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Title of Paper

Disrupting Masculinities within leadership: Problems of embodiment, ethics, identity, and power.

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Introduction

In my recent book (Knights, 2021), I raise the question of whether current discourses reproduce rather than challenge heavily masculine styles of leadership. Frequently, these discourses take the form of linear rational accounts of individual attributes such as traits and characteristics, behavioural styles, or transactional and transformational skills that are deemed to have a causal relationship to effective leadership. This focus on variables that can be measured to identify chains of causation extends even to matters of personality as in analyses of charisma and emotional intelligence (Riggio, 1988). However, what studies of leadership frequently neglect – or even worse, deny – are the embodied aspects of non-rational behaviour. Yet, in practice, these behaviours are prevalent in the form of, for example, bullying, discrimination and procrastination, and they often have a toxic impact at work, in sport, leisure or politics.

A dearth of direct discussion of the emotional and bodily aspects of leadership can be traced to the preoccupation of authors with emulating the positive sciences to the point of becoming ‘scientific’ where the presumed status of the claim to science displaces any meaningful benefit of the content of one’s analysis and discourse. It involves exaggerating the efficacy of the methods of the physical sciences regardless of the type and topic of investigation. Populist political leaders, from Hitler to Trump, have always been aware of the power of an embodied and emotional way of relating to their followers. By contrast with cold and calculating rationality, an embodied reasoning can be positive and productive for communities and social relations more generally, but it also has the potential to become toxic, where leaders display an insatiable and narcissistic ambition for success at the expense of integrity, ethics, and trust (Lipman-Blumen, 2007).

Despite this, toxic leaders readily find followers who – due to their own anxieties and insecurities – possess an excessive desire for certainty and control. By removing the need for reasoned choice and informed decision, authoritarian figures provide a simplified ‘truth’ to these followers, presenting a world in which they are no longer required to discriminate between fact and hyperbole (Goethals, 2021). Using these means, populist political leaders and social media conspiracy theorists have gained ever-increasing traction in recent times (Knights and Thanem, 2019). When combined with a masculine preoccupation with competition,

conquest and control (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993) and in partnership with the narcissistic tendencies of all leaders, the impact can – quite literally – be lethal. Asking what is to be done throws up several possibilities, one of which is for academics studying leadership to do so in ways that challenge and, hopefully, disrupt masculinities in leadership, thus depriving them of the power to institutionalize their toxic impact. One significant difference is its focus on the masculinities surrounding leadership but also its consideration of the comparatively neglected issues of the body and ethics, identity and insecurity, power and resistance and to explore these both theoretically and empirically through examples from my research.

Given that I advocate exploring aspects of leadership relating to the body, masculinity and ethics, it was incumbent on me to provide some limitedly embodied narrative of the context of my concerns with these matters. But first I should explain my background in so far as it relates to leadership. I did not follow a conventional academic career since I left school at 16 and spent several years working respectively in banking, textiles and insurance both as an employee and then, in the latter industry, as a self-employed insurance broker. During all the years in self-employment, I also pursued educational activities largely as a hobby until I felt confident enough to apply for a full-time academic post in business and management at the Manchester School of Management, where I was pursuing a Masters research degree. Because of the comparatively low pay in university, and because of substantial financial commitments, I continued to run my business part-time and can say that my practical experience enhanced my academic work and especially the teaching. Eventually, my engagement with business and corporations became a major source of funding as well as providing me with access to sites, partners and participants in research projects.

I also learned a lot about leadership as a practitioner and sought to put this to 'good' use in a practical, as well as in a theoretical, sense, since at UMIST, I took on leadership activities of the organization studies staff grouping and eventually of two research centres and an academic-practitioner, collaborative research forum activity. The latter involved 20 major financial service companies, including the big five banks and several leading insurance companies and supported private funding of £1.5m over 17 years from 1994. Also, between 1990 - 1997 I was a Director of the Financial Services Research Centre (FSRC) involving funding of around £2.5m. In the other research centre, I was the Deputy Director of the Economic and Social Research Centre Programme for Information and Communication Technology between 1989-1995 managing funding of approximately £1m. Later at another university, I had a short period as head of school. My research interest in gender and masculinities was further strengthened when, with colleagues, I was invited by a publisher to create a new international academic journal – *Gender, Work and Organization* that I then co-edited for 22 years.

