

Paper for 3rd ASPA/EGPA Transatlantic Dialogue

Workshop 3: Training and Developing Leaders

‘Working with Leader Individualism’

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Introduction

Notions of, and the practice of ‘leadership’ are becoming increasingly important for public service managers. One source of emphasis appears in assessment regimes and inspection reports that very publicly place public sector organisations on league tables of performance, and make frequent links to the presence or absence of leadership and its quality (Ford 2006). They contain explicit and implicit assumptions of ideal models of leader/manager practice which the assessment processes seek to evidence. Leadership development interventions often mirror this process, mapping and developing individual leader performance against a current ideal of practice that could potentially be described as attempts at leader cloning, or at least the cloning of their practices, the use of 360 degree instruments being a particularly stark example. I have been involved in many such programmes myself and they can be very valuable in supporting people in developing their thinking, responding to current and future agendas, and often in gaining useful skills.

However, this paper sets out an additional agenda. It sets out an argument, and processes, for the very conscious development of managers own theories of practice, a platform from which managers can work reflexively, critically, and productively with other more traditional interventions, and the turbulent and constantly evolving environment in which public sector managers operate. The first section of the paper outlines literature that frames and supports the agenda, which collectively offers a perspective on the construction and enactment of personal theory, and leader individualism in that sense. It sets out the first draft of a conceptual framework. The second section describes a research plan that aims to explore the personal constructs, enacted reality, and action / practice elements of the conceptual framework. The third element of the paper briefly describes an ongoing pedagogic experiment related to the framework, which though not formally evaluated at this stage, suggests that the agenda of the paper is worth pursuing as a formal research project.

A brief note on the issue of ‘leadership’ versus ‘management’. This paper is essentially about the development of individuals who have formal roles (or aspiring to roles) which give them responsibility, and authority, to maintain, sustain, and improve our public service organisations. They have various and many titles, amongst them are: manager, senior manager, assistant

director, director, executive director, chief executive, head of service, head of division, etc etc. Very rarely do they hold the formal title of 'Leader'. However, the target group for this research is the senior managers of public organisations who are assumed under the current discourse(s) to be 'leaders' of their organisations, or requiring 'leadership' skills. For the purposes of referring to the group of people whose development is discussed in this paper I shall mainly adopt the term 'leader' and 'leadership' practice, though in making reference to others' work this becomes difficult in practice. Most of the literature I reference does not make the distinguish between leaders and managers, though I am satisfied that they are referring to the target group I have outlined above.

It is not my intention to gloss over or to detract from this debate. For the purposes of this paper, however, the distinction is one of a current discourse(s), the discursive frame of 'leadership' in particular being prevalent at this point in time (Collinson and Grint 2005), and a recognition of the term to which most people would relate. Discursive framing and the influence of such discourses on the construction of managers' personal theories will be discussed later. The point of this research is not to start from the researcher's position on management or leadership but to elicit the constructs of managers / leaders themselves.

A conceptual perspective on the construction of leader individualism

An exploration of related literatures suggests that individual practice of leaders can be explored via the proposition that it emerges from the individual's own personal theory of practice. There are corners of the management literature that would support this. There is also research in the psychology, social psychology, organisational psychology, and hybrid management literatures that illuminate some further aspects of personal theory and practice construction. This section of the paper outlines some of the literature that would frame and support the approach, and which collectively offers a perspective on the construction and enactment of personal theory, and leader individualism in that sense. This is a first draft of a conceptual framework that defines this proposition and includes perspectives on the construction of personal theories, sources of influence on these theories, the potentially limiting nature of constructs, and the space for autonomy of practice. The following section outlines a research agenda which it is hoped will both test the concept and potential pedagogic responses to leader individualism.

Personal theory

There have been a number of writers, during at least the past 40 years, who have at some place in their work emphasised the importance of the influence on managers' (the label most frequently used in their work) practice of their own views and beliefs about managing, and / or about how the world works: Argyris (1991), Mintzberg (1994), Sayles 1964, Senge (1990), Stewart (1989, 1997) Watson (2001a). Though the terms they use are different they all suggest that managers as people operate out of personal theory or constructs that affect their practice. The significance of this is perhaps best illustrated by Tony Watson (2001a) who talks of managers as practical theorists: *'Most human actions – including many of those which have become almost habitual – are informed by ideas of how one thing connects with another or how one event leads to another. These, in effect, are theories and in this sense, poor practice is likely to follow from poor theory'* (p166).

This may seem a self-evident statement, and could easily be described as the basis for all leadership development programmes, offering knowledge with which the participants can improve their practice. But have we taken the issue of ‘practical’ theory seriously enough? To extend the position into further interesting territory Senge (1990) talk of ‘*mental models*’, equating them to Argyris’ ‘*theories-in-use*’ (1991:103), and their potential for limiting developments in practice: ‘*new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting*’ (Senge, 1990:174).

Not only can poor theories, or the deeply held images of how leaders think the world works lead to poor practice, they can limit and ring fence thinking as well as conflict with new ideas and the potential for new or improved practice.

