

The flesh of leadership: A phenomenological reading

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- Can you feel yourself in leadership?
- How might followers recall the experience of being lead?
- How might we recast leadership theories, knowledge and narratives beyond technical, measurable and outcome based understandings?



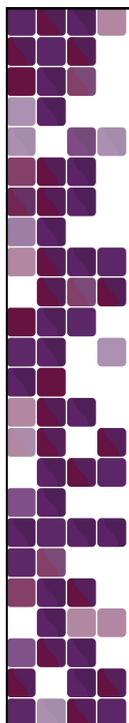
- This paper offers a phenomenological perspective of leadership as an embodied, relational, fractured, contested and misunderstood phenomenon.
- Further, this paper proposes new insight into leadership as an embodied practice by returning to a focus to life-worldly events in order to provide situated meaning for those who identify as leaders and those who have experienced the impact of 'leadership'.



Defining leadership

A socially constructed activity derived from an interplay between individual sense making, collective cultures and institutional norms, rather than being based in any objectively verifiable reality

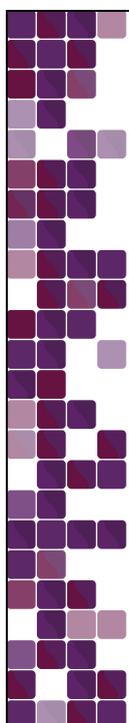
In this sense leadership can be seen as an embodied and relational activity between a leader and a follower whose roles emerge out of contextual demands



The Study



- This paper is a result of a doctoral study with the aim of exploring the relationship between leadership and courage.
- The study was carried out in two distinct phases including stage one which involved an Australia wide online survey and stage two which involved a series of individual interviews.
- The study draws on a range of interpretative lenses however particular attention and influence is drawn from a body of literature identified as critical leadership studies.



Phase one



- Development of an online survey
- A total of 53 questions were included in the online survey.
- Information collected as part of the online survey included demographic details, understandings of and experiences linked to leadership, and understandings of and the enactment of courage. A number of scenario based questions were also included as part of the survey.
- A total of 161 individuals completed the survey in its entirety with 309 individuals partially completing the survey.

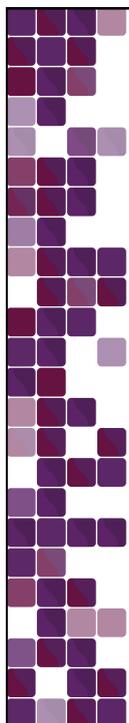


- One hundred and twelve individuals representing 69.6% of those who completed the survey indicated an interest in participating in phase two of the research project, with 11 individuals being selected for phase two.

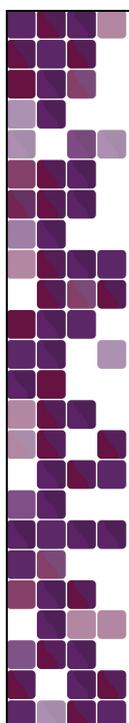


Phase two

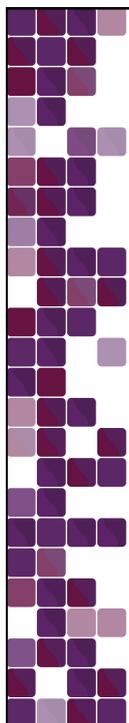
- Individual interviews
- To date two interviews have been undertaken with each individual
- Recorded, and transcribed




'I'm not the extrovert. I am not an extrovert and when I think back about some of the - about all that and I think god, how did I even ever last...it was really tough times. Even the parish priest had difficulty with me. It was just because I was talking in a way that people were scratching their heads because they weren't there yet...I didn't know who I was. I felt I could never be myself. I always had to be somebody else..., it was quite difficult...It (change) was a very lonely process and despite the inclusion of people in the process they, it was almost like they didn't trust you to even carry out - if you asked them what do you think, they didn't trust you to carry it out. Even though they got it but they still didn't trust you. I really think a lot of it had to do with not being from the local community and I'm not that public a person so there's not that much dirt you can dig up on our family because there isn't any.



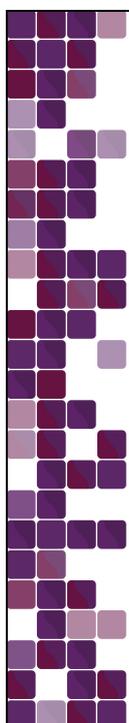

In 2009 we had our first voice survey. Much consultation around the questions, much facilitation around the process, we still weren't trusting whether Jane (pseudonym) would know exactly whether Mary Brown said what she said in the survey. But that was alright. We took them all through it. We involved people. We had a focus group and the end result was not too pretty in my part but the realities of that was I knew the results. I knew in my heart even though I didn't want to see it. I knew in my heart that the results wouldn't be too great where I was concerned...Working in this organisation was a very lonely place and so you were not only lonely in a town, you were lonely in your work environment because you were the outsider'



Flesh



- Merleau-Pontyian (1962) understands phenomenology as a study of essence including the essence of perception and the essence of consciousness
- Such an approach allows for an account of the individual and collective experience of space, time and the world in which we 'live' and encounter.