Reflecting on this biographical history, I recognize that, despite conducting research critical of certain aspects of masculinity, I was energised particularly by masculine norms of competition, conquest and control and occasionally my single-minded determination to succeed came up against resistant forces that disrupted the linear rationality of these projects, compelling me to rethink my career trajectory and reflect on my approach to leadership.

Meanwhile, through conducting empirical research in newspapers and financial services, my own practical experience of leadership as an emotional and bodily enterprise was confirmed. Yet, when consulting the vast literature, there was virtually no direct discussion of these matters despite their prevalence in leadership practices. While within leadership, there is considerable emotional or bodily content as well as strong masculine rationalities, research fails to examine them largely because the cerebral norm takes precedence. In academia, disembodied rationality

is much like the air we breathe although through its masculine manifestations, it can be quite polluting, especially of leadership that demands more of staff than is reasonable.

Another aspect that the literature seems to ignore is an understanding of how leadership is not specifically or just about individuals so much as what has been described as humanity's inheritance, involving all that we share in 'common' such as 'knowledges, languages, information, codes, affects' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). What constitutes leadership is not just the character traits, styles, or propensities to be transactional, transformational or distributional; it also necessitates access to 'common code and information resources as well as the ability to connect and interact with others in unrestricted networks' (ibid: 10) but these and their implications for practice are simply ignored in the literature. One major implication of following this kind of focus is to understand leadership as an ethically embodied and involved engagement with 'communities of practice' shared in common by us all.

While in the late 20th century, building on gender analysis, deconstruction theory and psychoanalysis, there were signs of a critical approach to leadership studies (Calás and Smircich, 1991; Sinclair, 2005 [1998]), it was only in the early 21st century that this critical turn began to impact the mainstream (Collinson, 2011; Tourish, 2013), and despite criticisms that this literature is not all that critical (Learmonth and Morrell, 2016), it has inspired me to return to engage with this discourse. I have already claimed some distinctiveness for this book in that it focuses on leadership concerning the body, ethics and masculinity, but also it discusses identity and insecurity, power and resistance, and diversity and innovation that, while not entirely neglected in the mainstream literature, are concepts that remain under-theorised or marginalised.

What question may be asked as to how this text is different from the several books that have developed critical approaches to leadership? Here I would argue that most of the literature in critical leadership studies emerges out of a humanistic perspective that seeks to liberate leaders so that they can return to their authentic selves, and thereby release followers and society at large from the toxic impact of their egoistic power (Sinclair, 2007; Tourish, 2013; Wilson, 2016; Wilson et al., 2018). Some go as far as to argue that we should not even study leaders let alone seek to measure any behavioural content since it is most effective 'where leadership is not required' (Bolden, 2016, 45). Few, however, have adopted an alternative way of studying leadership that would be compatible with such a challenge. I argue that we have to abandon humanism to focus on 'affect' as a way of understanding leadership as that 'invisible' space residing *inbetween* subject and object, mind and body, and leaders and followers.

Of course, science has always sought to efface such ephemeral phenomena that defy objectification for it favours representations generated by sovereign subjects whose actions are deemed to generate knowledge of the world including notions of leadership. But this 'in between' not only involves affectively engaged bodies affecting other bodies and their (our) material and symbolic lives, but it also energises these self-same bodies in ways that enhance their (our) capacity to be affective. It also energises us to explore the ambiguous in-between spaces that prevail on us to engage with, rather than seek to control, the other regardless of leadership relations. Fundamentally, affect reflects and reinforces the kind of ethics where we identify with other bodies sufficiently 'for us to have [a real] ... concern' (Gatens, 2006, 39). Leadership might then begin to resemble what has been described as the art of living an aesthetic existence, where true knowledge depends entirely on 'an essential position of otherness' (Foucault, 2011, 7367).

