Research as a Political Activity: The Fallacy of Data Speaking for Themselves

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Introduction

I am going to start this chapter by explicitly outlining what it is, and by virtue what it is not. While this chapter is located in a book entitled *Empirical Leadership Research: Letting the Data Speak for Themselves*, I am a 'leadership' sceptic. For me, 'leadership' is a theoretical fallacy.[1] That is, I believe there is sufficient doubt about the robustness of the concept that it needs to be problematized. Significantly this raises questions about whether it is even possible to empirically investigate a concept that is empirically questionable. Put simply, in this chapter I am going to ask questions of the very notion of 'leadership' and consequentially cast doubt over the idea that data about 'leadership' can speak for itself. In doing so, this chapter is more methodologically – or more precisely, epistemological – than empirical. My attention is on the unique set of relations that exist between the ontological / epistemological stance of the researcher and the construction of the research object known as 'leadership'. Understandably, an initial question may be to ask 'But what scientific profit can be discovered from such an exercise?' especially in a book dedicated to empirical work. I raise this point not as an iconoclastic attack, or privileged intellectualism, rather because I believe that, for the most part, 'leadership' researchers, for all their research and voluminous literature, do not ask themselves these questions. By avoiding asking oneself about the stimulation and provocation of your questioning, the individual scholar, and the domain at large, is significantly limited as to what it can say about the social world. Herein lies the contribution of this methodological intervention, the underlying generative principles of scholarly work constructs what is of value, what is worth investigation, and most significantly, what the researcher does, or does not, 'find' (I would say 'construct'). As a result, research is – as with any form of educating – political work. Therefore, an interrogation of the epistemological preliminaries of research is significant for advancing a rigorous and robust research programme – or dare I say 'science' – in any disciplinary area.

In adopting this approach there is a certain element of risk. To challenge 'leadership' is to attack one of, if not the, canon of the discipline. Unlike the critique of management and/or administration, not to mention the demonization of bureaucracy, 'leadership' is the current sacred label of the discipline. To question its scholarly significance brings to the level of discourse the very generative foundations of the fields of scholarship and practice, and for most reading this text, our identity. This is why we see numerous critiques of the various adjectives (e.g. transformational, servant, strategic, distributed, motion) used in the rapidly expanding literatures of 'leadership', yet minimal, if any critique of 'leadership' itself. It is as though the scholarly practice of reflexivity, or critically turning upon oneself, has been forsaken for the purpose of maintaining a particular relationship with practice. However, in seeking a generative research programme, I follow Pierre Bourdieu in *taking as ones object the social work of construction of the pre-constructed object* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992], p. 229). To do so is to cast doubt on orthodoxy, or more specifically, to make the familiar strange. This focuses attention on the relations between science and scientist.

I want to explicitly outline my mobilisation of the label 'science' at this point. The very use of which in the broader discourses of educational leadership, management and administration is deliberately provocative.[2] This is in contrast with more mainstream management discourses which frequently refer to themselves as management science. It is however through the mobilisation of 'science' as a label that I seek to both engage with, and contribute to, the discourses of leadership (a.k.a. management / administration). As with Bourdieu, I have a belief in science, but not science in the mainstream Anglophone employment of the label, mostly tied to logical empiricism and displaying an 'exhibitionism of data and procedures – where one would be better advised to display the conditions of construction and analysis of these data' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992]), p. 65).

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[1] My use of quotation marks around the word 'leadership' is deliberate. Given my argument centres on the questionable nature of 'leadership' as an empirical object I seek to consistently remind the reader that 'leadership' cannot be uncritically accepted in discourses if rigorous and robust inquiry is desired.

[2] It is however important to recognise that the *Theory Movement* of the mid-1900s sought to establish a science of educational administration. While for the most part this pursuit has been conceded as inappropriate, its legacy continues in the logical empiricist inspired orthodoxy of educational leadership, management and administration research. A significant contribution to this debate comes from Evers and Lakomski (1991, 1996, 2000, 2012) who contend that it is not science that is problematic, rather the type of science (e.g. logical empiricism).

Rather, I align with the view of science, and more specifically scientific inquiry, as an act of *distinction* from ordinary language and the under-problematized view of the social world *as it is*. Therefore, for me, science is, and should be, the goal of all inquiry into the social world.

