

The leader-poet: Ethical growth through reflexive poetic engagement.

Conference research presentation working paper

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Abstract

The pursuit of personal growth has been widely considered a desirable process in leadership development. However, the capacity to improve ethical engagement remains enigmatic. Launching from Bendell and Little's (2015) conceptualization of critical leadership studies and Edwards, Elliot, Iszatt-White, and Schledlitzki's (2015) call for creative techniques, this paper assumes that rational, behavioural, knowledge and skills-based approaches to enhancing leadership capacity may fail to access deeper emotional experiences that can better facilitate profound inner transformation (van Buskirk, London, & Plump, 2015). We propose that poetry and dialogue can be employed as tools for productive and reproductive reflection, as well as for research in developing ethical leadership capacity. Building on an interdisciplinary approach of poetic inquiry (McCulliss, 2013) and reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2009; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013) we present a phenomenological exploration of leadership reflexive learning through the production and narration of poetry. This study aims to contribute novel insight about ethical leadership learning that extends beyond traditional, rational approaches and taps into the emotional, spiritual, aesthetic and social process of personal transformation.

Keywords: poetry, leader development, ethical development, poetic inquiry

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“Leadership is, by definition, performative in which reflexivity is routine and moral grounding thus becomes possible.” (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014)

The pursuit of personal growth has been widely considered a desirable process in leadership development. However, the capacity to improve ethical engagement remains enigmatic. Launching from Bendell and Little’s (2015) conceptualization of critical leadership studies and Edwards, Elliot, Iszatt-White, and Schledlitzki’s (2015) call for creative techniques, the proposed contribution this paper assumes that rational, behavioural, knowledge and skills-based approaches to enhancing leadership capacity may fail to access deeper emotional experiences that can better facilitate profound inner transformation (van Buskirk, London, & Plump, 2015). We propose that poetry and dialogue can be employed as tools for productive and reproductive reflection, as well as for research in developing ethical leadership capacity.

Diversification of research methods and approaches to inquiry in management and leadership is essential to challenge prevailing paradigms and discourse. This study aims to access untapped aspects of ethical development in leaders and extend theoretical models of ethical leadership by exploring the lived experience of personal growth in leaders through poetic engagement. By studying the poetic engagement of leaders, the subjective experience of a leader in an organisational context can be integrated with academic study of leadership (McCulliss, 2013). Poetry is one among a number of genres less explored in the context of business management and organizational leadership (Grisham, 2006; March, 2006), which has the potential to enhance traditional forms of research in the social sciences (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009; Thomas et al., 2012). Poetic inquiry provides researchers with a

qualitative method for exploring the richness of experience of a person in a more holistic way through modes of representation that preserve the person's essence. As a qualitative research methodology, poetic inquiry has a variety of interpretations and approaches. For this study, we adopt the approach of using poems as a catalyst for interview dialogue (Xerri, 2017) around poetry, personal growth, and ethical leadership. Building on an interdisciplinary approach of poetic inquiry (McCuliss, 2013) and reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2009; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013) we present a phenomenological exploration of leadership reflexive learning through the production, narration and discussion of poetry in context. The novelty in our approach is the poet-leader as a research participant.

Although there is a small body of literature around the use of poetry reading and the interpretation of selected poems to facilitate data collection, leadership development and learning processes, there is much less research in which the participants are the poets themselves. We intend to provide novel insight and critical perspective to the study of personal growth processes in ethical leadership by exploring the lived experience of a leader-poet (who writes poetry of his own accord) and facilitating a dialogue around the poems and the poetic engagement to synthesize learning. We seek to employ a reflexive and meta-reflexive process of inquiry to support the participants' negotiation of personal growth that occurs in writing and interpreting poetry written by the research subjects themselves in a facilitated autoethnographic process. Specifically, this study pursues the objectives to:

1. Explore self-in-relation processes of creative production and critical reflection of leaders on personal ethics and professional morality.
2. Analyse the construction of meaning, purpose, values, ethical identity, and voice by leaders via poetic inquiry and reflexive narrative;
3. Identify novel insights about ethical social identity as a leadership dimension

We explore the processing of social experience as a leader-poet retrospectively situates and narrates a poem to convey the deeper meaning, spiritual orientation, and transformational significance of the creative experience. By accessing the creative process and personal growth effect of poetic engagement, this paper aims expand ethical leadership learning literature with a novel approach that extends beyond traditional, rational approaches toward a holistic view of the emotional, spiritual, aesthetic and social process of personal transformation. We begin by addressing how poetry has meaning for leadership learning and for ethical development.

