Putting the discourse to work: On outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development

How to cite:
Smolovic-Jones, Nela; Smolovic Jones, Owain; Winchester, Nik and Grint, Keith (2016). Putting the discourse to work: On outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development. Management Learning, 47(4) pp. 424–442.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1350507616631926

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This paper offers a praxis of democratic leadership development, arguing that the framework presented can act as a means of rethinking how collective forms of leadership are developed within and between organisations. Building on notions of leadership development as process and person-based, we interpret these as contested, democratic and contingent discursive achievements in a process of developing. Post-foundationalist theory, particularly the work of Ernesto Laclau, is introduced as a means of ‘democratizing’ key dimensions of leadership development: working with ‘leadership’ and ‘democracy’ as empty-floating signifiers holding the potential to generate energetic engagements between leadership development participants. A framework consisting of four dimensions is introduced, with particular attention paid within each dimension to its practice relevance. First, we seek to democratize the leader-subject, reinterpreted as a contested and contingent signifying subject of discourse. Second, we seek to radicalize the process of development through foregrounding conflict and agonistic practice. Third, we introduce the notion of symbolic violence as a means of thinking about direction-setting within development contexts. Fourth, we argue for development that pays attention to the unknown, to the gaps in discourse. We explore each dimension in relation to an illustrative example, a cross-organisational women’s group in the Pacific.
Putting the discourse to work: on outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development

Introduction

This paper offers a praxis of democratic leadership development, arguing that the framework presented can act as a means of rethinking how collective forms of leadership are developed within and between organisations. We prefer the use of ‘democratic’ to cognate terms such as shared, distributed and collaborative (Raelin, 2011), because it points towards both the idea of a collective act and the notion that such an act is often subjected to contestation (Laclau, 2014; Mouffe, 2009).

Drawing on post-foundational theory, we explore democracy as a fruitful means of rethinking important dimensions of collective leadership work, situating both the leader-actor and the process of leadership as temporary, contestable and discursive accomplishments. The leader and the process of leadership, two pressing concerns in the literature, become ‘democratized’, interpreted and worked with as contingent, contested and temporary accomplishments enacted through enunciated discourse. We argue that adopting a post-foundational theoretical lens, particularly the work of political theorist Ernesto Laclau, allows for a rich discursive account of leadership development as a process always in motion, always unfolding. It is an account that foregrounds the developing aspects of leadership development.
Post-foundationalism focuses on the ontological foundations of social relations (Kelly, 2014; Marchart, 2007); it interprets experience and reality as only knowable through language and acts of enunciation. In common with post-structuralist notions of performativity (e.g. Butler, 1990) it holds that we create reality through performances and participation in ongoing discursive-material accomplishments. Post-foundationalism takes one further step in acknowledging that language always falls short of capturing the richness of human experience and ambition: performances are always partial accomplishments. It is this ‘negative’ core of language – its absences and flaws – that post-foundationalists claim generates both energetic contestation and investment (Kelly, 2014).

Adopting a post-foundationalist stance, leadership (Kelly, 2014) and democracy (Laclau, 2014) are useful signifiers for development, not simply because people seem to attach great value to them but also because their apparent positive meaning lacks a final ontological ground. Leadership seems to attract loose and fuzzily-defined identifications of purpose, of generating energy in order to be able to tackle and meet head-on problems regarded as previously intractable (Grint, 2005a). Democracy, in our view, offers a way of thinking about broadly collective approaches to organising that embraces discord and contestation; embedding contingency within its foundations (Laclau, 2014; Mouffe, 2009), ‘democracy’ can signify both meaningful struggle for hegemony and the ultimate impossibility of final closure, as the struggle always continues. In the paper we deploy the discursive looseness and the meaningfulness of both democracy and leadership in a developmental setting. With this practice-focus, our contribution concerns the crafts of leadership development design and facilitation. In particular our account is relevant to practitioners seeking to mainstream energetic debate within development programmes. In respect of design and pre-programme
practice, the paper offers a way to expand the possibilities of what may be opened for
discussion – democratized – within a development intervention. In terms of facilitation, our
account offers a way for facilitators and participants to orientate and reflect upon their
enunciations amidst action: to situate themselves in a process of development that is often
experienced as, and designed to be, disruptive of organisational norms and identity
(Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). Although our framework appears initially most appropriate
for groups that are more obviously diverse, there are cognate benefits for relatively
homogenous groups in respect of deliberately disruptive interventions and increased
democratic engagement.