The labels of 'science' and 'scientific' have a long association with administration, management and leadership (Eacott, 2013a). After all, it is now over 100 years since the publication of Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) *The Principles of Scientific Management*, and there is little doubt that this is one of the classic management texts. Not only has Taylor's work been influential in industry, but also in education (see Callahan, 1962) and especially the early preparation and development programs developed by the newly established departments of educational administration in US universities at the time (Bates, 2010; Tynack & Hansot, 1982). Significantly, as Kanigel (1997) contends, Taylorism is so embedded in our ways of seeing and understanding organisations we no longer recognise it. I contend that as a result of our ontological complicity – the uncritical acceptance of the realness of leadership and its significance for organisational functioning – that 'leadership' research, irrespective of its rigour and/or robustness, advances discourses built upon questionable constructs. While these discourses are useful political resources – especially in the pursuit of evidence-based policy making – their value in advancing science and building / establishing credibility in the academy and beyond remains in question. The argument that I build throughout this chapter is based on: the problematizing of 'leadership'; 'leadership' research as a political activity; and questioning the notion of data speaking for itself. At its core, my argument is that scholastic inquiry built around a questionable concept is highly problematic and needs to be engaged with.

Problematizing Leadership

'Leadership' studies, like any other member of the social sciences owes its existence to the currency of public concern over particular social issues (e.g. public administration, governance, security, health, education). However, 'leadership' is not an unquestioned construct. This is the case not only in broader scholarly literatures, but also within organisational studies and interestingly, 'leadership' discourses themselves. That is, while there is little doubt in mainstream discourses that 'leadership' remains the label of choice in contemporary times, its scholarly value as a construct is contested (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2010). Podolny, Khurana and Hill-Popper (2005) argue that 'leadership' is actually marginalised by dominant organisational perspectives. Significantly, there remains ambiguity surrounding the very definition of 'leadership' (see Bedeian & Hunt, 2006) and advocates of 'leadership' and its effect on organisational performance frequently, if not always, constitute 'leadership' through titles / roles in organisational hierarchy. As I have argued elsewhere:

> Notably, over the past 50 years there has been a shift from leadership as meaning making to the significance of leadership for economic performance. This shift results in 'leadership' becoming an attribute of organisations demonstrating a 'high level' of performance. Embodying generative functionalist assumptions, such accounts are often limited to detailing personal / group traits, behaviours or actions correlated with higher levels of performance (Eacott, 2013b, pp. 91).

The result is the construction of 'leadership' as a research object explicitly coupled with organizational performance. Theoretically and methodologically, if not empirically, this is significant. For example, for those that view organisations as heavily constrained, especially from external influences such as large bureaucracies, 'leadership' is rendered as largely irrelevant and, at best, a social construction (Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Meindl, 1990). It is in this intellectual space that Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) assert that while most people seem to have little doubt that leadership is a 'real' phenomenon – not only important, but necessary for organisations – few acknowledge problems with confusing a socially constructed label with an assumed empirical reality. It is this confusion of an epistemic label with an empirical object that destabilizes scholarship about 'leadership'. Significantly, as I have argued elsewhere, there is sufficient to claim that 'leadership' is actually a label of the managerialist project, particularly when coupled with institutional performance:

> … the construction of a primary criterion, high student outcomes, a point of cognition, to which there is an assumed causal relationship. That is, an *a priori* assumption that by virtue of the institutional, or actually student, performance, leadership must have been enacted in that location. In doing so, researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike have constructed the epistemic label 'leadership' without acknowledging the post-event identification of the construction. Through the application of this *a priori* assumption of the existence, or 'realness' of leadership, and the *a posteriori*, or post-event identification of where leadership has happened, scholarship pays far more attention to the description of who leaders are and what they do, than developing the kinds of explanation which can inform theoretical criteria from which its very existence can be engaged (Eacott, 2013b, p. 95).