Poetry and Leadership

Poetry as a mode of communication has characteristics that can be meaningful for leader development (Buskirk, London, & Plump, 2015; Jenlink, 2015). The ambiguous nature of expression often found in poetry is a familiar feature of the leader's decision-making environment. March (2006) noted that although poetry is generally disregarded as a medium for communication in management; nevertheless, poems, as sites for struggle with doubt, paradox, mixed feelings, and contradiction, have utility for expanding managers' interpretations of complex leadership contexts. Poetry also is a compressed, creative and emotive means of communicating complex ideas (Armitage, 2015; Grisham 2006). The emotional, imaginative, and imagery-laden nature of poetry can evoke reflection and inspire. Working with ambiguity, complexity, emotivism and such internal struggles can provide a fruitful platform for developing so-called 'soft skills' for leadership (Grisham, 2006), as task which is considered particularly challenging in HRD literature. This paper aims to explore the production of poetry as a tool for leadership development by capturing moments of personal growth, and how the analysis of one's own poetry can uncover further aspects of personal growth for the poet, as well as facilitate further understanding of the self-in-relation.

Poetry and Ethics

Several scholars have noted the relationship between poetry and ethics. Indeed, Saunders (2006) asserted that poetry is ‘an aesthetic and ethical practice in its own right’ (p. 504). Ethics is a realm that can often be characterized by ambiguity and inner struggle when it comes to interpreting right and wrong, good and bad, particularly when faced with conflicting worldviews or difficult dilemmas. Ethical leadership development is a site at which people learn to grapple with clarifying their values (Karakas, 2010), to question prevailing power structures, norms and assumptions (Bendell & Little, 2010; Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2015), problematize issues (Armitage, 2015) and practice moral imagination (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). Poetic metaphor as a communicative tool taps into symbolism, emotional language and imagery which aids in creating shared understanding. In this way it can be utilized as a tool for building trust and inspiring others to action (Grisham, 2006) as well as for shaping emotional perception and values (Buskirk, London, & Plump, 2015). In considering these characteristics in terms of the ethical utility of poetry, we have conceptualized our inquiry to explore ethical leadership development through the production of poetry by participants, their subsequent personal reflection and analysis of the poems and their ethical significance, and how a reflexive process using poetry as a catalyst might impact further personal ethical development.

Method

This study adopts an autoethnographic mode of inquiry (Spry, 2001) in which the self-exploratory research and analysis process of the subject is considered in relation to the professional context. We view this inquiry as autoethnographic as the participant is actively engaged in the learning, research and analysis process of exploring personal experience of

self-in-relation. This process is facilitated in dialogue with the lead researcher and in collaboration with the participant. “Creating poetic inquiry is a performative act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience offstage and onstage in the creation of research” (Prendergast et al., 2009, p. xxiii). It operates within a social constructionist paradigm integrating a phenomenological approach with methods of poetic inquiry (Langer & Furman, 2004) and dialogue for data collection. Unstructured dialogic interviews method for data collection and Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Roos, 2002) will be utilised as a guideline to generate accounts of the participants’ experience of writing poetry and using the artefacts as a basis for reflection and reflexive practice. We adopt a simple definition of poetic inquiry extracted from McCulliss (2013) and Prendergast et al (2009), who each noted the multiple ways poetry can be incorporated in the research process to constitute poetic inquiry. A summary of some aspects of poetic inquiry relevant to this paper:

I

Poetic inquiry is a form of qualitative research in the social sciences that incorporates poetry in some way as a component of an investigation...

IX

Poetic inquiry is a response to the crisis of representation experienced in postmodern critical perspectives on traditional approaches to ethnography and other social science research paradigms...

XII

Poetic inquiry is sometimes presented as a prose-based essay that includes poetry woven throughout...

XXI

Poetic inquiry is called by a multiplicity of names in social science but is always interested in expressing human experience, whether that of Self or Other or both... (Prendergast et al., 2009, p. xxxv-xxxvii)

Foremost, our inquiry including using participant-voiced poems (McCulliss, 2013) written by the participants for data collection as the data itself and as the subject of study. The following procedure will guide the inquiry:

1. Conduct initial unstructured interview (unrecorded dialogue/notes) first experiences with poetry
2. Conduct unstructured interview (recorded dialogue with notes) experience interpreting poetry, refer to specific poem written by subject
3. Conduct reflective journaling task: consider own unethical behaviour (3 sessions)
4. Conduct unstructured interview (recorded possibly with video) reflexive integration of journal tasks and poetic interpretation, learning experience.

Participants

At this stage and for this paper, our study focuses specifically on one leader-poet who was identified through the lead author's professional network. In the future, further inquiry using the same or very similar procedures would include a wider range of participants. Our participant is a leader with 30 years of experience in the field of biomedical science. He is a white male in his mid-50s, a UK citizen, educated to PhD level. As the head of a unit within a large public organization in the UK, he oversees 130 staff and 300 trainee staff. He writes poetry on his own initiative and engages with poetry to a certain extent both as a personal interest and in his professional life. The specific poem intended for use in the study, "Sexy

Science [In Big Pharma]” was written in response to a specific workplace-related experience and was not produced as part of the research process.