- Leadership being understood as a relational activity between 'leader' and 'follower' (Karp, 2013) creates opportunities for the study of encounter and therefore an opportunity to explore the encounters had between leaders and followers
- These accounts create richer interpretations when a full-bodied understanding of leadership is explored (Sinclair, 2005) paying attention to issues such as sense-making experiences, the practical activities of leadership, notions and experiences of power, the dynamics of identity and the politics of organisations.



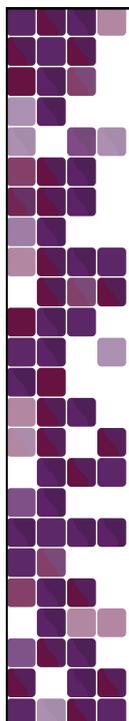

- It is my intention that a critical reading of leadership might generate a more liberating stance for current and future leaders as well as future research into leadership.
- A move away from any neutral and objective assessment of leadership and a **(re)orientation** of new knowledge through a **(dis)orientation** of existing knowledge may be in fact what leaders of the 21st century require to help them make sense of being in leadership.



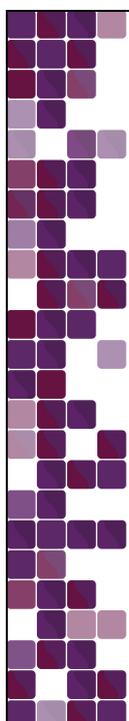
Leadership as flesh



‘Flesh of the world, is described (apropos of time, space, movement) as segregation, dimensionality, continuation, latency, encroachment...that means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world and more over the flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encodes upon the world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 248)




- Flesh is the ‘stuff’ of which humans are made, as well as a myriad of other ‘things’ including the perception we have of each other and the perception we have of ourselves
- As such, flesh talks of the inter-connectivity between leader and follower, and therefore of the inseparability of this relationship
- Further, it affords additional debate of the qualitative experience of leadership e.g. how one begins to ‘be’ in leadership and experiences leadership
- Finally, it offers the opportunity to examine the ‘felt experience’ of leadership and the ways in which leadership ‘contains’ the emotional work of leader and follower



Returning to the narrative



Jane spoke of

- ‘Disguising’ her fear and ‘performing’ confidence in her leadership particularly during staff meetings and times of change
- Spoke of location and geography (‘not being local’ and ‘being an outsider’)
- Experiencing leadership through her organs (‘I knew in my heart even though I didn't want to see it’)
- Of ‘never being myself’ therefore dis-embodiment in order to re-embodiment (‘I always had to be somebody else’)
- Physicality (‘Working in this organisation was a very lonely place and so you were not only lonely in a town, you were lonely in your work environment because you were the outsider’)



What might this say of leadership into the future



- Merleau-Pont notion of 'flesh' provides a concept through which the invisible dynamic experience (which is at the heart of leadership) can be brought more into conscious awareness
- It invites a new way of being 'present' in leadership through the experience of flesh



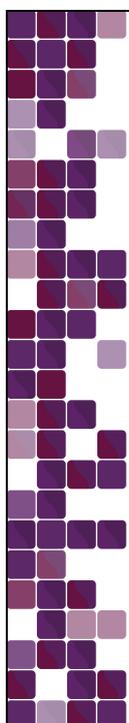
Self definitions



I chose to lovingly release my sons without a vicious court battle when my ex decided to move overseas and take them with him. Many of my closest family and friends disagreed with my decision, but I made it anyway because in my heart I knew it was the right decision for me to make. Courage was going to the airport to say goodbye and waking up the next day (and every day afterward) to get on with



My husband suffers from bi-polar type II and we are Christians. We had some friends tell us recently after sharing our story & some recent challenges with them that basically our faith is not strong enough. I felt disappointed and after thinking on these comments from my friends (who also gifted us a book about how to have faith, scriptures and everything else...) I found the courage to ring her after a few days and asked if we could re-visit the conversation regarding faith. I then went on to tell her that it was judgmental and dismissive to even suggest something of that kind to someone who has a mental illness and this goes to demonstrate the lack of knowledge and understanding on her part - I suggested before she give out advice she gain some knowledge and insight into the illness before judging someones journey. As a result of this conversation she no longer maintained contact with me - this was disappointing but I had to have the courage to voice up about an important issue.



A good chunk of my childhood and early adulthood was spent in a cult. When my child was born I walked away and lost a whole world and it's contents. I was extremely relieved to discover that I wasn't struck by lightning and have spent many years learning to be myself, which is a fairly daunting task when you must rebuild a world for yourself.





Facing the world again and finding a new direction in life that was both meaningful for me and being able to give to others, after my 19 year old son, Bradley, (only child) suicided nearly 6 years ago.