From the psychology literature, Kelly (1963) describes the formulation of constructs through which individuals view the world of events, and by seeking to predict and control the events of life, individuals develop and test theories and hypotheses, these personal viewpoints being analogous to the theoretical points of view of scientists: ‘*man-the-scientist*’ (p4). However, these constructs are not disconnected, compartmentalised ideas created to help navigate the disparate and many aspects of an individual’s existence and experiences. There are aspects of our constructs that hold more significance, to which lesser the parts will conform. ‘*In general man seeks to improve his constructs by increasing his repertory, by altering them to provide better fits, and by subsuming them with superordinate constructs or systems*’ (p9). This provides the connection between Senge’s and Watson’s views; the ‘practical theorist’ with ‘deeply held internal images of how the world works’; what we might find works – pragmatic developments, with what we are prepared to consider as appropriate options for thought and action conforming to a set of superordinate ideas. Kelly’s view of the power of the superordinate constructs is captured here. ‘*In seeking improvement he is repeatedly halted by the damage to the system that apparently will result from alteration of a subordinate construct. Frequently his personal investment in the larger system, or his personal dependence upon it, is so great that he will forego the adoption of a more precise construct in the substructure. It may take a major act of psychotherapy or experience to get him to adjust his construction system to the point where the new and more precise construct can operate*’ (p9).

So ‘man’, is often invested heavily in a personal construct, and have a great attachment to the deeper elements of it, resisting perhaps what might appear to be even relatively small refinements if the two conflict.

Enactment, and sensemaking

If it is accepted that at least part of the role of personal constructs is to help navigate life by predicting and controlling events, that brings into question how an event, or reality, is perceived and created. Weick (2001) has a particularly persuasive and powerful explanation of how ‘reality’ is created at an individual level, and not only emphasises the mental framing of reality, but also the interventions that result, in terms of action and the subsequent impact of that action on reality: sensemaking and enactment. The key stages of the process developed by Weick from Piaget include physical as well as cognitive activity, where individuals: ‘*stumble across a stream of activity*’; ‘*bracket*’ their experience by selecting or excluding portions of the stream;

'punctuate' what is selected by making initial and crude connections; and *'parse'* these portions by organising them into causal connections – thus creating causal maps (Weick 2001:186). This then becomes the 'reality' to which an individual responds.

This is not a mere selection from what is 'real' but an extension of an individual's activity, both in a physical as well as a cognitive sense. Having first created the environment to which we respond (in thought) our response (our action) also impacts on and shapes this reality. Furthermore, the selection or bracketing of units from the stream of experience is informed and may be limited by what we know – we are likely to notice what we already know and can label, and in this sense our enacted reality can be self-validating. Where as individuals we may be thinking that we are discovering what is out there, Weick describes a process of imposing our sense of what is out there, often seeking, consciously or otherwise, validating information. *'Left to its own devices (ie guided by retained knowledge and routines) sensemaking is the infrastructure for organisational inertia. The reason it remains this conservative force is that the action keeps singling out evidence that confirms prior sense, much in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy'* (Weick 2001:176).

It is also likely to be limited by what we can know. We are limited by the amount of information that can be processed, and the number of possibilities that can be considered - bounded rationality: *'..human rationality is very approximate in the face of the complexities of everyday organisational life'* (Simon 1991:18). Volume of information, and the need to select from it, may also add further pressure for the creation of a reality that conforms to our individual views.

The broad umbrella of humanistic traditions of psychiatry and psychology allow for the individually constructed nature of the world, and existential and phenomenological psychology emphasises the uniqueness of an individual's view. *'The existential position cuts below this [Cartesian] subject-object cleavage and regards the person not as a subject who can, under proper circumstance, perceive external reality but as a consciousness who participates in the construction of reality.'* (Yalom 1980:23)

Although there are many points of departure within these traditions about what fundamentally lies beneath the actions and anxieties of individuals, Yalom describes the central point of reality as constructed as a fundamental postulate: that individuals have choice, and are also not fixed in their personality (p23), and from the phenomenological position *'all of us arrive at unique interpretations of our experience'* (Spinelli 1989:xiv). More fundamentally, in existential terms, *'human beings constitute themselves, their world and their situation within that world; that there exists no "meaning", no grand design for the universe, no guidelines for living other than those that the individual creates. The problem then in rudimentary form is, how does a being who needs meaning find meaning in a universe that has no meaning.'* (Yalom 1980: 423)

Existentially we require meaning and guidelines for our lives, we have to create them for ourselves. In these terms, the basic meaninglessness of life is one of our *'ultimate concerns'* (p8). The meanings and guidelines we create for ourselves, our constructs, are fundamentally important to our psychological well-being. Exposure of, or major challenges to, our models are therefore anxiety-causing. Challenges could potentially be fundamentally de-stabilising for an individual. They may be doubly de-stabilising if the challenge also includes the basic premise of the ultimate concern itself: all there is, is subjectivity.

