University of Huddersfield Repository

Gibbs, Stephen P.

Co-produced autoethnography in leadership research - methods at the margins

Original Citation


This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/10196/

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/
Co-produced autoethnography in leadership research – impetus for methods at the margins

Stephen Gibbs
(s.p.gibbs@hud.ac.uk)
Dept of Leadership and Management
Right message, wrong colours

• “A consequence of the dominance of rationality is that leadership has been cast in largely behavioural and structural hues almost devoid of any consideration of human interiority” (English, 2008: 96)

• Interiority? Human being e.g. self as system subject to nature or self as subject to its own volition
Dark arts

• “...a more complex model suits the realities of leadership... as well as having the potential to reveal [the] ‘dark secrets’ in leadership preparation...”
  (English, 2008: 96)
“Frightening the horses”

• “So here I was first day back as the new chief operating officer. Do I have to dress differently, perhaps act or behave differently in some way? What will the issues be and how should I handle them?”
  James Stewart, Director

• The innocuous experiences when highlighted lead to meaning beyond headlines and to the ‘dark matter’.

• Ethnography! HALLELUJAH! But on the margin, peripheral to the mainstream. Bad for career?!
The Underground M[e]n

• “They may be any age up to sixty or even sixty-five, but when they are black and naked they all look alike. ... You can never forget that spectacle once you have seen it - the line of bowed, kneeling figures, sooty black all over, driving their huge shovels under the coal with stupendous force and speed.” Orwell in The Road to Wigan Pier
• Few people outside of Yorkshire and Lancashire in 1936 knew the conditions of mining communities until Orwell’s work of ethnography

• “I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am a most unpleasant man.”

The Underground Man in Dostoyevsky’s Notes from Underground

• A truthful voice in Industrial society?
• How much does society value the voice of the individual?
• How much will leadership and society benefit from discovering the ‘truthful voice’ of its leaders?
Layers of understanding

• First-rate ethnography... seldom fails to offer up a number of critical, ironic insights into the world studied” (Van Maanen, 2011: 229).

• “no direct access to truth...” (p.227) but “Ethnography shines a light, sometimes a very strange one, on what people are up to...” (p. 229).

• Situated curriculum
• Co-produced with ethnographer
• Leading to patterns or resemblances but not objective realities (‘family resemblances’ Wittgenstein)
Inquiry at the margins

• How is James becoming a strategic leader? Where is he acquiring knowledge-in-action?
• Leader central to narrative plot
• Revealing complex web of relationships and activities
• Reliability anchored through text being connected life
• Verisimilitude ‘evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 751).

www.hud.ac.uk/researchfestival
And to ethnography

- Ethnography offers insights into complex social processes.
- Understanding the complex situation from the perspective of serial narratives revealing the ‘dark matter’ of leadership practice.
- Thin descriptions of ‘real time’ practice versus thick descriptions of observation.
- Auto-ethnography invites the practitioner to reveal ‘how people within a particular setting create meanings’ (Cunliffe, 2008: 18).

www.hud.ac.uk/researchfestival
Leadership Paradox

- Leadership seen by organisations as key source of competitive advantage
- Major UK Bodies (CMI / CEM / CIMA / Leitch Report) agree UK’s competitive future rests on addressing perceived leadership performance shortfall
- Billions spent on leadership development
- Programmes dominated by formal intervention approaches offering universal ‘truisms’ about leadership despite questions on their efficacy and very limited evidence of returns on investment
Shadow of certainty

- Predominant approach to leadership and leadership development is positivistic
  - Efforts to prove theories that can be replicated over time
  - Efforts to find universal solutions to complex contextualised problems
- Scholarly consensus that we learn to lead through naturalistic experiences that occur over a long period of time
- Despite this growing acceptance there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative research