

Empirical leadership research: letting the data speak for themselves

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Introduction

This collection of papers is based around two highly valued concepts in contemporary times: leadership and empirical research. Each however brings a unique trajectory to current debates. Leadership is a somewhat seductive label and refers to social practices that are constructed as both rare and desirable. The value of these practices is not free from critique or even challenge (see Kellerman, 2013), but for the most part leadership remains an unquestioned assumption of necessity for, and evidence of, effective organisational or group functioning. Increasingly popular discourses have expanded the scope of leadership beyond an elite group of leaders through the mobilisation of a vast array of adjectives to locate leadership at different levels of social groupings / organisations. This expansion is supported by voluminous literatures drawing upon lived experience, but more importantly, empirical research arguing that leadership is not the privilege of any single individual or organisational role. Empirical research has long held an esteemed place in society – at least in the western world. With the rise of science (as opposed to religion) in understanding our world, the importance of data and facts collected from the empirical has emerged, and been sustained, as the benchmark of evidence. The contemporary gold standard of research – the randomised control trial – further legitimises the importance of empirical research and its role in understanding and advancing our world.

Our focus in this book is on leadership writ large. We are not limited to any particular institutional / organisational level or even a specific socio-geographic locality. Rather, we have a general interest in social groupings, ranging from a small collection of individuals through to large multi-national operations. The scope of reach that leadership exhibits is reflected in the expansive discourses that draw upon the label of leadership and the voluminous literatures that occupy substantial space in university libraries (those that still have physical shelves and are not fully digitised) and mainstream bookstores. Significantly, leadership is constructed as an applied field of study. That is, one of considerable practical application. It is possible to argue that the establishment of leadership as a research unit of interest was based – and dare we say continues to be – on a desire to illuminate what works in organisations and how that can be applied in other contexts and replicated at scale. Such underlying generative principles were evident in the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911) over a century ago. Although Taylor did not speak of leadership per se, as the label did not rise into ascendancy until many decades later, his desire to achieve maximum prosperity for both employer and employee remains a strong theme in contemporary discourses. The purpose of maximising prosperity and developing functionalist accounts of ‘what works’ has become somewhat of an orthodoxy in the discourses of leadership and this does particular work on the forms of scholarship undertaken. As Collinson and Grint (2005) argue:

Studies of leadership have typically drawn on a narrow range of functionalist theories (based mainly on psychological studies and perspectives limited primarily to social psychology), using positivist methodologies, and producing quantitative findings. As a result, empirical findings have tended to be rather objectivist, essentialist and functionalist, frequently abstracted from specific contexts (p. 7).

Traditional ways of studying leadership, those which continue to be legitimised even in the face of critique, have drawn heavily on quantitative measure of traits and/or behaviours and correlated those with various organisational and individual outcomes. At its worst, such correlations are used to then make causal arguments and at best, all these studies can say is that certain leadership traits or behaviours (assuming there is a belief in the measure) are evident in settings exhibiting X outcomes. What this poses for leadership studies is a methodological – or arguably ontological and epistemological – challenge around how best to understand the phenomenon of leadership. Recognition and engagement with these challenges does however remain on the periphery of leadership studies, as an orthodoxy of logical empiricism, particularly of functionalist, descriptive or normative perspective, remains hegemonic. While acknowledging that alternate voices remain on the periphery, there has always been, and always will be, movement on the edges. The long established critical (both with a capital and lower case ‘c’) voice remains, and for some is actually gaining traction, even if beyond the intellectual boundaries of leadership as a scholastic field – Matts Alvesson and his numerous collaborators

being some of the leading contemporaries in the broader leadership (management) space, and a specific example is the Critical Studies in Educational Leadership, Management and Administration book series edited by Pat Thomson, Helen Gunter and Jill Blackmore for Routledge. This is interesting not only for the reason that the critical is gaining a voice in arguments, but primarily due to the increasing eclecticism that diversity of opinion brings to scholarly debate and dialogue. It is here where the very generative principles of the Untested Ideas Center takes root. The purpose of creating an intellectual home for social scientists to develop, test and refine different ways of doing research and being scholars is much needed at scale. Through the broadening of theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of leadership, especially those that move beyond geographic and intellectual boundaries – particularly that of US hegemony – scholarly eclecticism opens the world to new and fruitful methodologies. Such avenues allow us to see the world through new lenses and it is only through new ways of seeing the world that we can change trajectories beyond the status quo.