Our constructs are important in helping us to create images of the complex reality to which we need to respond, in helping us to navigate it, in maintaining meaning and our psychological wellbeing. They can also be conservative forces in their potential to create a reality that conforms to prior sensemaking, and superordinate constructs. We can also avoid making our theories explicit, and avoid testing them in order to prevent embarrassment, threat, and feelings of vulnerability and incompetence (Argyris, 1991), and they can also be so taken for granted that individuals do not even know they are using them. These processes apply to us all as human beings, leaders can be no different. Our natural, very human, defences, therefore, can add to the difficulties of testing and improving our theories, and consequently our practice. However, leaders' theories are often challenged through attempts by the organisation to change them, by requiring them to behave differently - the latest corporate initiative. Perhaps defensiveness is even more understandable in organisational settings where they may feel particularly exposed to being found, or perceived, to be inadequate, or rejected (Kets de Vries and Miller 1984: 134).

However, despite all of these difficulties Kelly, resonating with Watson's position that our theories may poor ones, also holds out some hope: *'some are definitely poor implements...[but] no one needs to paint himself into a corner'* (ibid:15). The philosophy on which Kelly bases personal construct theory, constructive alternativism, holds that people's views or theories can and do change. This occurs partly through the adjustments made through empirical feedback, a process of finding what does and doesn't work – how good our theories are; and partly because we can also make adjustments to how we choose to see the world, the superordinate constructs, *'...man creates his own way of seeing the world in which he lives, the world does not create it for him'* (Ibid:12). Perception is reality, not reality is perception. Taking a different or alternative view of reality permits changes to personal theories/constructs. Our constructs can change, quite fundamentally, and are, or at least can be, emergent, and therefore so are we.

However, as highlighted earlier, shifts to fundamental elements of our constructs are likely to be difficult. Not only are they mostly unconsciously held, what we believe we think and do is unlikely to relate very closely to what we actually think and do (Mintzberg 1989, Argyris 1991). *'Ask people in an interview or questionnaire to articulate the rules they use to govern their actions, and they will give you their "espoused" theory of action. But observe these same people's behaviour and you will quickly see that this espoused theory has very little to do with how they actually behave'* (Argyris 1991:103). So even if consciously attempted, challenging our thinking, without looking closely at our practice, may not in fact be a challenge at all.

This is not only interesting in its implications for understanding leaders' models, in the sense that it indicates difficulties in leaders knowing and understanding their own *'theories-in-use'* (Ibid)', but it also poses difficulties for any research or development process. In interviews, for example, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is what a leader thinks s/he thinks. Unless very unusually self-aware, what actually informs their actions, or indeed their perception of their actions may be something very different. In classroom environments, using traditional teaching methods, perhaps without a very sharp focus on the actual practice of the learner, again, opportunities for real challenges to thinking may be lost. A term mostly associated with research practice and researchers, the principle of reflexivity could be seen as important here for leaders. Any process designed to elicit a leader's personal theories-in-use must create a process of developing a *'capacity for critical self understanding'* (Roberts 1996), an awareness of their own subjectivities and the impact these have on their actions and interactions.

Though I want to place great emphasis on the individuals' role in creating their own reality and the inherent inter-connection between their reality, personal theory, and action, I would also like to acknowledge the role of social and cultural influences.

Influences on personal theories and constructs

Roberts' discussion of reflexivity is connected to his position on the taken for granted nature of *'the knowledge that informs action, practical consciousness'* (p67), and approached it from a critical management perspective. He was particularly critical of the nature of the management knowledge that he believed was informing manager education in 1996. He talked of the current *'dominance of technical rationality (p63)'*, the manager as no more than a *'morally neutral technician'* (p63), the very nature of this knowledge being likely to mitigate attempts to create more reflexive practice. Reflective practice sits relatively easily within management as morally neutral, values free, and instrumentalism, if confined to a pragmatic attempt to learn from experience what works and does not work. However, reflexivity, in its emphasis on looking inwardly and critically at the premises and assumptions that inform our actions, would be irrelevant if management is merely an issue of finding the correct technique and implementing it competently. Hales (2001) goes further: *'The manager, whether called that or not, has become the quintessential contemporary character embodying the triumph, at least for now, of manipulative social relations in the utilitarian pursuit of amoral efficiency'* (p54).

Watson also recognises technical rationality and uses the term 'Managerialism' in a similar vein. *'The managerialism which must be rejected is technicist thinking...a view of management as a morally and politically neutral activity'* (Watson 2001b:386). Watson also refers directly to the related discourse: *'Managerial discourse is a way of talking, thinking and acting with regard to managerial work in which the organisation is treated like a big machine and managers are the engineers who design, maintain and drive it'* (p391).

If Roberts was, and is still correct, in his view of the dominance of technical rationality in management education, it is probable that this would form a major part of the management discursive resource, and have at least some impact on the practice of managers, particularly if *'personal subjectivities are created through the discourse current in our society'* (Watson and Harris,1999:17). Managers may be engaging unconsciously and uncritically with cultural and dominant discourses. At the very least it will be part of the cultural resources that are drawn on to *'make sense of a particular aspect of their lives and thereby influenced in that part of their life'* (p6).

