

Re-imagining ethical leadership as leadership for the greater good

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Abstract

As Western nations slowly emerge from the recent global recession, there is demand among citizens for authorities to practice, and be seen to practice, ethical leadership. Although these conditions have been favorable for research into ethical leadership, extant research privileges empirical-descriptive Anglo-American perspectives on ethical leadership and is largely silent on the meaning and practice of ethical leadership in the context of the ‘big’ ethical questions. In consequence, most research into ethical leadership, although well meaning, offers little guidance about how to imagine and implement sustainable, ethical solutions to systemic problems. In this research note, we outline a proposal to reimagine ethical leadership as leadership for the greater good and identify three avenues of research into leadership for the greater good that compliments existing critical perspectives on ethical leadership.

Introduction

As Western nations slowly emerge from the recent global recession, there is demand among citizens for authorities to practice, and be seen to practice, ethical leadership; to demonstrate that the individual and organizational roots of ethical misconduct, historical and prospective, are being identified and remedied. Witness, for example, the recent pledge by Mark Carney (2015), the Governor of the Bank of England, to end the irresponsible practices that have gripped the financial sector.

Consistent with this yearning for leadership in the public interest, recent years have witnessed a flurry of research into ethical leadership. Prominent among these studies is authentic leadership (George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing & Peterson, 2008), which persists in the popular and, to some extent, academic imagination as exemplary ethical leadership, despite limited empirical support (see, e.g., Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens 2011) and questionable assumptions about what makes people ‘tick’ (see, e.g., Ford & Harding, 2011; Sparrowe, 2005). In this research note, we contend that leadership scholars ought to move away from authenticity and towards ethicality as the subject of study and, consistent with recent remarks by Chia (2014), Hernes (2014), and Tourish (2015), we propose that pausing to interrogate core assumptions of ethical leadership, rather than executing yet another technically proficient but conceptually thin study of it, would have a salutary effect on our understanding of our quarry.

The project of interrogating core assumptions is, of course, well underway, yielding new insights into the relational, contextual, and political dimensions of ethical leadership (see Liu, 2015, for a review). Concomitant with these developments is the emerging view that ethical leadership is best understood and theorized as a *social practice*, which provides an affordance for examining how complex ethical

tensions, dilemmas, and paradoxes are apprehended and addressed in the practice of ethical management and leadership (Cherry, 2014; Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007). Although the relevance of paradox to management, organization, and leadership studies is well established (Lewis, 2000; Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Smith & Berg, 1987), overtly paradoxical conceptualizations of management and organization that are alive to the complexity, ambiguity and liquidity (Bauman, 2000, 2007) of contemporary capitalism are relatively rare (but see Lavine, 2014; Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Overtly paradoxical conceptualizations of leadership, where leadership is defined as the processes through which people are persuaded to assume collective responsibility for solving shared problems (Grint, 2010a), are rarer still.

We contend, in accord with recent proposals by Collinson (2014), that the study of the complex tensions, dilemmas, and paradoxes encountered in the practice of ethical leadership, and the corresponding development of overtly paradoxical conceptualizations of ethical leadership, represents an important new direction for ‘critical’ ethical leadership research. However, unlike paradoxical conceptualizations of management, which pertain to commercial organizations, research into paradoxical conceptualizations of ethical leadership ought, ultimately, be addressed to a wider canvas; namely, the national and global communities in which wicked (Rittel & Webber, 1973) or adaptive challenges (Heifitz, 1994; Heifitz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009) are experienced, which are unresolvable through compliance with experts or obedience to authorities alone, necessitating leadership (Grint, 2010a).

We propose that examining ethical leadership in the context of these wider social, historical, and cultural frames will have a salutary effect on our understanding of ethical leadership because these frames make the moral boundaries pertinent to the

practice of ethical leadership more salient. Indeed, in the context of prevailing debates about the insalubrious effects of US-centric journals, journal branding, and academic 4* bias on the quality of leadership research (see, e.g., Adler & Harzing, 2009; Chia, 2014; Hernes, 2014; Tourish, 2015; Willmott, 2011), adopting a wider lens is necessary to improve the substantive meaning and practical utility of leadership theories. It is a social and research priority to break out of the conceptual dead ends we find ourselves in and, more specifically, the publication trap that privileges widely researched topics examined with familiar methodologies rather than new, often controversial, topics interrogated using innovative methodologies (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Willmott, 2011). If this is true for management and organization research in general, it is certainly the case for leadership research in particular.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for taking the wider social, cultural, and historical view is the affordance these perspectives provide for re-examining some of the core assumptions of ethical leadership, as it is commonly understood. In particular, these perspectives challenge ethical leadership scholars to re-consider whether the relationship between the adjective ‘ethical’ and the noun ‘leadership’ ought to function like other adjective-noun couplings in leadership studies. To illustrate, many familiar treatments of ethical leadership tend to essentialize ethics and morality, locating these attributes in the individual as deep and enduring traits, exemplified by authentic leadership. By contrast, we propose that ethical leadership is more helpfully construed as leadership *for the purpose* of ethicality more so than leadership *in the context* of ethicality (e.g., an individual’s internalized moral perspective). Framed in this way, the limiting effects of the prevailing adjective-noun coupling are voided and new imaginative possibilities emerge. Of specific interest to us are the opportunities this affords for construing ethical leadership as leadership for

the greater good, which is, perhaps, the ultimate end towards which ethical leadership ought to be directed. However, the concept of the ‘common’ or ‘greater good’ is complex and resists crisp or singular definition. On the one hand, it has the quality of being familiar and commonplace. And yet, it is difficult to articulate or define in any precise way. We quickly discover that it is more complex, expansive, and elusive than we initially suppose.

The greater good: A once and future idea

At first glance, framing ethical leadership as leadership for the greater good seems trite; too obvious an idea to motivate a research agenda. However, consider the centrality of the idea of the greater good to our concept of civilization. Although the term ‘civilization’ has less currency today than it once did (Armstrong, 2009), most people see themselves as living in a civilization, which, as Saul (2009) notes, tends to be centered on a sense of shared destiny and belief in the notion of common goods. Currently, especially among people of Anglo-American nations where the authority of the individual is most ascendant, it is unfashionable to think and talk about shared interests, collective purpose, and common futures (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991). A corollary of this is that it is unfashionable to think and talk seriously about the public, common, or greater good (Eliasoph, 1998).

The experience of Anglo-American nations in recent decades is a fascinating social, cultural and historical context in which to situate our proposal to re-imagine ethical leadership as leadership for the greater good because of the erosion of concern for the greater good within these nations during this time (Bauman, 2000, 2007). In these nations, especially in the decades after the Second World War, strong unions, combined with collective bargaining and social welfare provisions, cultivated a period of equality, stability and order (Judt, 2010; Sennett, 2006). However, as the 1970s

drew to a conclusion, the governments of the United States and Britain diverged from the Keynesian consensus that prevailed after the war. Specifically, the Bretton Woods system—the system of regulations and institutions that regulated the international monetary system after the Second World War—collapsed (James, 2008). In contrast to mainland Western European nations where government support was sustained (e.g., Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands), the governments of Britain and America, coupled with Australia and New Zealand, embraced deregulation and free market ideologies (Albert, 1993; Baumol, Litan, & Schramm, 2007; Judt, 2010). Considerable research attests to the significant economic and sociocultural changes that have occurred in these nations as a result (e.g., Galbraith, 1994; Hacker, 2006; McAuley & Lyons, 2015; Pimpare, 2004; Reich, 2008; Saul, 2009; Sennett, 2006).