This book serves the goal of methodological pluralism through its focus on empirical leadership research and not any one way of undertaking such research. That is, while journal special issues and edited collection frequently base themselves on a theme – a particular theoretical / methodological approach – our rationale was more fluid. We sought not to confine ourselves to any one particular way of doing scholarship and instead encouraged our contributors to think creatively. Such thinking was not to be limited to the application of methods, but also to include theoretical constructs, methodologies and even the practices of leadership scholarship itself. In doing so we have chosen to deliberately work on the margins of leadership studies (see also Wilkinson & Eacott, 2013). If scholarship seeks to advance knowledge and move our ways of thinking and being beyond the status quo of contemporary times, then we argue that working at the margins on untested ideas is where we should aim to be.

Leadership across disciplinary boundaries

Leadership, as a unit of scholarly analysis is a somewhat elusive yet high utility label. Unlike many other labels which remain of primary importance to a single discipline, leadership has utility. In many ways, leadership is a universal label that crosses both geographical and intellectual boundaries. Although there remains some questions regarding the translation of leadership from the language of the everyday into the scholarly language of research (see Eacott's chapter in this collection), for the most part there is little questioning of leadership's existence and its value to organisations.

What remains vital for leadership as a scholarly term is contextualisation. There are at least two schools of thought on this challenge for scholars. First, and the most common adopted, is that leadership remains a universal (and unquestioned) label and the addition of an adjective serves to locate leadership in a particular time and space. This locating can operate as a means of distinction between organisational types, such as 'school' leadership or 'team' leadership, or be based on a particular type of leadership, such as 'transformational', 'strategic', or 'authentic'. The former is used to explicitly articulate the context of leadership under investigation while the former is more focused on evidence of the present of a particular type of leadership in a given context. Both raise questions about what constitutes the context of leadership. Or more specifically, is it the adjective that gives meaning to leadership. The second school is that the use of an adjective is only required if insufficient work has been done around what constitutes leadership in the first place. This argument stresses the need to carefully construct leadership, deconstruct practices on the basis of the original construction, and then reconstruct those within a given time and space. In this approach, the need for the adjective is removed, as the intellectual work around the constitution of leadership is central to the inquiry and the narrative of the empirical provides support for the author's claim. These are however, only two schools of thought, and the intellectual diversity of the academy and wider community interest in leadership makes it impossible to meaningfully capture all possible approaches.

At a macro level, the intellectual home for scholarship on leadership is a tricky terrain for early career researchers and graduate students to negotiate. If context is important for leadership, and we contend it is, then the most appropriate home for scholarship is field specific journals. For example, for those studying the leadership of educational institutions, it makes sense to disseminate that work in specialised journals such as *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, or *International Journal of Leadership in Education* among others. Similar examples can be populated for other units of analysis. That being said, if the interest is in the theoretical and methodological advancement of leadership studies, then more generalist journals, such as *Leadership*, may be more appropriate. That being said, the utility of leadership, and the inter-disciplinary manner in which it can be approached also makes leadership studies equally at home in sociology, psychology, economic, or business literatures. The point we are trying to make here is that leadership

is an intellectually diverse terrain where both the label itself and the ways of knowing that label are not the property of any signal discipline, making empirical research on leadership interdisciplinary and most importantly pluralistic.

Centrality of empirical research to scholarship

With the managerialist hegemony of contemporary times, one language speaks above all others: data. For research to find an audience beyond itself, not to mention have an ‘impact’, contemporary practices indicate the need for data. These data are not only needed but necessary for the much desired evidence-based practice. Politically, decisions based on data have far greater traction than those based solely on lived experience. The relatively recent rise of the science-into-service (see Cook & Odom, 2013; Fixsen *et al.*, 2009), that which poses a certain degree of Tayloristic thinking, is explicitly about translating scientific knowledge into human services. Even with the recent critiques of Michael Gove’s policy trajectory in the English context, and in particular using the notion of ‘policy driven evidence’, there is little doubt that the value of data has been legitimised in contemporary thinking.