In *Self and Society*, Hewitt (1997) expresses the relationship between the person and the social world from a position of symbolic interactionism. *'Only individuals act. Everything else – society, culture, social structure, power, groups, organizations – is ultimately dependent on the acts of individuals. Yet individuals can only act because they acquire the capacity do so as a member of society, which is the source of their knowledge, skills, orientations, and motives. Individuals are born into and shaped by a society that already exists and that will persist long after they are dead; yet that same society owes its existence to the conduct of its members'* (p4).

Society shapes individuals just as individuals shape society, but Hewitt allows space for individual autonomy and a capacity to act that may *'run counter to what culture demands or encourages'*...*'the individual is 'no puppet of society'...'human beings are self-conscious creatures who can say "No" and who can think of novel solutions to their problems'* (p20-1).

We are not able to escape or transcend our culture or the limits of our linguistic resources, but we are not entirely constrained by them either. Rorty (1991) talks of *'historical contingencies that fill our minds with the words and beliefs they currently contain'* (p14), and also of the impossibility of stepping outside of our minds, cultures and language. However, he suggests that change can come about through the 'gradual enlargement of our imagination by the metaphorical use of old marks and noises', modifying old beliefs and ideas by *'playing them off against each other'* – producing new and more interesting ideas and *'phrased in new vocabularies'*(p14). Our self-consciousness and our imagination allow us, not to step outside of our culture but to produce new ways of seeing drawn from the rubbing together of existing beliefs and ideas until a spark appears. Not only can we change our views to other existing ones, but we can potentially create entirely new ones, albeit developed from old marks and noises. The concepts made available within our culture either generally or about management specifically, will impact on individual's ideas about management, but no matter how dominant, a self-consciousness and imagination will always allow individuals to create and use alternatives.

My own experience of teaching on an MBA programme suggests that Roberts' position on the uncritical nature of the knowledge that informs practical consciousness may still be current. Considerable proportions of the MBA student population do indeed seem to want to be taught structured rational models of practice, ideas that offer the promise of success through the application of technique - at least at the start of the programme. However, there are also numbers of students who are very open to non-instrumental approaches, and also that reality may not be 'out there'.

Amongst the broader cultural and society level influences lies the individual's organisation - their immediate working environment, and the ideas within that organisation may have an influence over the personal constructs as above. If the individually constructed nature of reality is connected with the enacted environment of Weick, we can begin to look at the links between the individual and their organisations; the construction of 'the organisation'; and further, its systems and processes. If it is accepted that individuals enact reality - enact organisations - Morgan's (1997) image of an organisation as a Psychic Prison becomes very plausible. There are alternative perspectives offered within the overall position but essentially this is a way of looking at organisations which allows that: *'unconscious concerns and preoccupations can have an affect on organisation'*; and for the *'organisation as an external representation of unconscious strivings'* (p224).

Morgan claims that a Freudian analysis allows for the following interpretation of scientific management: *'Taylor's life provides a splendid illustration of how unconscious concerns and preoccupations can have an effect on organization, for it is clear that his whole theory of scientific management was the product of the inner struggles of a disturbed personality. His attempt to organize and control his world, whether in childhood games or in systems of scientific management, was really an attempt to organize and control himself'* (p220).

If scientific management, one of the greatest influences on the development of 'management' and manager practice, was the product of a disturbed personality, what might that say about the society that has so easily absorbed and maintained its practices. It is tempting to say how 'disturbed' are we then? However, the key point I want to take from this element of Morgan's work is the impact of the unconscious on organisation via the unconsciously informed practices of managers – and this, as an example adds weight to this perspective as a major challenge to

management as techno-rationality, instrumentalism, manager as morally neutral technician, and the reduction of management to technique.

This is further reinforced by explorations into leadership from clinical and therapeutic practice, again here influenced by Freud in the highlighting of the role of unconscious motivation. Kets de Vries (1993) describes how the *'intrapsychic theater'* affects the way companies are run on a day-to-day basis; how unconscious emotions, aspirations, and fantasies can shape organisational decisions and policies. The *'irrational feelings of leaders and followers infiltrate the entire company culture and management structure... "normal" companies can suddenly lose perspective'* (p xiv). In this sense, the worldview of senior managers is at least partly a product of their fantasies; covert, unconscious psychological processes that impact on decision making, strategy formation, structuring and organisational change, and potentially performance (Kets de Vrie and Miller, 1984).

In looking at one element of organisation and manager practice – strategy-making, Watson (2001 and 2003) has observed and conceptualised it as a process of 'strategic exchange'. *'Organisational strategists bring their own personal orientations, identity projects and life priorities into their strategy-making work and these both influence and are influenced by the strategy-making in which they engage.'* (Watson 2003: 1321)

Watson's approach is essentially humanistic in its broadest sense, in that he describes his own position as *'process relational'*: people are emergent in that they are continually 'becoming' rather than 'being' (fixed personalities), and that organisations are seen in terms of human relationships, not entities in their own right (p1320). As people are emerging, making sense, and developing their own personal life strategies, this inevitably impacts, in this case, on strategy-making and vice versa. This same principle applies to manager practice generally (Watson 2001a, Watson and Harris 1999) where managers shape their personal identities and working lives at the same time as being shaped by the world around them.