Unstructured Interview Scheme

This research project employs unstructured interview method and unstructured dialog with the objectives to 1) explore self-in-relation processes of creative production and critical reflection of leaders on personal ethics and professional morality, 2) analyse the construction of meaning, purpose, values, ethical identity, and voice by leaders via poetic inquiry and reflexive narrative, and 3) identify novel insights about ethical social identity as a leadership dimension. The procedure will comprise a series of three iterative unstructured interview sessions combined with journaling tasks to gain a deeper understanding of the ethical reasoning involved in processing critical incidents through explicating and reflecting on poems. The participants will refer to a poem or to several poems that they have written themselves as stimuli for the interviews (Xerri, 2017). The researcher will engage in dialog with the participant using the poem as an anchor to tease out the participants’ motivations, experiences, and perceptions related to conceptualizing, formulating, and interpreting the poem in the context of their leadership development and ethical development. Examples of prompts to stimulate dialogue:

1) Exploration

- What is your experience with reading poetry? Writing poetry?

2) Reflection

- What is your experience with interpreting poetry?
- What is your experience with other forms of artistic interpretation?
- Tell me about this poem (refer to the artefact in question).

Potential follow up questions:

- How would you characterize the emotions you were experiencing that led to producing the poem?
- What specific incident or experiences led you to write the poem?
- Why do you think this experience came out in the form of writing poetry?
- What does this poem say about your personal values? Your professional values?
- How do the experiences, feelings, or perceptions you sensed in relation to the poem impact your professional behaviour today?

3) Journaling tasks: in-depth reflection

a) Briefs: Reflecting on your current, recent, and past professional career history spend some time on a few different occasions recalling briefly an example of conduct you experienced/observed that you consider unethical. Note your approximate age, what the incident involved, the emotions you may have experienced, thoughts you had, decision-making you made to take action or not, and any outcomes or repercussions.

b) Longer/in-depth session(s): Think critically about your own behaviour in the professional context. Point out one specific situation, a specific environment, a specific relationship in the work context in which you or others might question the ethicality of your own behaviour.

Reflecting further and critically on this example, describe the issues, the context, some of the events/incidents you think impacted your behaviour; describe in depth your response to the situation(s). What sorts of options or conflicts did you struggle with?

Reflect critically on how this situation (environment, relationship) influenced you. What were you feeling, what emotions were you experiencing about yourself and others? how did the experience change anything about your beliefs, values, or your behaviour? what was the lasting impact? what lessons did you or could you now take with you? How

might you use this experience to formulate an action plan to strengthen your moral practice?

Integration/Reflexive engagement

- Tell me about your journaling? What new insights did you find?
- How do you see your reflective journaling and the results in relation to your poetry? Or in what writing poetry does for you?

Data analysis

For this study, we have defined a broad set of analytical constructs to guide inquiry. Roughly and initially, these include: personal growth, self-in-relation, moral action, values, conflict. Thematic analysis of transcripts based on the Gioia Methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012) for qualitative content analysis. We plan to conduct data analysis in an iterative process of reviewing interview recordings and transcripts to identify and define themes characterising defined analytical constructs. We anticipate that further themes may emerge through analysis and will integrate any emergent themes in our discussion. Iterative review of data analysis results will also be conducted with the leader-poet participant for further clarification and interpretive rigor.

Participant 1 Poems I

Glasgow Belongs To Me

Glasgow's gawin' roon and roon,
Fe' drink, and drugs cooked on a spoon,
Or a Kit Kat wrapper,
No matter.

A city of culture born to death,
From fatness and a lack of breath,
A Mars bar deep done in batter,
How dapper!

Another pregnant underage,
Men say she's just a slapper,
Get a council hoose real soon,
And by her boyfriend battered.

Glasgow's health and poverty,
Defined by a post code lottery,
Our self-deprecation a mockery,
Of a people in tatters.

No matter.

Sexy Science [In Big Pharma]

The Boss declared, "we do sexy science"
In a laboratory where nothing was said,
I imagined him in a gimp mask,
Adding drugs to an organ bath,
Whilst Miss Whiplash made up the Krebs.

But ten years on with the company gone,
He's redundant battered and bruised,
Miss Whiplash left him all forlorn,
She got a job in laboratory porn,
The mask in the drawer lies un-used.

Participant 1 Poems II

The Kind Leading the Blind

I always wanted to be the head,
I saw our leaders past,
Not as willing volunteers but tasked,
I never looked at it with such dread,
My resilience always built to last.

Management courses thickly layered,
360 and they're ready to be led,
You're made not born they looked and said,
Nothing will leave you scared
I bloated on propaganda fed.

But my romantic waltz with visions shared,
A daily strategic disco shuffle,
With suited men in testosterone tussles,
Pointed fingers, threats and stares,
Top down growling never muzzled.

But staff you never tell the tale,
But deflect, protect, inspire,
And many you help survive the fire,
And never use the word fail,
An upbeat town crier and white liar.

Whilst in China I heard once said,
A party man is of servant kind,
Thus, by Mao I'm part defined,
Not so much a radical red but instead,
Just one kind trying to lead the blind.

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