What we have playing out here is the foregrounding of the empirical problem over the generative theoretical problem. As can regularly be witnessed in the mainstream media, there is a degree of public scrutiny in the administration of society and 'leadership' is frequently perceived as the means of addressing any crises that arise. The hegemony of this default position – at least in Western-capitalist societies – is evidence of the argument made by many social theorists that the social world exists in the body as much as the body exists in the social world. Therefore, the way in which we perceive the world is the result of our internalisation of the objective structures of the social world in the cognitive schemata through which we apprehend the social world. Significantly, and at scale, there exists a belief in 'leadership', and most importantly, the stakes of the task at hand. That is, 'leadership' functions only in so far as it produces a belief in the value of its product (e.g. policy, security, order), and means of production (e.g. governance). This blurs the boundaries of the empirical and the epistemic, as 'leadership' the research object is the institutionalisation of a point of view grounded in a pre-reflexive belief in the undisputed value of the object itself. The resulting 'leadership' discourses are generative. They have not only brought 'leadership' into being, but also created a situation where only 'leadership' can solve the generated empirical problems of organisations / institutions. Bourdieu, following Gaston Bachelard (1984[1934]), describes such situation as 'epistemological obstacles' and calls for an 'epistemological break' (see Bourdieu, Chamboredon, Passeron, 1991[1968]). He sees the taking of pre-scientific concepts from the social world without careful examination of their construction has highly problematic and un-scientific. As Bourdieu *et al* (1999]1993]) observes:

> The positivists dream of an epistemological state of perfect innocence papers over the fact that the crucial difference is not between a science that effects construction and one that does not, but between a science that does this without knowing it and one that, being aware of work of construction, strives to discover and master as completely as possible the nature of its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects those acts produce (p. 608).

If we are to accept the social world at face value, the orthodoxy of ordinary language (as opposed to scientific language) that constructs the research object in such a way that you can find lists, directories, role statements, capability frameworks, among others, already constituted by 'professional' bodies. This speaks explicitly to Bourdieu's argument. The contemporary organisational condition of flatter hierarchies, project based teams and the like has called traditional notions of administration –namely bureaucracy and chain of command – into question. The generative 'leadership' discourses have morphed with these changes and rather than asking questions of the label itself, have expanded to now include numerous adjectival 'leadership' labels which reflect the array of organisational positions and roles (e.g. teacher leadership, middle leadership, project leader) of the contemporary organisation. As a set of discourses, this proliferation of adjectival 'leadership' demonstrates a shift in thinking, but one grounded in accepting the social world at face value. First of all, the minimal engagement with asking questions of 'leadership' is problematic for the advancement of any scientific disciplinary knowledge. Second, if 'leadership' is everywhere, and an inclusive concept, then by its very nature it does little to offer any form of distinction rendering itself somewhat useless. That is, if everyone is a 'leader', and by virtue 'leadership' is everywhere, then the concept itself is vacuous and its scholarly value is next to nothing. That is of course unless you, or a sponsoring body, have an explicit use for 'leadership' research in advancing its own agenda.

With reduced research funding and the orthodoxy of 'leadership' as a means of bringing about 'positive' change, many researchers or research teams are falling under the control of large firms seeking to secure a monopoly, or to use Michael Porter's (1985) term 'competitive advantage', through the commercialisation of profitable products. Equally problematic are the politicisation of research and the use of findings for political advantage. 'Leadership' research has the very real prospect of being solicited for the production of marketable products. Think here of Gunter's (1997), following Halpin (1990), claim of 'management by ring binders'. This solicitude can be positive – and often very profitable, materially and symbolically, for those who opt to serve the dominant vision, if only by omission (and in the case, scientific inadequacy suffices) – or negative, and malignant, sometimes even destructive, for those who, just by practicing their craft, contribute to unveiling a little truth of the social world (Bourdieu, 2004[2001]). In the context of the arguments raised above regarding the epistemic, rather than empirical, foundations of 'leadership', research about 'leadership' serve a political purpose.

Leadership Research as a Political Tool

Research is a political practice. This extends beyond the highly competitive national research council grant schemes and the disciplinary power games of the academy. Research, as the construction of new knowledge – and dare I say even the confirmation of existing knowledge – is a political act. The individual, or research team,

who studies the 'leadership' of organisations, has a 'use' for them, hence the voluminous normative literature. In light if the arguments raised above regarding the vacuous nature of 'leadership', the political mobilisation of research plays out in two ways: the legitimation of scientific method and/or the mobilisation of common-sense arguments.