We may not only be subject to the vagaries of our sensemaking, our enacted causal maps, our personal constructs and theories that aim to predict and control - help us navigate the world, our bounded rationality, and our defensiveness; but we are also subject to our unconscious concerns and preoccupations, emotions, fantasies, and aspirations, and our developing and emerging identity and life strategies.

This apparent 'irrationality' could be rather depressing – perhaps from an instrumentalist point of view (or even denied), or suggest that the relationship between people and organisations, and particularly managers and organisation (because of their potential impact) are much more interesting and complex, and less prone to technique than some of the 'management' literature suggests. These perspectives from the literature also reinforce the value of self-awareness and reflexivity for managers. Understanding their own assumptions and pre-occupations, or that these may be unconscious, may help them to make better interventions into their own practice.

It also brings into question the value of descriptive and / or prescriptive models of leadership in the sense that they may be ideals of practice that are unattainable, and perhaps even inappropriate, if they do not take into account the relationship between the individual and the influences on how they undertake or fulfil their role.

The space for choice of action

If indeed leaders do have their own personal constructs and theories of practice, this in itself would not be 'problematic' or interesting if they were so constrained by the policies, procedures, rules, and other authority in their organisations that they had no opportunity to act in ways that are informed by their own thinking. A number of studies in the management literature are helpful here in establishing the tendency, space, and autonomy for choice of action. There is space to choose, and space to act on their own theories of practice, if not complete freedom.

Most managers have jobs that are too big, and they cannot meet all of the expectations placed on them. In analysing the content of advertisements for managerial jobs *'The story is almost one of the manager as super-woman or superman.'* (Watson and Harris 1999:10) - they appear even to be designed this way. There are echoes of Rosemary Stewart's position, some ten years earlier, that no-one can occupy the whole job space (Stewart 1989). If this is the case, this implies that if managers cannot do everything that is asked of them they have to choose what they can or will do. My own experience as a manager, and of listening to fellow managers, resonates - faced with the latest corporate initiative - 'tell me where I fit this in'. The size of the leaders job is an issue, but also constraints and demands within that. In accounting for the difference in behaviour of managers in similar jobs, Stewart (1982) developed a model that defines the area of choice – activities that the job holder can but does not have to do. Stewart's space for choice lies between the demands of the job - activities that the jobholder has to do and cannot get away with not doing; and the constraints of the job - factors that limit what the jobholder is allowed to do. The proportion of demands and constraints can differ between jobs, but if the 'demands' are minimal and the 'constraints' few, this increases the space for choice.

In a study of the relationship between organizational structure, managerial role expectations and managers' work activities, Hales and Tamangani (1996) found that *'the old adage that what gets measured and rewarded gets attended to'* was confirmed, these being related to Stewart's 'demands'. However, they also found that *'...all managers spent their time on activities that were not part of others' expectations'* – perhaps Stewart's area for choice – doing things that they did not have to. Managers in decentralised organisations were also able to spend more time on these activities. The degree of constraints and demands can vary between jobs but can also be related to the organisational structure and forms of control.

Other factors, expressed as managers' perceptions of sources of choice, were identified by Marshall & Stewart (1981b), the main factor being company culture. Senior managers had more space for choice as seniority was also a basis for freedom, as was experience, and the attitude of immediate superiors which could also provide (or take away) space for choice. However, the degree of acceptability, or desirability, of choice differed between managers too; some actively sought it, others condemned it as inappropriate, though Marshall and Stewart also identified that many were not conscious of choice or choosing, and acted *'by habit and / or instinct'* (p274).

Hales and Nightingale (1986) also found managers were unconscious of making choices about what they did, but also did not acknowledge all of the expectations placed on them by others. They interpreted these unacknowledged expectations as both the product of poor perception and a deliberate choice to ignore them. Their investigation of the expectations of managers from others was also interesting in that one of the aspects of the picture that emerged was of *'a mass of competing, often contradictory or conflicting demands and expectations from a multiplicity of*

sources, both inside and out of the manager's organisation' (p10). If it is not possible to meet all expectations because they are conflicting, this may therefore also be a factor which allows, or perhaps even forces managers to choose which expectations to meet.

Even when the demands and constraints are considerable, at least some managers will create space to choose. Factors may also exist within organisational systems that create the space for choice, or even force choice, either through confusion, the sheer impossibility of the expectations, or tolerance. So managers do make choices, often unconsciously, and organisations do have a role in shaping what they do, and choice can also get exercised very deliberately. In a conceptual model developed from role theory and the concept of enactment, Fondas and Stewart (1994) focus on, and elaborate *'the notion of a manager actively, deliberately, creating the environment rather than responding to it'* (p88) – the manager enacting expectations, influencing others' and the organisation's expectations of them. (Though Weick (2001) may argue that deliberate or not, individuals do create the environment to which they respond.)