What is to be found in the book

Despite the attention and the volumes of literature given to its practice and theorization, a major problem in the field is the tendency to take for granted rather than interrogate leadership. This book seeks to correct this by exploring both the explicit and implicit assumptions underlying leadership discourses, theories and practices. The book is organized into 3 parts, the first reflecting generally on leadership studies, the second focusing on a range of concepts that are important but often neglected in the mainstream leadership literature, and the third, providing some empirical illustrations of these reflections and conceptual issues through some of my research. The theme throughout is that leadership research is insufficiently conceptual and theoretical insofar as it fails to interrogate the assumptions that it brings to bear on its studies. Rather, it seeks to focus narrowly on the attributes of leaders, for example, personality or character traits, energy and drive, decision-making or negotiating competencies, technical or interactional skills, and transactional or transformative powers which are seen as having positive effects on organizational efficiency, effectiveness, productivity and/ or profitability. A second theme is that whilst empirical, leadership research often lacks integration with theory such that it fails to contextualise its findings, and authors give the appearance of being empiricists. There are exceptions, of course, where research adopts, for example, a contingency approach and seeks to identify the social and historical context as both a condition and consequence of events. A third theme is that research focuses too narrowly on the individual leader as if leadership were exclusively the property of individual persons who then attract followers. Again, there are exceptions in relational and practice perspectives that understand leadership to be intrinsically collective occurring as an outcome of 'shared, symbolic or collective structures of knowledge' that derive from complex social interactions (Raelin, 2016, 5). Fourthly and finally, there is an absence of substantial theorising and empirical research on gender and the body, in particular, masculinities. This not only results in fairly disembodied understandings of leadership, even though those focusing on charisma may think otherwise but also neglect other inequalities around age, disability, ethnicity, race and sexualities, all of which lead to a dearth of ethics in leadership studies.

The book is divided into 3 parts but, as with all attempts to distinguish or classify different themes or topics, these divisions merely facilitate the reader's journey through the text. In this sense they are heuristic rather than substantive; for broad-brush overviews, conceptualizations, and empirical materials are not separate but merge into one another in any sense-making enterprise.

Part I Reflecting on Leadership Studies: An Overview

This part provides a broad overview of the field first by discussing in chapter 1 the ontological and epistemological foundations of leadership narratives and in the second articulating a genealogical type of history of the field of leadership studies, where the main approaches are briefly summarised.

The **opening Chapter 1** examines some of the false expectations that arise by celebrating and romanticizing leaders as heroes and heroines. This is concerned primarily with the tradition that generates attributions of leadership to persons who are deemed to have essential qualities that render them charismatic, heroic, rational and perhaps even magical. This individualization of the phenomenon as a property of persons has been restrained in succeeding developments of the literature, especially where there is an emphasis on the context, the followers and practice rather than prescriptive ideals. However, romanticizing the individual continues to remain a

legacy that is frequently rekindled, sneaked in by the back door, or simply presumed in the form of proprietary views of power and identity relating to leadership.

In **Chapter 2**, I provide a genealogical analysis of leadership theory from the Great Men (sic) through trait, behavioural, contingency, transactional and transformational theories to the more recent relational, practice and critical approaches. Before these more recent developments, theories would be described as mainstream and were dominated by psychologists who are scientific and reductionist in their methods and understand leadership from an individualistic ontology and epistemology. By contrast, a majority of approaches since then have subscribed to critical, social constructionist, process, practice or poststructuralist perspectives that support relational and communal or collective ontologies and epistemologies. These later studies have embraced a range of issues from concentrating on followers, collective and communal matters, bodies and emotion and raising concerns about gender and ethnic diversity, power and resistance, and ethics and politics. This genealogical approach to studying leadership has already been well documented by authors who argue that the literature draws up a history of leadership as ‘a teleological journey’ that after numerous blind alleys and false paths culminates in a perfect nirvana of deep understanding that needs merely to be rigorously applied (Ford et al., 2008, 13). Of course, each new theorist along the way would presume to have the panacea for the problems that their predecessors also claimed but failed, to resolve. Hence, the promises that leadership researchers often make have to be acknowledged as just empty and vacuous rhetoric upon which history will soon deliver its doom-laden verdict of despair. For this reason, this book is cautious not to offer detailed prescriptions, but just food for thought about how leadership might be different.

Part II Conceptual Reflections on Leadership, Ethics, and Masculinity

In part II, I explore many of the implicit or explicit assumptions or concepts underlying the various discourses, narratives, theories and practices of leadership. The selection is not exhaustive but directed toward the central themes of this book, which are ethics, power and masculine identities in leadership.

Chapter 3 discusses identity or subjectivity in the context of anxiety and insecurity at work – topics that despite a focus on leaders as individuals in the mainstream literature – are widely neglected. The chapter focuses on how identity, but more importantly attachments to a preferred or ideal identity, on the part of both leaders and so-called followers can damage social relations in ways that are counter-productive to organizational goals and developments as also to individual wellbeing. The chapter argues that anxiety and insecurity revolve around a self-defeating preoccupation with seeking to secure and stabilize an identity that forever escapes the subject. Of course, there are some positive aspects to this anxiety and insecurity in so far as it drives people to act often in creative, innovative and experimental ways as a means to reduce the insecurity. However, it can also be extremely negative in rendering individuals paralyzed or dumbfounded even to the point of mental disturbance. Apart from exploring some of the deep ontological and other philosophical routes of insecurity, the chapter also examines some ways of deflecting myopic activities that, in seeking to alleviate anxiety, can be a major source of its reproduction.

In **Chapter 4**, I turn to the question of power and resistance and argue that if power is neglected as is claimed (Collinson, 2014; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010), resistance is almost non-existent largely because the literature is largely concerned to promote the idea of leadership and show it in a positive light. There is much resistance to leadership and that is why several theorists

have sought to encourage participative, in contrast to authoritative or autocratic, approaches and why others have begun to focus on followers to examine the conditions of their followership. However, power is not often interrogated in leadership studies and this tends to result in proprietary conceptions, whereby power is seen as something that individual leaders possess. Resistance is then seen in zero-sum terms of being the opposite of, rather than in relationship to, power (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994). The chapter draws on Foucault (1980) to show not only how power and resistance are inextricably intertwined but also how knowledge forms a part of the intricacy in so far as, in discourse and practice, none of these concepts can be extricated one from another.

The subject matter of **Chapter 5** is diversity and gender which has attracted the interest of students of leadership partly due to the dramatic impact of feminism and concerns about discrimination at work. Neo-humanists have argued that leadership and organizations are plagued by the domination of discourses of masculinity and their reproduction of binary epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies that render them linear rational and disembodied (Braidotti, 2013; Pullen and Vacchani, 2013). For example, it has been contended that there is a ‘close connection between constructs of leadership, traditional assumptions of masculinity and a particular expression of male heterosexual identity’ (Sinclair, 2005, 1). Here, there is a renunciation of a “macho” view of leadership, where the leader feels compelled to be “hard” and “controlling”, believing that respect only derives from fear and blind loyalty. Rather than generating a sense of mutual valuation and collaboration, this coercive approach is often counter-productive in terms of securing the trust and full cooperation of participants. It is also damaging, emotionally and spiritually as well as to the body since discourses of masculinity compel the leader to repress or hide those impulses and aspects of social and bodily identity that are incompatible with, or at least provide the appearance of, adopting, a ‘tough’, “macho” style (Sinclair, 2005).