Our contribution to leadership development scholarship is to offer an alternative means of
exploring what it means to research a collective process of development, one couched
within a framework (leadership) that is more commonly associated in popular culture with
the behaviours and traits of individuals (Ford and Harding, 2007). Introducing the notion of
democracy as enacted through partial, contingent and contested discursive enunciations
offers an alternative way of thinking through the possibilities for leadership development
research.

Our praxis framework contains four dimensions, each focusing on a different but related
aspect, namely: the democratization of the leader-subject; agonism and democratic
processes of leadership development; the discursive violence expressed through offering
direction in development; and, working at the limits and unknowns of group constructions,
through exploring discursive rupture and uncertainty. In presenting our praxis framework
we draw on an illustrative example from our research, the work of the Pacific Women’s
Group (PWG).
Before elaborating upon the framework and its practice relevance, we situate our account in leadership development literature focused on leadership as a collective process. We then discuss the value of post-foundationalism to this study, before offering more detail on our illustrative example. We conclude by discussing the general practice and research implications of our framework.

**Existing research on collective forms of leadership development**

Leadership development research is increasingly focusing on alternatives to accounts concerned with traits and behaviours of individual leaders, instead positing the idea that leadership can be approached developmentally as a collective process. Day (2001) initially distinguished between ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ development, the former concerning work on an individual’s traits and behaviours, the latter involving a collective view of leadership, whereby capacity and process become the foci of attention. Viewing leadership as a collective endeavour can appear counter-intuitive and counter-cultural, at least within a western context where leadership is often equated with individualism, usually with heavily masculine and competitive overtones (McCabe and Knights, 2015; Stead and Elliott, 2012). Indeed developers seeking to pursue collective forms of leadership can be confronted by participants who adhere to strongly-held identifications, with “heroic tales” of cultural icons (Ford and Harding, 2007). Challenging such prototypical views can lead to significant resistances on the part of participants (Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; Sinclair, 2007), who may more readily identify with the perceived decisiveness of individualistic leadership.
Poststructuralist research has sought to overcome the individual-process binary in leadership development by interpreting both as discursively assembled constructions. From this perspective, individuals and processes can be said to be constructed through the language, discursive practices and technologies of development. Adopting a poststructuralist view of identity as drawn from a number of socio-political-organisational discourses, studies have explored how leadership development programmes can act as important forums for re-constructing the identifications of participants in more collective terms. Although leadership development programmes can act as sites for control and regulation of identity (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014), they can also act as important forums for resistance and the crafting of new identifications, places where “identities inevitably compete, struggle, contradict, lure, seduce, repel, dominate, and surprise” (Carroll and Levy, 2010: 225). These studies approach the very gaps and cracks in dominant perceptions of leadership (and organisation more generally) as opportunities for re-framing work, for seeing beyond socially conditioned possibilities (Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Stead and Elliott, 2012). The individual leader in leadership development is thus cast as someone who is positioned within, and is a shaper of, a more collective process of leadership.

Raelin (2011: 196), has explicitly used the signifier ‘democracy’ to describe the development of collective processes of leadership, which he refers to as ‘leaderful’ action and work. The benefits of foregrounding democracy, for Raelin, are that it can generate “free expression and shared engagement”. Leadership development work, for Raelin, is about re-envisioning leadership as a process, one which is made ‘leaderful’ through the democratic participation of a range of actors. This body of leadership development research approaches facilitator and participant work within development programmes as grappling with and mastering the
ability to re-formulate discursive constructions: of processes and identities. For example, Schedlitzki et al (2015) report on development work where the practice of deconstructing and ‘re-storying’ Greek myth acts as a means for critical reflection on the part of participants. Smolović Jones et al (2015) likewise explore the possibilities of re-shaping and experimenting with narratives of agency and of collaboration within a development setting. Nicholson and Carroll (2013) describe such construction work in more stringent terms, as ‘undoing’ identities alongside and perhaps even prior to the building of re-worked, collaborative leadership narratives.

Our intention in what follows is to build on research that has sought to interpret the person and processes of leadership development as discursive constructions and accomplishments. Specifically, we seek to add value by outlining how identities and processes within leadership development can be re-interpreted as fluid, developing and democratized contingent accomplishments.

Leadership development and democracy from a post-foundational perspective

Post-foundationalism encompasses theorists such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, a group with theoretical divergences but also some significant overlaps (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Marchart, 2007). As a basis for this paper, we draw mostly from the work of Ernesto Laclau, supplementing where relevant.