They suggest four key influences on a manager's 'expectations enactment' of their job: characteristics of the role set (role senders); the role set and focal manager relationship; organisational influences external to the role set and focal manager relationship; and the characteristics of the focal manager. The degree to which a manager creates or influences his/ her own job is dependent on the relationship between these determinants, and particularly how these enable a manager to 'modify, shape and create the role senders' expectations'. Stewart and Fondas suggest that these are the conditions under which managerial jobs 'evolve', and that they are the circumstances under which *'managers are able to uniquely, proactively, self-define their work in an organisation.'* (p21).

The model begins to explain some of the variations / variables in degrees of choice exercised by managers as well as how managers' roles develop. There are a number of aspects of the model that are of interest to this research; in particular, the characteristics of the focal manager and those that positively affect expectations enactment. Where the manager has power and achievement motivation, risk orientation and an internal locus of control they are more likely to affect the expectations of others. Interpersonal relationships are also a key feature, including interpersonal attraction between the role set and focal manager.

Expectations enactment supports the emphasis I would like to place on the individual whilst recognising wider influences and the connectedness of the individual and their interaction with 'the environment'. This literature establishes the space for choice, choice over action, the space for managers to act out of their personal theories; it is likely that their practice is never solely determined by their role, or their organization's expectations of them in that role.

The model presented below (Figure 1) is a work in progress but is intended to capture the argument presented above, it describes a theoretical '**leader individualism**': the construction of individualism and leader practice is largely an unconscious process and it emerges from a propensity and opportunity, through enacted choice space, for leaders / managers to act out of their personal constructs and personal theories of practice. Their constructs are influenced, the discursive resources and frameworks of their environment, their identity and life strategies, and unconscious pre-occupations, their sensemaking and need to maintain meaning. They enact reality, in ways which are informed by their constructs, and may also be influenced by the need to maintain meaning for themselves. However, thinking and practice need not be entirely

constrained by the discursive resources that exist, or the protection of existing personal constructs. Leader individualism does create individualistic practice; it also has the potential to create innovation.