Chapter 6 is concerned to explore the potential for leadership research and practice to engage with embodied reason and affectivity. The chapter begins by examining first, how the body has been marginalised in social science generally and second, the way that leadership studies have neglected the body at the same time, as perpetrating particular disembodied masculinities. It analyses the conditions and consequences of this neglect and traces it to the domination of a cerebral, cognitive linear rationality that reflects and reproduces discourses and practices of masculinity. In research on leadership, this rationality generates disembodiment where researchers stand aloof as if unrelated either to their own or the bodies of the participants in the research. For practitioners, this disembodiment precludes the very kinds of relationships with others that would lend an impact to their leadership. I turn then to post-humanist feminism to explore the potential for such an embodied framework to facilitate a greater challenge to the ethical limits of the prevailing theories and practices of leadership (Knights, 2021a). Finally, the chapter theorises how the notion of affect can facilitate the integration of these concerns to offer a new way of thinking about leadership.

Focusing on Ethics and leadership, **Chapter 7** begins by discussing how it is always tempting to trace contemporary ideas about leadership to a historical past, even though this often distorts events by interpreting them in terms of contemporary concerns. Consequently, we have to resist popular views of leadership as deriving from the ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, and perhaps even more so, the 15th Century Machiavelli whose book *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 1961) seemingly justified some of the most ruthless and tyrannical tactics of many later leaders. For in the case of the Greeks, the terms they used were more concerned with excellence and facilitating others to pursue what they already knew, and our current

translation of Machiavelli relates to its inconsistency with contemporary democratic values. Still, it is necessary to draw on presently constructed interpretations of the past in the sense that whatever we write about the present has already passed once we have put pen to paper. Leadership always attracts increased attention when moral and political conditions are seen to be in crisis or beyond human control as has occurred frequently in very recent history. While crises extend across a wide range of conditions from climate warming, ethnic cleansing, pandemics, terrorism to military wars, I focus primarily on those relating to social and economic organizations so concentrating on the ethical scandals within contemporary corporations. In particular, the chapter examines critically how increased regulation is the routine response to these scandals and argues that this occurs largely because of a limited interrogation of ethics and its significance for our lives. It then explores other non-regulatory obstacles to the development of ethical leadership and, in particular, the domination of masculine discourses and practices within organizations. Finally, it explores whether leadership is not so much the solution, as part of the problem of, the crisis of ethics in organizations (Wray-Bliss, 2013; 2019).

Part III Empirical Illustrations of Leadership, Ethics and Masculinity

This third part makes what has already been indicated is a somewhat arbitrary distinction between theory and practice that should be disrupted but for ease of making sense of the text is retained. Yet all of everyday life reflects, reinforces and reproduces the theoretical assumptions and the practical experiences that are both guides and effects of human action. Of course, theoretical deliberations and empirical research are a more reasoned, self-conscious and reflexive consideration of what occurs in everyday life, but we should never forget their heritage nor their mutual entanglement. The chapters reflect and report on some of the empirical studies in which I have been engaged during my career.

The first of these in **Chapter 8** reports on direct empirical research on academics (Carke and Knights, 2015) but also draws on a lifetime of experience of working in higher education. In recent years, universities have embraced a managerialist agenda in terms of adopting discourses and practices incorporating audit, accountability, and controls. These involve ranking, and competitive league tables based on ‘rigorous’ metrics of performance (Willmott & Mingers, 2012) that have been criticised as gendered; reflecting and reinforcing aggressive, competitive masculine demands on staff to meet a multiplicity of targets and standards. Few parts of this literature challenge the dominance of aggressive forms of masculinity and the complex embodied agents and material objects through which they are enacted in organizational practices (Thomas & Davies, 2005). The book problematizes the gendered organization of academic life as well as the narrow adversarial approaches to ideas of resistance that privilege instrumental values, and close down spaces of ethically embodied affects that offer an alternative vision of resistance.

