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OSW-144: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Embodied Identity Struggles in Balancing Leadership Expectations: The Case of in Attempts to Create Leaderful Practices in a University Context

Abstract

This study, drawing on collaborative autoethnography, explores the ongoing negotiation of managerial identity struggles in a university context. In this study, we adopt Alvesson and Willmott's (2002: 626) definition of identity work as an individual's 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness'. We emphasise that identity struggles are a key aspect of the processes of repairing and revising the self.

We will investigate identity work through a practice-based lens, drawing on the concept of leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; Raelin, 2016). L-A-P views leadership as inherently embodied, meaning it is not constructed in the mind of an individual leader but occurs through everyday interactions shaped by context and relationships. We analyse how identity struggles arise and then get reshaped in day-to-day leadership practices as managers

navigate conflicting expectations. L-A-P provides an amenable theoretical lens for our study as it adopts a post-modern view of leadership, where leadership is viewed as emerging through practice—a collective process of achievement involving humans as well as non-material and material artefacts within a specific context (Carroll et al., 2008). Furthermore, it considers identity to be co-constructed and mediated through social structure and self, mutually and simultaneously, making identity formation complex, constantly under construction, and as dynamic as lived experience itself (Carroll, 2016; Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis, & Sabelis, 2009).

From the L-A-P perspective, leadership occurs ‘in the space between’ individuals (Lichtenstein, Uhl-Bien, Marion, Seers, Orton, & Schreiber, 2006) and emerges through interactions within a given context via sayings, doings, and relatings (Raelin, 2016; Ryömä & Satama, 2019). The L-A-P approach thus emphasises collective accomplishments (Sergi, Lusiani, & Langley, 2021) and subscribes to a processual view of leadership, defining it in terms of the accomplishment of present and future direction (Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2010; Kempster & Gregory, 2017, Sklaveniti, 2020). To explore leadership from a L-A-P perspective, researchers must analyse the flow of practices to identify interactions that prompt turning points leading to changes in the trajectory of the flow of practice (Raelin & Robinson, 2022).

Consistent with these studies, this paper conceptualises leadership as a processual, contextual, and constantly interacting continuum. This interaction is embodied (Ryömä & Satama, 2019) and is expressed through subtle gestures, facial expressions, intuitive assumptions, and expectations about how we should think and act in everyday interactions with others. Our findings further illustrate how material elements become intertwined in the construction of leadership.

This study was conducted in two Finnish Universities as a collaborative autoethnography. The empirical material is based on autoethnographic diary notes of two authors of this study. Through our collaborative analysis, we identify two embodied identity struggles through which we negotiated leadership expectations in the university setting. We further attempted to create leaderful practices to support collective leadership emergence: (1) balancing heroic and collective leadership expectations in various ‘bodily’ sensations and spaces and (2) balancing our embodied vulnerabilities of ‘unknowingness’, administrative routines and some ‘inspirational’ leadership expectations that arose internally.

This study contributes to the discussion of leadership-as-practice by increasing understanding of the struggles managers face when attempting to promote leaderful practices, practices in which everyone participates in leadership both concurrently and collectively. Further, the study contributes to managerial identity struggles by illustrating how these struggles are deeply embodied. Methodologically, this study engages with the recent discourse on collaborative autoethnography in the study of leadership-as-practice, demonstrating how collaborative autoethnographic reflections offer a reflexive understanding of the research phenomenon.

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