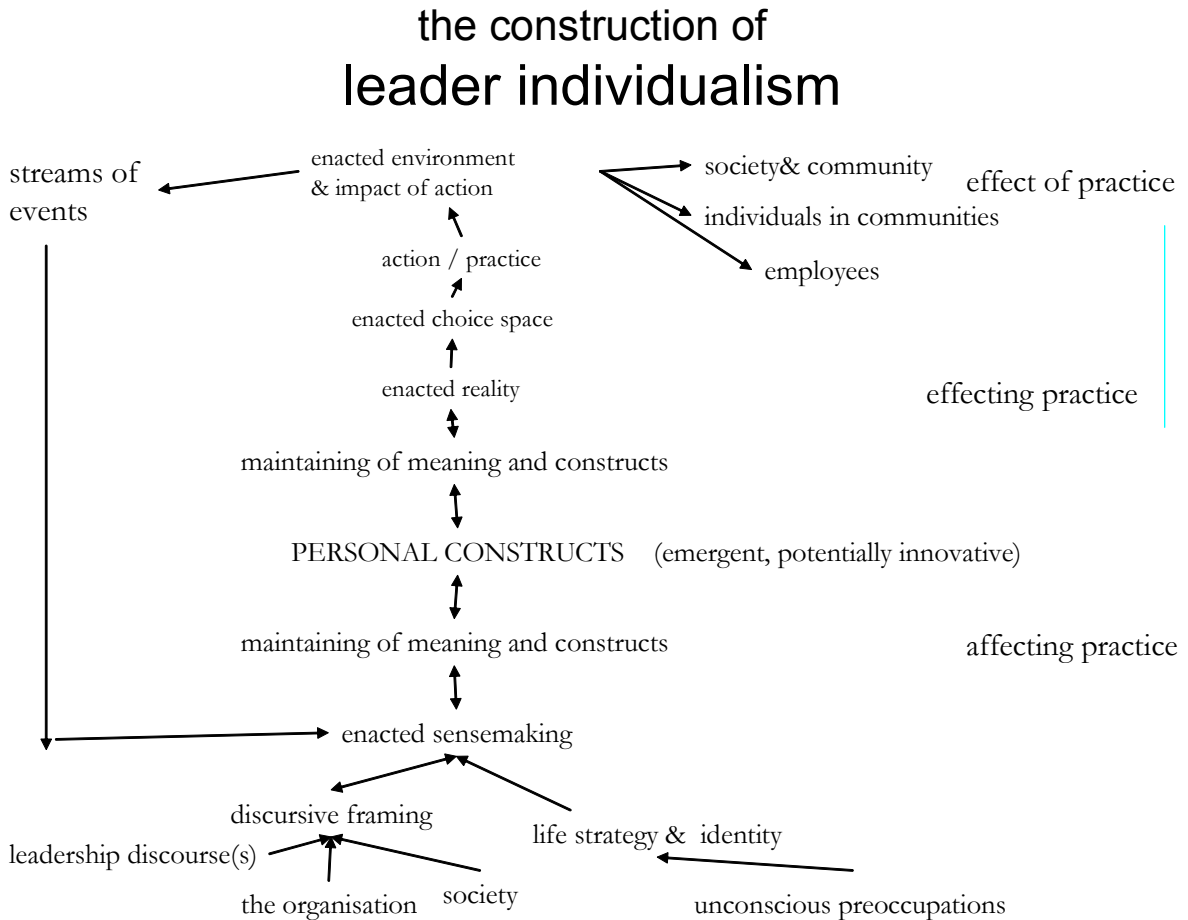


Figure 1

Positioning a research project

Having established a conceptual position, drawn from the literature, that emphasises individualism within leader thought and practice, I have created an empirical, participative research agenda that will explore the personal constructs, enacted reality, and action elements of the conceptual framework illustrated above. It will firstly focus on making individual leader thought and action explicit - accessing and individual's theory-in-use; secondly, make comparisons between the explicit models of participants to test the degree and nature of individualism; and thirdly, assess the impact on thought and practice of engaging in the participative research process. The research processes themselves will be viewed as potential

development interventions, or at least the basis for the design of leader development interventions.

The conceptual framework outlined above describes my initial position from which I will approach the research. At the very least they describe an initial set of assumptions, to a certain extent beliefs, and a 'personal theory'; the foundation position from which I will inquire, and also to inform how I inquire in terms of congruency of this framework with methodology and method. I am currently working to refine my methodological position but this broadly and necessarily means a phenomenological position: the world as socially constructed and subjective, with a focus on meaning not facts (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 1991). It will allow for the construction of meaning by individuals, but it must also take account of two further issues: the enacted nature of reality, and the difficulties of accessing people's theories-in-use. As highlighted earlier, asking people what they think they do, and what guides their actions may not be the most reliable way of arriving at what they really do and the personal constructs that actually do inform their practice.

This inevitably has to be an interpretive piece of research and will be ethnographic in nature, comprising of a series of micro-ethnographies, that can accommodate the observation of individuals in action, in their environment. Ethnography, as described by Watson (2001a) allows for '*attention to meanings and the processes through which the members of those worlds [as constructed by research participants] make meaning for themselves and others...add to the general body of knowledge about the human social world, and at the same time, inform the practical understanding of those involved in the activities it examines*' (p7) – the latter point being crucial to this project. Watson's definition also gives scope for accessing academic knowledge, critiquing practices that emerge through dialogue and observation, and acknowledges the researchers hand in constructing the account. It will also be a participative process as issues of reflexivity emerge both for me as the researcher, and for the research participants, as we jointly seek to explore their personal theories of practice.

The methods and research design will also be heuristic in the sense that they will allow for open exploration and '*modifications in the study can be made as emerging themes dictate leads to be followed up*' (Moustakas 1981). Methods will be planned and developed but also open to change or refinement, as will the identification of relevant literatures to support emerging themes.

In a pilot study I have already undertaken the method chosen was small scale ethnography, including unstructured interviews, observation, opportunistic questioning, and participant validation. I spent one day with each of two directors of a local authority. The day began with a semi-structured interview, followed by observation, opportunistic questioning between the managers' work commitments (mostly meetings), followed by questions based on observations made throughout the day. I then analysed the transcripts of our discussions, and my notes of the texts of meetings and other observations, then discussed my interpretations with the managers concerned. The initial study proved fruitful, and though parts of the process worked better than others, the methods themselves bear repeating. I will be including the repertory grid and / or laddering techniques first devised by George Kelly, based on the personal construct theory drawn on above. The grid appears to offer a technique for arriving at an individual's core constructs, without the intrusion of a deductive framework, which also allows for a two-way process of negotiating an understanding of the participant's meanings (Jancowicz, 2004).

Observation will remain a key element of the research. A major reason for its inclusion would be as a measure to moderate the issue of differences between a manager's espoused theory and their actual theory-in-use. Placing more importance on being able to observe as many situations as possible where managers are interacting with others is the result of reflecting on the outcomes of the pilot research, particularly small meetings or one-to-one situations where the managers are likely to be very actively participating. These ethnographic observations provided a rich source of material for discussion both during, and at the end of the day.

The '*open-ended, in-depth (ethnographic)*' interviews will also remain an important element of method, the purpose being to attempt to understand complex behaviour 'without any a priori categorization' (Fontana and Frey 2005:705). Fontana and Frey also point out the difficulties of trying to distinguish between participant observation and unstructured interviewing as empirical observations will stimulate paths of inquiry. I intend to further refine the approach to the interviews by framing them as '*philosophical dialogues*': '*An interview is two persons seeking knowledge and understanding in a common conversational manner*' (Czarniawski 2004: 47).

