgrounds, who are routinely overlooked and problematised in studies of leadership (Hall & Back, 2009; Lukes, 2005; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Sinha, 2005), whose tendency is to adopt unconsciously white and western assumptions regarding leadership. This tendency is evidenced in accounts of leadership that adopt a strong preference for the ethnicity paradigm, which posits equality amongst all races, but assumes that white experience of assimilation is the desired goal for all people of colour (Omi & Winant, 1986), and is designed to support this status quo (Grimes, 2001), the normalising of whiteness in leadership and the heroic nature of leadership (Grint, 2010), in the form of the prototypical leader – invariably white and male (Grimes, 2001; Liu & Baker, 2016; Sullivan, 2014) – and even.

Marginalisation in the leadership literature is widely accepted as an explanation for why individuals and groups from GM cultural backgrounds are subject to the presence of

stereotyping and bias within organisations and this is particularly the case for African, Asian or Latino people in Europe and the US (Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005; Mendez-Morse, 2003). Extant research reveals that marginalisation and stereotypical views underpin society and organisations, (Liu and Baker, 2016; Ospina and Foldy, 2009) and lead to a number of barriers that make it difficult for marginalised groups, such as GM individuals, to exercise leadership (Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Liu & Baker, 2016; Nkomo, 1992; Ospina and Foldy, 2009; Sullivan, 2014). These barriers result in GM people experiencing leadership within organisations as mainly negative, leading to concrete ceilings (Davidson & Chapman, 1997), glass cliffs (Cook & Glass, 2013) and stereotype/identity threats, (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Foldy, Rivard, & Buckley, 2009), which prevent them attaining positions of leadership. In addition to these occluded discourses whiteness has long been associated with property and power and with that power comes the unconsciously developed sense of a right to exclude (Harris, 1993). bell hooks, (1992: 12) refers to this as 'the sentimental idea of racial erasure', which assumes that racism would cease to exist if everyone would forget about race and just see each other as individuals'. Thus, the normalising and invisibility of 'whiteness' reiterates these underlying assumptions (which sees non-white leaders as lacking credible authority or legitimacy to be leaders), by heroicising white leaders, who are seen as saviours, philanthropists or heroes stemming from the roots of white domination (Sullivan, 2014).

By contrast black or non-white leaders are also invisible in the leadership literature through operationalised marginalisation, which exposes itself through organisational discourse such as conscious or unconscious stereotypical views, racialised conditions, organisational barriers and lack of access to professional networks (Grimes, 1996; Liu & Baker, 2016; Nkomo, 1992; Sullivan, 2014). According to Ospina and Foldy, (2009), by ignoring the leadership of GM individuals and white leaders whose identification with a set of racial norms is unseen, our understanding of leadership is incomplete. There is inadequate attention paid in the leadership literature to helping us unpack the ways in which GM people navigate between, and dis/identify, with discourses and practices of leadership within a post-colonial context.

Drawing on the work of Butler (2004), Liu and Baker (2016); Ospina and Foldy (2009) and Rivard, Foldy & Buckley (2009), amongst others, we draw on post-structuralism, post-colonialism and critical race theory to explore some of the identifications GM people hold in relation to leadership, as well as the distinctive ways in which they construct a form of leadership. Although GM leaders can be said to be constrained in powerful and often hidden ways, by assumptions of individualism and white masculinity (Liu & Baker, 2016; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Sullivan, 2014), this research also seeks to foreground the novel ways in which GM leaders are able to enact "improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler, 2004:1). Our findings seek to draw out some of the ways in which subaltern GM people seek to speak within the constraints of post-colonial norms (Spivak, 1993).

Methodology

The research was pursued through a qualitative approach that draws on the semi-structured interview data of 14 GM individuals (2 male and 12 female), collected over two years. These individuals were working in senior/middle leadership roles, within the public and voluntary sector, including community and faith group organisations, or identified as emergent leaders. The approach to the interviews was narrative-based (Riessman, 2004), as we sought to draw out the rich, yet specific, experiences of research participants with the discourses and practices of leadership. Findings were blended with the first author's autoethnographic account of

holding leadership positions within the UK public and voluntary sectors and in her social network. This approach acknowledges her active role as a native autoethnographer, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013), in co-constructing the meaning of the stories woven within the interviews and the research as a whole (Ellis, 2004). Narrative analysis was drawn upon, as it held the promise to offer rich insight into the occluded sub-genres hidden within the interviewees' narratives as the fine-grained detail of their lived experiences (Fletcher & Watson, 2009).

Findings

The findings draw out a dual pressure experienced by GM leaders in relation to the discourses of leadership. First, participants felt hurt caused by stereotype within their organisations, as they were confronted with, micro-aggressive practices, covert racial attacks (Patton, 2009), and stereotype barriers (Ospina & Foldy, 2009), such as having their abilities/skills questioned, attributing their success to other individuals or experiencing barriers to job promotion, which they attribute to their skin colour. These pressures resulted in a plethora of emotions and feelings, including the internalisation and racial battle fatigue (Harper, 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011), the outcome of which leads GM individuals to experience either acceptance, identity conflict, resistance or withdrawal (Foldy, et al., 2009; Boyd & Mitchell, 2018) in relation to dominant leadership discourses, as they tackle the identity and stereotype threat situations, (Foldy, et al., 2008),

Second, GM leaders had to grapple with expectations of family and their cultural and social milieu. Specifically, these were experienced as normative pressures to advocate for other GM workers and the wider commumity in their professional lives and to challenge systematic racism – unconscious or conscious when presented. Further, research participants spoke of an initial naivety generated through their upbringing, which failed to prepare them for the racism they would later experience within organisational life, constituted through an uncritical acceptance of the discourse of meritocracy, also an assumption that runs deeply within the leadership literature. Finally in relation to their families and communities, GM leaders spoke of a felt need to 'dumb down' intellectual knowledge for fear of family and community isolation and personal reprisals.

However, the findings also point to the resillient and creative ways some GM individuals navigate the leadership labyrinth (Wyatt & Sylvester, 2015) and use their duality to deconstruct and re-enact their complex identities, to emerge as pioneers and mentors, able to negotiate a sense of belonging as GM citizens, despite the challenging experiences and often hostile terrains they traverse whilst practicing leadership.

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