

Forming character in business school leadership education

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Forming character in Business School leadership education: Psychologies, sociologies, and virtues

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An article about leader character brings two thoughts to the front of my mind before I even start reading beyond the title. First, leaders seem to be endlessly fascinating in their selves, their identities, as much as for what they do. Observers of leaders and leadership (all of us) will speculate, with or without evidence, on *why* someone has acted or behaved in a specific way, making explicit or implicit reference to the 'kind of person' they are. These discussions, in homes or workplaces, circle inexhaustibly around the person inside the leader's character, on what's going on inside the soul. Second, the term leader character makes me think of context, paradoxically – the complexities of the social, cultural, and economic conditions that people we call leaders work within, and what those surroundings mean for who they are/become. Just to refer in passing to the most recent or prominent social, cultural, or economic changes that surround organization and leadership: new forms of feminism and misogyny, mass movements of capital and people, political populism, and work organizations that appear not to exist beyond an app. This paper, as I read it, confronts the first issue, but perhaps not the second.

It is impossible to dislike a paper that begins 'Leadership continues to disappoint' (Byrne, Crossan, & Seijts, 2017: 1) – it promises so much. I especially like the ambiguity that the term 'leadership' contains here. As the introduction to the paper makes clear, we could be thinking about individuals at the hierarchical peak of large organizations, or the academic discipline called leadership studies, or the educational field that many of us work within, when we consider the disappointment being examined. Many explorations of leadership begin by lamenting the definitional confusion of the field – it's refreshing to find some researchers ignoring that altogether, and concentrating on what we can all see, the failings of the group called leaders and the art they claim to practise.

However it does become very clear that the research reported here focuses on the 'who' part of leadership. For me, the research question emerges as something like: 'who do you think you are, to lead other people?'. This is interpreted through the notion of character, a way of seeing and thinking through which individuals are encouraged to look inside to identify traits, and values that guide action and behaviour. This argument is much more profound than just another call for management educators to encourage students to study the character of others. Ultimately, this research offers a way of thinking about leadership and character that suggests our students might 'examine who they are at their very core' (p4). The purpose, as the authors also make clear, is the pursuit of more humane decisions being made in organizations. So where does this take us? I think there are two directions that this paper hints at, both potentially fascinating for future research, education, and thinking.

The psychology of character

A few years ago, I changed employer – there were two conditions attached to the job offer. First, I would be Head of Department for at least three years (which wasn't a great experience, so we'll draw a veil over that); second, I was required to teach a final year undergraduate course called 'Leadership Development'. The degree programme lead warned me that the course had a mixed

reputation with students – some really enjoyed the psychoanalytic perspectives the previous course lead had worked with, some objected very strongly to being asked to ‘look inside’ during classes with their peers. One student was reported to have cried during a class as her ‘unconscious leader’ was examined; others complained to their peers and academic colleagues of feelings of inappropriate intrusion.

‘Fine’, I thought, ‘I’m not doing any of that sort of thing anyway – I teach leadership from sociological perspectives – no intrusion in that’. Then I found a flaw in my confidence – the students were fascinated by the idea that leadership comes from within, and can be developed through interventions into the person. They also seemed to enjoy my insistence that social, cultural, and economic structures are important (though one very memorable piece of post-course feedback told me ‘TOO MUCH FEMINISM!’), but they were very insistent that the problems of leadership we observed in our world might be addressed by looking into the person.

So I introduced more psych- perspectives, including a (critical) appraisal of neuroscientific approaches to leadership development. That worked, in the sense that it satisfied some of their wish for more individualist perspectives. However, it was also very troubling, in that those who chose to write their assessed papers on neuro-leadership took a completely uncritical position on it as theory and practice. All encouragements, and there were many of them, to take ethical and methodological critiques into account were ignored. I was left feeling that I had done something wrong, failed educationally. As I read this paper, then, I re-interpret that experience: for me, this paper provides an alternative to the psychology/sociology binary that we inherit in leadership studies and leadership development (that I reproduced to the students I was working with). I’m looking forward to testing it next time I teach my troublesome course.

The philosophy of character

So, I think Byrne, Crossan, and Seijts’ innovative and thoughtful educational work provides an alternative to psychologising or neurologising *and* sociologising, and I’m very grateful that they’ve taken the time to write it up for this journal’s readership. The really clever translation comes from what they do with frameworks developed in positive psychology, as the individualised actions and behaviours are socialised through the notion of judgement. This is accomplished through engagement with theories of learning, again bringing forward a combination of individual/cognitive and social/experiential. This is all neat.

There is, though, a messy side to the idea of character, and attempts to develop it, that I think might point to some further theoretical and educational development. Surprisingly, this untidiness has been explored in greatest depth and detail in economics, specifically economic history. Deirdre McCloskey (2006, 2010, 2016) has just completed a trilogy of long, complex, beautifully readable books that take the virtues that inform character development as their central theme. McCloskey began her academic life as a doctoral trainee destined to join the Chicago School of orthodox economists, participating in brutal seminars designed to establish how self-interested economic actors are and how competitive academics might be (see McCloskey, 1999, for a fascinating account of this). However, she lost the neoclassical, monetarist, neoliberal faith, acquiring a heterodox perspective on economic life, resulting in an identity that she has described as ‘postmodern free market quantitative rhetorical Episcopalian feminist Aristotelian’. There is one foundational idea that

McCloskey carries with her through all of this, the notion that virtues can be practised within capitalism *if we pay attention to the development of character*.

I think this argument has great relevance for the work being pursued by Byrne, Crossan, and Seijts. One of the most consistently raised difficulties of teaching and studying leadership is taking account of context. I work mostly with undergraduates, and they take a lot of convincing that they have experienced leadership by being led, or by behaving/acting in specific ways. Context helps – if we can get into conversations about experience, as this paper suggests, then we get closer to understanding that leadership is being practised all around and through us. Looking into this is clearly a key task in leadership education and development, and the account provided here is very encouraging. Unfortunately for me, British higher education is characterised at the moment by its mass nature – I usually work with groups of 150 or more students, so I read with some envy of the paper authors' small groups of 40.

And yet, the students we work with tend to be smart, keen to engage, and almost always interested in leadership. The usual tricks of the trade can produce some involvement – movies, guest speakers and alumni with practice credibility, and examples such as the Silicon Valley tech sector that form part of most 20-year-olds everyday lives. But more, I find (as I think the authors of this paper have) that a generous amount of challenging thought, requiring critique, takes us all to the place we want to be – the students stretching their thinking and ideas about practice. It is all too easy to forget that the people facing us in B-Schools are there because they're curious, oriented to learning, and interested in ideas (Jandric, 2017).

Individualistic psychologies and neuro- perspectives on leadership don't make it for the students I work with. Nor does reflex sociologising, emphasising only structures and cultures. We have to stretch for the kind of ideas that Byrne, Crossan, and Seijts are bringing into their classrooms. The virtues provide the kind of ingredients that we need to work with over a long course, and leave us all feeling satisfied with the way we've been asked to think.

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