Since this pilot research was undertaken I have made refinements to the conceptual framework and have concluded that a more focused approach is needed to exploring, and making explicit, participants' perception of reality than was previously attempted. This is likely to be done both through exploring this directly with participants, as well as through the analysis and interpretation process. The interpretation will partly take the form of conceptualised models of participating individuals' personal constructs, perception of reality, and action.

I will also be developing and including a journal for managers to record their own insights into their practice and their perceptions of their environment, helping them to become closer to joint researchers than 'subjects' or even participants. The role could be described as a form of ethnography, autoethnography, as defined by Adler and Adler (1999): the researcher in '*introspection and complete membership roles*' (p443). I would hope to include this after my own initial research interventions of observation and interview, and the participant validation stages. Having gone through these stages a manager may be better able to self-observe, or introspect. If managers were willing to co-operate this additional material, or insights, could be included as research material to be jointly analysed. The last element of the research would be an assessment by the manager of the impact of the process on their thinking and practice.

The research will hopefully be revealing and interesting on a number of levels but particularly: validating, or otherwise, at least part of the conceptual model for the construction of leader individualism; the production of explicit accounts of individualism in terms of conceptualised models of practice on which leaders, academics, and leader development practitioners can draw; and particularly, an informed judgement of the value of interventions designed to work with leader individualism in affecting and developing the practice of leaders. There are many more potential research agendas, for example, how might this model work for teams of managers / leaders in organisations. What are the implications for a theory of how leadership might be practiced, or an 'ideal of practice'?

Pedagogic experiment on a Public Service MBA

I have been able to experiment with the pedagogical implications of leader individualism for leader development on a Public Service MBA, and have found methods by which students can explore their own individualism both independently and with support from fellow students. On a

five day module (1day + 2days + 2days), spread over six months they undertake their own ethnographic research into their organisation, leading to a conceptualisation of their perception of their organisation; an auto-ethnographic study of their own practice, observation of self within their environment; and a peer observation exchange – observation in the workplace by a fellow student followed by feedback. The self and peer observation processes lead to a definition of their practice and an attempt by them to conceptualise their theory-in-use.

The module also includes ‘personal workshops’ - dedicated space for each student to present their perceptions of their environment, their personal theories-in-use of leadership, in order both to share ideas and be challenged by others’, and to present planned developments of their practice referred to as their ‘aspirational theories’. Formal theories and ideas of leadership are deliberately absent from the module (other than leader individualism) in an attempt to encourage as far as possible an inductive approach to exploring their own theories-in-use, though formal academic theories are presented on other modules of the MBA programme. It is accepted that discursive framing will influence the process but students are encouraged to be conscious of this. They also complete a Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Myers 1998), a personality type instrument, to begin and encourage the reflexive process.

Though the resultant models developed by the students do undoubtedly have similarities, they show very significant differences in both theory and action, if only in emphasis, or combinations of theory and practices. The aim of this module and its approach is for students to develop long term and ongoing self-conscious, critical, reflexive practice, and also to provide a means of working more consciously with the external and internal influences on their practice.

A formal review of the module is yet to take place, however, the informal feedback suggests that the process does impact greatly on some students who have reported increased insight into their own practice and deliberate conscious revision of it. They also report an increased feeling of agency, and of having both a duty and ability to influence the environment in which they work, where previously they felt quite powerless and more subject to it. They have a clearer sense of what they ‘stand for’ – their own values, and a sharper focus on the ethics of leading and managing and their impact on others. A more conscious and critical approach to interpreting their environment develops, its relationship to their practice, and in some cases reinterpreting their reality. Some students begin to question the fit between themselves and the perceived theory-in-use of their organisations.

Many students are very enthusiastic about the process and their ‘discoveries’, and enjoy writing the associated assignment. Others find it of less value, and are uncomfortable with its inductive nature, in looking at themselves, and sometimes ask questions like: ‘what is the right answer?’ It may well be the case that, as with all approaches to leader development, leader individualism will not appeal to everyone, in some cases perhaps as a result of a tension between this approach and existing constructs. However, there is sufficient evidence here to suggest that the conceptual framework, and processes designed to work with it, are at least worthy of further development and in depth research – and may well offer a powerful leader development intervention.

Concluding

There is no agreed ideal of leadership, nor is that achievable, though individual leaders could be encouraged to take an explicit if emergent position of their own, which lends itself to conscious testing and development. I hope the value of this argument and framework will be in providing

routes into achieving ongoing, genuinely reflexive practice that is self-conscious in its influences, and improves the chances of innovations in leadership. This position does not preclude the introduction of ideas and models of leadership drawn from research but it does give equal prominence to the individuals own theories, and the processes that influence and or protect them, as well as those that are likely to open them up to movement and improvement. Ultimately I hope the value of the research will also be in its attempt to respond to the issue raised by Henry Mintzberg in 1989 which is still not sufficiently well addressed. In discussing the social consequences of the decisions of large organisations, and the artificial distinctions between economic and social goals Mintzberg stated: *'no job is more important than that of the manager. It is the manager who determines whether our social institutions serve us well or whether they squander our talents and resources.'* (p24).

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