Kellerman (2013) argues, the 'leadership' industry was initially spawned and sustained in the United States in the 1970s, when corporate America was, for the first time since the Second World War, fearful of competition from abroad, notably Japan. In doing so, 'leadership' is positioned as *the* solution to the contemporary crisis of organisations, and in particular state institutions (see also Gunter, 2012). For example, since the recent global financial crisis, no fewer than 16 European Union nations have had a change of government. There is a perceived crisis in the 'leadership' of nations and need for change. Hartley (2010), following others, claims that shifts in economic conditions frequently, if not always, result in shifts in discourses of leadership, management and administration. In the context of Australian education systems, the current Gillard Labor Government has the aspiration goal of making Australia a top five education nation by 2025. This is built around data (e.g. PISA and TIMMS) indicating a decline in the rank of Australia on global league tables – once again, a crisis in performance. Central to the government's reform is the notion that 'if each of those [Australia's 9529 schools] schools is to be a truly great school, it needs great leadership' (see www.alp.org.au/school-reform/). In addition to the coupling of performance and 'leadership', there is also the establishment of 'leadership' as a key political leverage point.

In navigating this terrain, managerialist policies have constituted a new unit of analysis in discourses of institutional performance, the 'leader', not 'leadership' as its focal point. Policy, and much research for that matter, is focused on 'improving' this 'leader'. This is somewhat contrary to mainstream discourses of 'leadership' which are increasingly calling on the distribution of 'leadership' within organisations.[3] An important shift in these policy discourses is the strengthening of the science into service model (see Fixsen, Blasé, Naoom & Wallace, 2009) and the (re)legitimising of the quasi-experimental design, namely the randomised control trial, as the gold standard of empirical research. In the case of the latter, we see the expanded application of a natural sciences model of research, one that is problematic in the less easy to measure disciplines (e.g. humanities and many social sciences). As Donmoyer and Galloway (2010), you likened this move to that of the Theory Movement of the 1950-60s in educational administration, note:

> … to be considered *scientific*, educational research must be oriented toward the construction and validation of theory that applies not to a single case or small number of cases but to a large group of organisations or individuals (p. 4).

The strengthening of the science into service, or other facsimiles such as evidence-based practice, takes this a little further back into the past. One of the key questions of science into service is how to make better use of research-based evidence in the delivery of interventions (e.g. prevention and treatment) in human services. In the case of 'leadership' specifically, this translates into 'if we know what leadership works for X outcomes, how do we make that happen?'. This is arguably one of the drivers behind the mass adoption and popularity of the quality improvement movement. In industry this played out as the Total Quality Management system, loosely attributed to Deming. In the case of education, this gave rise to the School Effectiveness and School Improvement movement. In both cases, this re-legitimised the mobilisation of scientific methods of managing labour. In both cases we see the re-emergence (if it ever left us) of Tayloristic thinking. Taylor (1911) was driven by efficiency. He sought maximum prosperity for the employer and employee and saw this being achieved through the 'one right method'. History paints Taylor in many colours,[4] but his profound legacy on ways of thinking – and seeing – the world of organisations and their leadership, management and administration cannot be denied.

As with Taylor and his stop watches and clipboards, frequently the consumers of 'leadership' research seek definitive evidence of what works and then how best to employ that method. Although we rarely call upon the label 'one best way' anymore, the contemporary equivalent is 'best practice'. The role of 'leaders' in this space, once we know what we need to do, is how to we bring this into being? For many, this is the purpose of 'leadership' research, bringing research based evidence on how best to produce a product into being through the manipulation of organisational structures. In many ways, it is difficult to argue with rational thesis of Taylor's work. That is, find out the most efficient way to do a task and then operationalize that way at scale. In this way, both the employer and employee can prosper. The important generative question in this thesis however is who,

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[3] I am however sceptical of 'distribution' as this implies that 'leadership' is a commodity that can be traded like stocks within a market. Such a conceptualisation fails to adequately engage with the social nature of practice (see Eacott, 2013c).