Chapter 9 turns to innovation, change and technology. Leadership has always been strongly associated with organizational change and innovation whether it be team-working, quality or knowledge management, new processes and products or distributive arrangements assisted by new technologies (McCabe and Knights, 2016). Although always contingent on the conditions of its genesis and application, innovation is what stimulates or simply reflects organisational change or the transformation of established practices. Leadership is usually involved at all levels of innovation from inception to accomplishment although insofar as it is a process, there is rarely finality in contrast to key stages of achievement. The chapter also reports on some of the research I conducted in the financial sector on innovation and change (Knights and

McCabe, 2003) and a limited selection of research on IT software development (Knights and Murray, 1994). Broadly research was selected on the basis that it involved a focus on leadership and, in particular, the masculine discourses and practices that were dominant in the corporations studied. While managerial masculinities may not have been the principal determinant, it is no coincidence that each of the organizations studied failed to remain independent either because of bankruptcy or takeover by a competitor.

In **Chapter 10**, I focus on a broad range of research that colleagues and I conducted in financial services around the turn of the 21st century. Around the time of the research, the sector passed through one of the most spectacularly horrific periods in its history, readily resulting in the unwelcome crown of the 'unacceptable face of capitalism'. It continues to reel against a public that is still shocked that an industry can get things so wrong as to place everyone within the western world in danger of an economic Armageddon. While the background to this chapter is the global financial crisis of 2008 (Knights, 2017), it will also report on a great deal of research that was conducted on leadership, ethics and gender but also a little on innovation and organizational change as reported in the previous chapter. In terms of leadership, ethics and gender, the global financial crisis provides us with the most dramatic material. As the governor of the UK Bank of England declared it would seem there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure that ethical leadership is embedded in financial organizations (Carney, 2014). However, the view of ethics informing regulation is inadequate and the chapter suggests it be complemented by a broader literature concerning responsibility and bearing witness in living the ethical and aesthetical life in ways that develop an embodied sense of engagement with others where there are social relations of common commitment. Ethical leadership has to escape from relying solely on codes of compliance and ideals of utility or virtue and instead bear witness to embodied engagements that embed relations in feelings, affects and responsibility to others rather than cognitive calculations of self-interest.

Chap 11 Postscript

This final chapter draws on some of the different analytical concepts examined in the book to provide an analysis of what turned out to be the worst crisis since the second world war. The COVID-19 pandemic occurred during the later stages of my writing the book and since leadership was quite crucial, it was impossible not to offer an analysis. The chapter seeks to do this as a way of illustrating further some of the arguments of the book and especially the problems of masculinities in leadership. Drawing on many of the analytical concepts of Part II and their illustration in business or public sector organizations in Part III, I examine a range of masculine identities and insecurities, embodied and disembodied enactments of power as well as the ethical conditions and consequences of political leadership during the pandemic. It focuses primarily on the populist leaders of Brazil, the UK and the US, and I describe how they engaged a range of masculinities in mismanaging the crisis. Finally, it reflects on the implications of masculine leadership within democratic populism and demagogic totalitarianism for a post-COVID world.

In conclusion, why it might be asked, do I refrain from outlining the content of a programme for challenging masculinities in leadership? It is because this would be precisely to engage in a masculine preoccupation with closure and to contradict the philosophy of engagement that I seek to endorse. For this reason, I end the book not with a set of prescriptions but simply with a postscript where the arguments of the book are made manifest in the exemplification of masculine leadership in practice. More precisely, drawing on our recent experience of the

Covid pandemic, I infer that the responses of some political leaders to the pandemic were mismanaged partly as a result of their attachment to masculine identities. Through examining the practices of Bolsonaro, Johnson and Trump, I show how they displayed 3 types of masculinity. First, they were bravado in their dismissal of the virus or in minimizing its temporary inconvenience. Second, they were macho in the use of military language to demonstrate how their war-like struggle would end in victory. Third, they manifested deeply narcissistic tendencies in dismissing those who questioned their false optimism concerning promises that could not be delivered. Finally, they have tended to claim a self-gratulatory ownership of, and credit for, any limited success in managing the pandemic.

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