In the scholarly sense, the presentation, refutation and advancing of knowledge claims is based very much on the presentation of data. Data from empirical research is an extension of the sensory ways in which we explore and come to understand the social world. As a result, it is the data that is generated from and about the empirical that adds legitimacy to our claims about the world in which we live. Calls for research-informed policy, evidence-based practice, and science-into-service all require empirical research. The elite universities, those which rank highly in national and international league tables, are those which produce substantial high quality empirical research. It is empirical research which enables original contributions to knowledge, high quality research training and impact through various avenues of knowledge translation. For the most part, the doctorate, that elusive ticket into the academy, is built upon the demonstration of successful undertaking of empirical research. The questioning of research that falls outside of the orthodoxy of empirical research – frequently given the disparaging label of ‘ivory tower’ work – is further evidence of the hegemonic position of empirical research.

The underlying generative principle of knowledge creation is that empirical research, and especially its key element of data, is needed. This is an almost universal assumption that works across both scholarly and the ordinary language of the everyday. This book explicitly brings the universal label of leadership and the centrality of empirical research together for the purpose of not only advancing knowledge claims, but doing so in innovative ways.

The structure of the book

The book has been divided into two clear sections. This division is based on the epistemological approaches in the chapters rather than a pre-determined theme for the collection. As the chapters are drawn from the first Untested Ideas Research Center International Conference and additionally by invitation, there is an eclectic mix of approaches taken to leadership across these chapters. The chapters comprising the first section we describe as aligning with a more traditional approach to leadership while the chapters in the second section are based upon a more critical perspective. Interestingly, the chapters in section two are nearly all from Australian authors, in keeping with the long history of critical scholarship emanating from that part of the world.

In the first chapter, Nicholas Sun-Keung Pang and John Pisapia investigate how school leaders in Hong Kong are responding to the period of rapid and discontinuous change that has been characteristic of the education system in Hong Kong over recent years. Specifically they argue that school leaders need to think and act strategically through the application of advanced cognitive capabilities in order to prepare their schools for ongoing professional development and school improvement. Pang and Pisapia draw upon a large scale questionnaire (a total of 635 school leaders at a senior management level) in which school leaders self-reported how systems thinking, reflection and reframing affected school leaders’ practice of strategic execution. They found that those school leaders that demonstrated a higher use of systems thinking and reflecting in strategic thinking skills also reported a greater use of a range of leadership influence actions. The chapter has further implications for leadership selection processes, professional development and better understanding the theory of strategic leadership in education.

The second chapter, by Jinyan Huang and Michael Reilly, deviates from the emphasis on educational leadership in the other chapters and explores manager and worker perceptions of leadership effectiveness and ineffectiveness in a skilled trades business. The significance of this chapter is not only the focus on leadership in skilled trades businesses but also the attention given to negative characteristics of ineffective leaders, an issue that is still given much less attention in the academic literature. Huang and Reilly draw upon G-theory as a theoretical framework to explore the perceptions of effectiveness and ineffectiveness of positive and negative leader characteristics. Seventeen managers and seventeen workers participated in the study. They found that the rater employment status did affect their perceptions and rating variability of leadership effectiveness and ineffectiveness. Interestingly the positive leader characteristics between workers and managers were very different while the negative leader characteristics were similar. However, overall the managers' responses were more consistent than their workers.

In the next chapter, Suseela K.S. Malakolunthu and Nagappan C. Rengasamy draw upon the notion of institutional leadership to conceptualise the leadership of two school principals in Malaysia. The study adopts a case study approach, drawing on interviews, observations and document analysis to examine the leadership actions of two principals in relation to the theoretical frame of institutional leadership. With a particular focus on the themes of instilling values, strengthening the system, maintaining internal consistency, harnessing community support, overcoming threat and challenging the process, the study found that the two principals' practices were closely aligned with this form of institutional leadership, albeit one more than the other. The importance of this study lies in the identification of principals who are prepared to break loose from various institutional constraints and the potential for reconsidering principals' professional development along the lines of appropriate skills and creativity.