Although the power of the idea of shared interests and common purpose has subsided in Anglo-American nations in recent decades, partly as a result of these changes, this has not always been the case and may not remain so for much longer. There is, among the citizens of these nations, a pervasive sense that something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today (Judt, 2010; Schwartz, 2010); a sense that we are living through a time of interregnum (Bauman, 2000; Saul, 1995), witnessing the demise of an old pattern and anticipating the emergence of something new (Jironet, 2014; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

As recently argued by Wilson (2016), if there is to be a reawakening of concern for our shared interests and common future, this will require renewed and sustained engagement with the idea of the greater good. Crucially, this means that contributions to our understanding of the greater good by intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky (2013), Slavoj Žižek (2013), and Hans Sluga (2014) are necessary but not

sufficient. Rather, citizens themselves need to engage with the concept and imagine for themselves what the greater good means in the context of their lives and their aspirations for future generations. Further, if there is to be renewed concern for ethical leadership—in the sense of leadership for the greater good that we propose in this research note—then deep engagement with the idea of the greater good is especially important among all who would practice ethical leadership.

A new research agenda: Leadership for the greater good

Although this background sketch is brief, we hope it is sufficient to convey the conceptual motivation for our agenda to forge a stronger connection between ethical leadership research and the big ethical challenges facing Western societies, in general, and Anglo-American societies, in particular. Three propositions are especially pertinent to our proposed leadership for the greater good research agenda.

First, we propose that ethical leadership researchers turn their attention more comprehensively than observed to date to the greater good. This involves, in part, abstracting away from the specific relational and political context in which leadership is practiced to also consider deeper cultural worldviews and historical contexts of which social action is reflective and constitutive (see also Ruwhiu & Cone, 2010; Ruwhiu & Elkin, 2016). Examining the tensions or conflicts that inhere between cultural worldviews may be especially instructive. Consider, for example, the tensions between the individual and greater good, or individualism and collectivism, that underpin many political problems in late modern life (Forsyth & Hoyt, 2011; Judt, 2010) and unconsciously undermine well meaning, but often ill-conceived, attempts at distributed leadership (Grint, 2010b). If, as we suspect, the greater good is too complex and paradoxical a phenomenon to approach head-on, then studying the tensions that must be constantly negotiated in the search for the common good (see,

e.g., Sluga, 2014) may offer a practical way into an otherwise recalcitrant construct.

Second, we propose that ethical leadership researchers pay more attention to the ways in which tensions related to the greater good are apprehended and conceptualized in the practice of ethical leadership. To illustrate, when individualism and collectivism are construed dichotomously, they become incompatible, posing a dilemma resolvable only by privileging one and discounting the other. However, framed as a paradox, wherein apparently contradictory elements are understood to exist simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011), difficult choices may be obviated if the hidden connections between the elements are discerned and abstract unities discovered. Although the variety of tensions relevant to the practice of ethical leadership deserves attention in its own right (e.g., as a means of understanding the nature and dimensions of the common good), equally important is understanding whether and/or how these tensions are apprehended, conceptualized, and addressed in, to use Sandberg and Tsoukas' (2011) apt phrase, the "temporal flow" of practice. This calls for processual-narrative studies of how leadership is "done" in organizations (e.g., Clegg et al., 2007; Dawson & Buchanan, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Third, we propose that ethical leadership researchers widen the scope and stage of discovery beyond the Western world, in general, and Anglo-American nations, in particular. As observed by Eisenbeiss (2012), current research on ethical leadership focuses excessively on an empirical-descriptive Anglo-American perspective and is largely silent on other cultural perspectives. We concur and suggest that looking beyond the Anglo-American world to historical and contemporary European and Asian perspectives on leadership and the greater good would be especially helpful in illuminating aspects of the greater good that have receded from view among the citizenry of Anglo-American societies in recent decades.

Conclusion

In this research note, we have asserted that scholars of ethical leadership ought to move away from authenticity and towards ethicality as the subject of study and have sketched an argument in favour of a wider research agenda predicated on the construal of ethical leadership as leadership for the greater good. Specifically, we proposed that construing ethical leadership as a social practice focused on the search for the common good—de-emphasizing, but not dismissing, the importance of deeply inhering moral sensibility—opens up new avenues for ethical leadership research that compliments emerging critical perspectives on ethical leadership.

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