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Original Citation

Gibbs, Stephen P. (2011) Revelation, Verisimilitude and 'Drama' in Modern Strategic Leadership. In: University of Cumbria Doctoral Colloquium, 7 July 2011, University of Cumbria, Lancaster Campus. (Unpublished)

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/11088/

Revelation, verisimilitude and 'drama' in modern strategic leadership

Emergent research methods in the field of leadership development

Autoethnography is: *"an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 733). "First-rate ethnography… seldom fails to offer up a number of critical, ironic insights into the world studied" (Van Maanen, 2011: 229).*

Auto (the first person-voice)
Ethno (the self in situation)
Graphy (the text: journals, essays, social science prose)

New Opportunity

Autoethnography offers leadership study unique opportunities as it allows the leader to become central to the research process; satisfying both an ontological and epistemological argument for an increased focus on the 'self' (Spry, 2001; Humphreys, 2005). It therefore differs from ethnography in its ability to move on from the wide-angle view of the organisational context ('other') to the *"focus on the inner, vulnerable and often resistant self"* (Boyle and Parry, 2007: 186). This has the ability to place the individual leader as a central figure within the story of leadership experience (Kempster, 2010). Co-produced autoethnography places a further emphasis on the subject by requiring the researcher to write about themselves and then be open to interrogation by themselves, reflectively, as well as their co-author, creating a co-produced narrative 'sandwich' (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The potential is to allow the organisational leader to *"reveal a discovery"* through their narrative (Saldana, 2003: 224).

Veracity

This emergent research offers an innovative means to address the lack of in-depth empirical research on strategic leadership (Kempster, 2009; Lowe and Gardner, 2000; Waldman et al, 2006). The caution surrounding this and maybe any new development in social science is validity (Besio and Butz, 2004). This is partly due to there being too few studies that fully reveal their analysis (Bryman, 2004). Steve Kempster responds by suggesting the autoethnographic story sits between the continuum of science-facticity and meaning revealed through art (2010); as such, veracity stems from the data's verisimilitude, that is, it evokes a high level of plausibility by virtue of the story's connectedness to life (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Readers of good autoethnography will have a strong sense of the account 'reading well' (Ellington, 2001).

Strategic leadership

The research seeks to restore the plausible experience of leading via the revelation of autoethnography. Leadership research during the 20th century has frequently been positioned within the rationalist tradition (Lawler, 2005; 2007; Ashman and Lawler, 2008; Gibbs, 2010; Gibbs, 2011). This 'received wisdom' has led to dissonance for the leader whose lived experience of leading appears profoundly removed what he or she reads in management texts (Grint, 2005; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). Furthermore, management texts have struggled to offer a consistent or coherent shared understanding of what leadership is (Barker, 1999; Bennis and Nanus, 1986). (Published articles on leadership have risen from 136 in 1970/71 to 10,062 in 2001/02 showing the growing interest in this field. This 'explosion' of interest has served to add to the difficulty for the research community to agree coherent definitions surrounding leadership; this suggests new and more compelling methodologies are welcome (Senge, 1999).)

The rise of the institution has given birth to the notion of the strategic leader, someone who looks beyond the immediate to create value over the long-term. There are limited autoethnographic accounts of the experience of 'being a strategic leader' (Kempster, 2010). The research considers the 'whole self'. The suggestion here is that senior strategic leadership rarely brooks a divide between system-world and life-world and therefore research should consider the 'whole experience of leading' by inviting first-person vignettes via 'real-time accounts' of 'being and becoming a strategic leader'.

Ethical opportunity and difficulty – an appeal to reflexive writing

It would be churlish to say this form of enquiry is without significant difficulty. The pressure for social science researchers to accord the right to the subject to interpret their own experience acknowledges an appeal by some for a *"democratisation of representation"* (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001: 345). Hence there is an appeal for autoethnography to enable the subject to define themselves free from the filter of other researchers. However, the very nature of writing accounts of the 'drama' of leading within organisational life leads to issues of exploitation of others' through narrative interpretation. Personal experience struggles then to be a primary source of authority. These and other dilemmas opens the debate to the question of to what extent do we all value the voice of the individual within society. The challenge then is one of fair dealing. There is an appeal here then for the nature of the writing to be reflexive; to the extent that it *"exposes theory to ethnography and ethnography to theory"* (p. 347).

Phd title: Modern Strategic Leadership and Existential Self
A Co-Produced Autoethnographic Exploration of Modern Strategic Leadership
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