Chandra J. Foote and Mary Ellen Bardsley explore the often ignored aspect of school leadership, that is, the role of disciplinarian. This is a role that is often delegated to others such as deputy principal or others in a senior administrative position. However, what is less known, according to Foote and Bardsley, is how these leaders are prepared for such a role, and how the effectiveness of such a role is evaluated. Drawing on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frame, the chapter explores the experiences of 10 leaders in schools in New York State undertaking this role. A combination of participants of PBIS and non-PBIS schools was selected and the findings illustrate some differences in the way PBIS and non-PBIS disciplinarians undertake their work with many following more authoritarian ways of working. The authors argue that a focus on the preparation, role and responsibilities of these leaders can lead to practices of a less authoritarian nature and moving towards a more humanistic one.

In the first chapter of section two, Richard Niesche and Martin Mills draw upon a case study of a principal who undertakes reforms in two schools over a 14 year period. Both schools are severely disadvantaged in terms of their students coming from very low socio-economic status communities. Niesche and Mills draw upon the work of Nancy Fraser to theorise the leadership practices in the two schools. The case study includes interviews with the principal, teachers and key administrative staff to examine their experiences of school reform in these communities. Key aspects of this principal's philosophy of social justice include high expectations, relations with the local community and building leadership density. The chapter argues that leadership in these types of communities needs to advocate for these students in terms of a parity of participation, to use Fraser's term, so that the best opportunities can be provided to these students through forms of recognition, representation and redistribution. This is not intended to be a new form of adjectival leadership approach but rather to illustrate an organically built, context driven approach to social justice.

Lisa Catherine Ehrich and Fenwick W. English take an innovative approach to understanding educational leadership in their chapter through the work of Elliott Eisner. Ehrich and English argue that the arts and perspectives from artists can provide useful and refreshing insights into the field of educational leadership. Specifically using the notion of connoisseurship, they draw upon interviews with a range of artists to explore the cognitive functions performed by those in the arts and illuminate the implications of these approaches for the study and practice of educational leadership. Ehrich and English present an alternative view to the dominant perspectives in the field by using arts metaphors to break out of the stifling approaches to leadership that continue to be so dominant in the field.

In the next chapter, Christina Gowlett continues the 'critical' tradition by drawing on the work of Judith Butler to disrupt the normative lens of new schooling accountabilities. In a play on the title of this edited collection, 'doing data differently', Gowlett seeks to compare the ways that two school principals in Australian schools use performance data to frame their leadership practice. The comparison illuminates some differences in how these principals lead in respect to their negotiating of different 'intelligibilities'. The lesson here is not a prescriptive

approach to framing leadership and the use of performance data, but rather, a greater understanding of the constraints and possibilities for action within these new schooling accountabilities. The insertion of Butler's ideas here serves to work against the 'hegemonic norms' of models of best practice so often advocated in the field.

In the final chapter, Scott Eacott, provides a provocative, daring response to both the ideas of 'empirical leadership research' and 'letting the data speak for themselves'. Eacott forces the reader to engage with the epistemological rather than the empirical in his questioning of the utility and robustness of the term 'leadership'. These are discussions the field needs to have in order to problematise its obsession with a constructed label to signify a misrecognised empirical reality. This is a challenge to the orthodoxy of thinking in the leadership field, albeit one that Eacott acknowledges has inherent risk as a direct challenge to the discipline. As researchers in the field, we need to take account of our constructions of leadership as a form of discourse and social reality, and the political game we play in such constructions. To avoid doing so, according to Eacott, is to continue to risk the credibility of the field within the academy and the wider community. As such the data cannot speak for themselves, but we need to ask ourselves, 'is that such a bad thing?'

Conclusion

Leadership as a concept comes with substantive aspirations embedded. As such, it is a timeless concept that speaks to a desired future, or at least situation. This makes leadership one of society's great unfinished projects. As with notions of education, health, and security, there is always more that could be done. However, the desired state is not a shared vision. There are as many different versions as there are opinions. This may seem overwhelming in many arenas, yet in the scholarly sense it is an exciting prospect. What this means is that there is an ongoing call for new and untested ideas, a dynamic field of inquiry which cannot be captured in a single set of discourses or practices, but an intellectually diverse terrain that speaks beyond geographic and social boundaries. This book is but one contribution to the discourses of leadership, but one in which we see great potential in what it offers in relation to different ways of knowing, being and doing leadership.

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