[4] For an expansive and illuminating biography I suggest Robert Kanigel's (1997) *The one best way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the enigma of efficiency* (Cambridge: MIT Press).

and for what purposes, defines the desired outcome. An important element in the success of Tayloristic thinking being embedded and embodied by the managerialist discourses of contemporary politics is that it speaks the language of the times – data.

Bourdieu notes that in the social sciences even the least competent and intellectually equipped scholar (Bourdieu, following Alain, actually uses the label 'dumbest') can use common sense and find support, especially beyond the academy (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992]). This is usually the case when initial data is not exclusively supportive of a political agenda. Take for example the School Based Management (SBM) movement, which is gaining renewed traction in Australian education policy, as with elsewhere. At its core, SBM is built on a romantic belief in 'participation' at the local level[5] and frequently exhibits a denial of power relations in the social, yet invokes a level of common sense logic that is difficult, if not impossible, to refute. For example, one of the key arguments raised by SBM advocates is that the more those involved in acting out decisions are involved in the actual decision making process, the more likely they are to affiliate with the decision and act it out consistent with its intention. This general argument is used as a means of breaking down large centralised bureaucracies in favour of smaller, more localised but more importantly more responsive, administrative structures. There is a level of common-sense appeal in deploying education policy that requires schools to be more responsive to market forces, requiring greater transparency in terms of return on public investment, and demanding that institutions be more enterprising – both image management and securing funding from a more diverse range of sources. The trade-off of standardising the education product, through national curriculum, teaching standards, and employing testing regimes to assess the quality – not to mention setting up points of comparison – of schooling, makes sense if one believes in the instrument of measures. In taking this initial step on a policy trajectory on the basis of (rational) common-sense logic, 'leadership' research then plays the role of diagnosing problems with the administrative structures and performance of schools and developing interventions to improve that performance. As argued earlier in the paper, this makes 'leadership' discourses generative as they then evolve to fit the shifting organisational terrain all the while avoiding questions being asked of the construct of 'leadership' itself.

I am not suggesting here that the only use of 'leadership' research is for political advantage. Rather, on the basis of my earlier argument that 'leadership' is a vacuous concept, the mobilisation of 'leadership' as a research object is part of a social practice that exists in an asymmetrical social world. Therefore, those engaging in the research, in whatever role, have a purpose for it. This purpose, a generative principle of the work that shapes what is of value, what can and cannot be known, and how best to go about it, needs to not only be made explicit but needs to be engaged with my the researcher and the reader in seeking to better understand the construction and constant re-construction of the research object.

Can the Data Speak for Themselves?

On a global scale I would argue that very few researchers believe that data can speak for themselves. The notion of an objective reality that exists outside of the actors who generate knowledge seems like an epistemological preliminary from a bygone era. This is not to suggest that the trust of the scientific and wider community is not still invested in logical empiricism. The global spread of evidence-based practice, the science-to-service movement (Fixsen *et al.*, 2009), the recognition of the randomised control trial as the gold standard research design (Donmoyer & Galloway, 2010) and even the US *No Child Left Behind Act 2001* embedding and emphasising scientifically based research (Cook & Odom, 2013) reflects the hegemonic value of research. However, in the context of 'leadership', especially given the arguments put forth in this chapter, how can we possibly measure something when there is doubt over its very existence? Under what conditions, can an epistemic construct be measured in such a way that the results do not reflect the *a priori* assumptions of the researcher? Can 'leadership' research ever escape the assumption, both *a priori* and *a posteriori* of its creation?

Something that I have yet to touch on in this argument is the role of theory in research. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to adequately pay attention to this matter. However, I do wish to raise two key points. First, theory is central to any empirical research. As the much appropriated quote from Kant goes, research without theory is blind, just as theory without research is deaf and dumb. MacLure (2010) explicitly reminds us that:

> Theory stops us from forgetting, then, that the world is *not* laid out in plain view before our eyes, or coyly disposed to yield its secrets to our penetrating analyses (or our herbivorous ruminations). It stops us from thinking that things speak for themselves – 'the data', 'practice', the pure voice of the previously silenced. It blocks our fantasies about the

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[5] For an excellent account of the problematic nature of 'participation' see Anderson (1990).

legibility of others – the idea that we can read other people's minds or motives. It stops us from forcing 'the subjects' out into the open where anyone and no one can see them (p. 278).

MacLure's argument is both methodological and political. Methodological in the sense that theory is generative of research and what is researchable. It is theory, the epistemological and ontological position of the researcher in combination with the construction of the research object that shapes and is shaped by the research. Therefore, data is both product and producer of research. Importantly, the research, and specifically the data are situated in a web of relations. These relations are deeply political, as are all practices in the social world, and it is theory that brings the ordinary into question. Theory gets in the way and opens new possibilities for thinking and doing. The mobilisation of performative benchmarks, both international (e.g. the Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA; Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study - TIMSS) and domestic (e.g. National Assessment Programme: Literacy and Numeracy – NAPLAN), as evidence, is viewed as a mode of objective data that provides the basis for comparison and removes the subjectivity and anti-progress of the left. It is theory that locates these testing regimes – performatives which are frequently coupled with 'leadership' – in context. The common-sense appeal of comparing on an international scale overlooks the individual nuances of national contexts. The data may meet all the criteria of scientific credibility (e.g. reliability, validity) but without the detailing of context, or more specifically, the locating of the data within a particular time and space the story is significantly limited. When combined with the questionable construct that is 'leadership' and the political work of research, it is difficult to substantively argue that data can speak for themselves.

Conclusion

Research on 'leadership' is voluminous. Millions of words can be found of the role of 'leaders', the 'leadership' of organisations, and the act of 'leading'. There are constructs, taxonomies, models, frameworks, and sophisticated statistical measure of effect – including the contemporarily popular meta-analysis. This substantive bank of research has sought to move beyond the blind empiricism of the lived experience of turnaround leadership and provide some data to support the case. In doing so, research has constructed the epistemic label of 'leadership' and misrecognised this as an empirical reality. The argument that I have built in this chapter is that for the most part, 'leadership' researchers – as I believe it is impossible to completely separate the researcher from the practice of research – have failed, at scale, to recognise this shift. If 'leadership' research is to acquire any level of academic credibility within both the academy and wider community then greater attention needs to be paid to the manner in which it undertakes its inquiry. Attention to the construction and ongoing re-construction of the research object in time and space would advance our understanding of the leadership, management and administration of organisations in new and fruitful directions. These directions would arguably possess utility across both the fields of scholarship and practice. But this is a challenge that comes at a cost. The data must not be seen as an independent contributor to the discourses of 'leadership' but rather as a social construction in the political game that is knowledge creation. As a result, the data on 'leadership' cannot speak for themselves.

As noted earlier, adopting the approach I have is difficult and open to risk. Difficult in the sense that, as Bourdieu (2004[2001]) notes, every word uttered about scientific practice can be turned back on the person who utters it. For example, are my own *a priori* assumptions of 'leadership' generating a particular reading of the scholarly literature to cast doubt over 'leadership'? Or more basically, are my own cognitive schemas resulting in me seeing the world in ways that reinforce by already held beliefs? While I would like to think that through the rigorous and robust application of my craft I have reached my conclusions, these questions are fair and form part of the scholastic undertaking. The risk exists in the explicit engagement and resulting challenge of the status quo of 'leadership' discourses. There is a very real and likely outcome that my argument will be rejected by the existing guardians of the domain. This partially speaks to the claim that research is a political activity. The academy is a space where the custodians of a domain (e.g. 'leadership' discourses) come into contact, and frequently confrontation, with new contenders. Apart from the arguably masculine undertones of such a claim, the political contestation of scientific work is reflective of the social world in which it trades. The social world is constituted through complexity, contestation, fluidity and to expect data generated about it to be any different is fundamentally flawed. My goal in writing this chapter was not to merely write a piece on the scholarship of 'leadership', but to make a much more fundamental point about scientific inquiry on 'leadership'. The challenge that I have laid out is not only important in advancing science in the scholarship of 'leadership' (note that my claim is not for a science *of* 'leadership') but also for the training of future generations of 'leadership' scholars and the content of what is disseminated to those beyond the academy. As such, the challenge of the chapter rests as much with the reader as it does me. If but one person engaged in the study of 'leadership' engages with the

issues presented in this chapter, then it has been successful, albeit limited, in challenging the orthodoxy of thinking.

Acknowledgements

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