We acknowledge that post-foundational theory can be experienced as challenging but maintain that much of the difficulty can be pinpointed at the initial entry point and that once certain introductory assumptions are accepted the area becomes more rewarding. An alternative way of stating this is that post-foundationalism is frequently counter-intuitive,
even playful, as it prods at and toys with some strongly-held commitments across research paradigms. Bearing some of the introductory challenges that seem to accompany post-foundationalism in mind, we recommend entering the paper by thinking through three levels of abstraction.

The first is that post-foundationalism, and our paper, is concerned with the ontological (Kelly, 2014; Marchart, 2007), in particular a radical questioning of the ontological ground upon which notions of leadership can be said to exist and therefore developed from. As we proceed, and in common with practice-based views of leadership (e.g. Raelin, 2011), we adopt the position that leadership and its development only exist through the words and actions of people: through practice. Approaching leadership development as a matter of ontology, we hold that something valuable, energetic and contested can be brought to life through an ever-present and evolving practice between people. The ontological, for Marchart (2007: 2) is also the realm of the ‘political’, with political activity standing for contestation of the very ontological ground of what can be regarded as ‘real’, whereas ‘politics’ is a term reserved by post-foundationalists for formal institutions and processes. Realities of what we know and experience as leadership, we argue, are created, shaped and contested through regimes of practice and discourse. This is not to suggest that leadership may be interpreted differently depending on one’s perspective (an epistemological view) but to state that distinctive, if sometimes overlapping, realities of leadership are generated through the language we adopt and the practices we participate in.

The second level of abstraction concerns the fragility of the ontological itself. Adopting a post-foundational perspective means we assume the regimes of language used to enact leadership development realities themselves should be interpreted and worked with as
without a final, stabilizing ground (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Marchart, 2007):

leadership is not something that can “be encountered directly through the senses or
through language” (italics added) (Kelly, 2014: 912). Our symbolic repertoire is always in
some way lacking against the richness of human experience: it is “contingent all the way
down” (Cederström and Spicer, 2014: 179). As we can only experience and know the world
via (always contingent) language, human interaction and construction is comprised of
continuous but partial attempts to fix meaning via numerous identifications.

The third level builds on the partiality and contingency of language by suggesting that it is
precisely the inadequacies and flaws of language that enable an analysis of phenomena,
such as leadership development, as always in a process of becoming, of developing. Our
post-foundational perspective interprets the movement of leadership development (and
hence its possibilities and energy) as made possible, if counter-intuitively, by the gap
between the wager of the contingent construction (e.g. forms of leadership claimed as
particularly effective) and the impossibility of a fully satisfactory reality (forms of leadership
experienced as having absolutely worked).

In order to outline a praxis framework it is necessary to introduce concepts that capture the
dynamics through which this ontological positioning is actualised and contested. In this
respect we turn to the work of Laclau and his account of hegemony, empty-floating
signifiers and identification.

Hegemony, in the work of Laclau (1990, 2000, 2007), offers a way of thinking about
collective development work, as it evokes the presence of force and power but also
foregrounds a view of power blocs, consisting of a range of groups and actors, as temporary
and contested, enacting meaning through discourse. There is a certain pragmatism to
Laclau’s theorising, with its recognition that any coalition seeking to establish broader 
hegemonic acceptance for its activity will necessarily emphasise some causes and discourses 
more than others; or, some particular group or discourse will always find itself in a position 
of needing to represent causes or groups outside its narrower area of interest (Laclau, 
2007). However, this position of a specific discourse representing the larger cause is 
intrinsically flawed – a hegemonic position cannot fully capture that which is ontologically 
absent.

The second concept is the ‘empty-floating signifier’ (Laclau, 2007). Empty signifiers are 
words that not only lack intrinsic content but also act as nodes that attract discursive 
investment from a range of sources. ‘Floating’ refers to the notion that certain signifiers 
within language can be contested across contexts, an “overflowing of meaning” (Laclau, 
2014: 20) resulting in different chains of meaning competing to ground the signifier. Empty-
floating signifiers play an important role in post-foundational theory as they act as nodal 
points around which debate, contestation, deliberation and investment take place (Laclau, 
excellence; the concept itself is not only one that attracts significant investment from people 
and groups (Ford et al, 2008; Kelly, 2014) but is also premised on contestation of meaning, 
acceptance that people choose between a range of flawed choices. Likewise, the meaning of 
leadership is not only often vague (empty), it also floats, for example between chains of 
association related to positivism, heroism, constructivism, and so on. Both democracy and 
leadership act as nodes, connecting a range of other associations.

The third concept is identification. As the symbolic fabric against and with which we 
construct our identities is contingent, (full) identity is regarded as impossible by post-
foundationalists. In its stead are temporary and contingent acts of identification, acts which in themselves shift the hegemonic meaning attached to a group’s cause and identity (Laclau and Zac, 1994). In the work of Ford et al (2008), identity and the status of leadership as an empty-floating signifier coalesce. It is the empty status of leadership, the authors state, that allows for identifications that maintain the “great libidinal energy” (Ford et al, 2008: 76) of previous experiences with the signifier but also contestation around its performance in a number of settings, including leadership development.

Together these concepts offer the possibility of an account of leadership development that emphasizes fluidity and contestation. Contestation here is ontological and political, at the ground of what is to be regarded as real (Marchart, 2007: 2). Fluidity is central to a post-foundational approach; dynamic processes of collective work (as hegemony) and identity (as identifications) stand in for the absent ontological ground. From this perspective, leadership development should be approached as inseparable from the notion of enacting leadership, as to enact is to develop, to re-work and re-formulate the contingent ontological terrain upon which leadership is brought to life (Marchart, 2007).

Leadership development praxis and our illustrative example

The praxis framework that follows flows from this post-foundational perspective applied to the area of leadership development. Of particular relevance is the reinterpretation of key concepts from the leadership development literature, of the person and process of leadership, as contingent discourse, always in the process of developing. We acknowledge, however, that our view of what it means to be part of a meaningful leadership development
intervention is coloured by experience of practice. Drawing from Laclau (2000: 44-89), we view our theorising as the positing of contingent and universal positions that necessarily fall short of capturing every particularity of extant practice.

We therefore approach developing theory as inseparable from developing leadership development practice: they are co-constitutive; both engage in a process of trying to ground what it means to develop leadership. Hence our preference for the term praxis, by which we hope to evoke this notion of a contingent theory of leadership development: of a developing process of attempted groundings. Ultimately, it is a theoretical framework that can only exist and be manifested within the contextual experiences of others (practitioner and academic colleagues).

We draw on an illustrative example in order to provide relevant practice insight and appropriate context to the theoretically-informed contributions made, to assist the reader in understanding how this thinking can be put to work but acknowledge the particularity of the example and the work it can do for our theorizing. PWG (an anonymised name) is an umbrella group of 26 women’s organisations, representing ethnic and political groups within a nation under military dictatorial rule, drawing on participants from a range of classes and professional backgrounds. The gender dimensions of leadership development are not a focus of this paper and the illustrative example should be considered on the same footing as cognate studies that more often than not offer male-dominated groups as the basis of theory development. That said, we also hold gender as an under-explored but important aspect of leadership development (and post-foundationalism) that merits significantly more scholarly attention. Emphasising the diversity of groups represented in our illustrative
example is important, however, as this country has experienced tension and violence in the past between elements of the Indigenous population and other groups.

Stretching back to days of colonial rule, non-indigenous groups were brought to the country as guest workers but many remained and now comprise a substantial minority of the overall population. Significant issues exist concerning the under-privileged status of these minorities in comparison to the Indigenous population, particularly with regards land ownership rights. Yet these minorities might also serve as a reminder that this was a country occupied by colonisers. These points of antagonism have informed a series of unstable elected governments and military coups. Overlaying ethnic tensions in the country is a sense that, even more than most societies, this country displays a high degree of patriarchy, embedded in formal state structures (government, police and military) but also within its diverse range of intangible cultural practices (Underhill-Sem, 2010). The stated purpose of PWG is to develop solidarity between the diverse women represented in order to: generate more open discussion about the role and rights of women; enact change in the broader social and formal structures of society; and, finally and most tangibly, to increase the number of women elected in various tiers of government and working as professional officials in government. Leadership and democracy are two dominant signifiers adopted by PWG for its work. PWG engages in energetic online discussion forums. It holds regular face-to-face workshop events where issues considered important for women are discussed and debated. Furthermore, it seeks to contribute to formal government policy consultation. Our involvement with PWG was largely focused on the work conducted by the group in the 18 months prior to a national election that was promised as a transition out of military rule. During this time, the lead author observed the group and remained in contact with heads of
the organisations represented, and other actors, via email and social media. In addition, she participated in two online workshops hosted by the group. This researcher also spent two weeks with the women, observing their daily work and meetings, as well as interviewing 20 group participants. The extracts used below are taken from her programme of interviews.

Outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development

In rejecting final ontological grounding, post-foundationalism offers contingency a constitutive role whilst acknowledging that these discursive incursions of leadership signal a defining negativity. This constitutive negativity is provocative, interleaving fluidity and contestation at the heart of leadership development practice. In describing our approach we present four dimensions (broadly characterised as leader, process, direction and the unknown) within which this contingency is expressed, realised and contested. These dimensions are not a definitive model of leadership development (this runs counter to the central tenets of our approach). They are inter-related but distinctive facets that both express and disrupt important signifiers held as significant within leadership studies (see Grint, 2005b). What it means to be a leader (‘leader’ and ‘direction’ dimensions) and processual accounts of leadership (‘process’ and ‘direction’ dimensions) are connected from a post-foundational perspective because they are signifiers and debates that have grown around the empty-floating signifier ‘leadership’. In more plain language, we approach these dimensions as connected because these are discursive connections to leadership already made by both practitioners and scholars. From a discourse perspective we see these dimensions as intrinsically linked rather than discrete bounded entities; for example, constructions of leadership as person and process are held in our framework as discursively
co-dependent, connected via their mutual relationship to a complex ‘whole’ – a whole that, by definition is contingent and fluid, much like the leadership literature itself. In the following sections we present our framework by discussing each dimension in turn. For each dimension we describe its relation to our theorising. We then develop these points in the context of our illustrative example, concluding with more general commentary on how such insights could be leveraged by development practitioners. A summary of the framework is offered in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the praxis framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Implications for leadership development practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person - Democratizing the leader: foregrounding sliding subject-signification</td>
<td>Leaders as contingent signifiers in respect of both reference and centrality</td>
<td>Enabling opportunities for individuals to experiment with new leader identities; Identifying and exploring people’s shifts in leader-discourse; Exploring individual’s attachments to leader identities through discursive associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process - Radicalizing the democratic process: approaching conflict as a point of strength</td>
<td>Agonism and the symbolic order of democratic leadership</td>
<td>Generating processes of agonistic engagement to explore new possibilities for practice; Enabling constructive disruption at appropriate points; Democratising development practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction - Grappling with targeted, reflexive acts of symbolic violence</td>
<td>Symbolic violence of language and its disruption</td>
<td>Democratising symbolic violence as a means to challenge the prevailing symbolic order of directive leadership; Enabling the reflexive interrogation of directive leadership through agonistic practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The unknown - Limits of democratic leadership development: acknowledging and interpreting eruptions of the Real</td>
<td>The limits of any symbolic order and the incursion of the unknown</td>
<td>Exploring disturbances and uncertainty (the unknown) as critical incursions into extant symbolic order of leadership; Exploring irruptions of the Real to expose and test limits of discursive constructions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Person - Democratizing the leader

Approaching leadership in terms of the framing of symbolic meaning enjoys a rich scholarly history (e.g. Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Grint, 2001). Smircich and Morgan (1982) approach leadership as a phenomenon that is symbolically enacted and disputed between the “moving figure” of the leader (where the constitution of this symbolic figure includes the “flow of actions and utterances” surrounding it) and a “moving ground” of “actions, utterances, and general flow of experience that constitutes the situation” (p.261). Organisational artefacts, activity and people are thus thought of as fluid symbols around which meaning is generated.

Building on this perspective, we seek to interpret ‘leaders’ (if this is how they identify) within a praxis of democratic leadership development as contingent discursive signifiers. This position accepts the symbolic value attached to individuals within leadership work (see Gabriel, 1997) but also approaches such individuals as subjects-in-the-making; ones that can only be known through contingent discourse. Affirmatively, their identities can be recrafted in experimental and liberating ways, while acknowledging that a ‘full identity’ will never be accomplished. This approach aims to democratize the signifier of leader-subject: the notion that the very meaning and identity of leader can be made more transparent and open to contestation. Far from interpreting shifting and flexibility as weakness, our account sees slipperiness in the signifiers drawn upon by organisational actors as a point of strength for further analysis (in the case of researchers) and development (in the case of practitioners). This is so because pinpointing a sliding of meaning in discourse can signal important movement and renegotiation – i.e. that something has developed.
Adopting this position does not mean reducing leadership to individual leader-subject. Rather, it means interpreting leaders as signifiers that can come to represent points of symbolic significance for a group. These leader-symbols can come to represent the “absent fullness” of a group (Laclau, 2014: 121), indicative of the horizon of ambition towards which a group works. Leaders-as-symbols are viewed as actively constructing/constructed meaning-makers – their naming produces real work and consequences.

In the example of PWG, the dominant discourse concerning the identifications of the Indigenous population of the country is often portrayed as rigid: a collection of people guarding their cultural and political rights. In our research we encountered Lana, who was regarded by other members of the group as a bastion of indigenous traditions. Early accounts of her participation were of a dominant figure lecturing others about their roles in society and the political process. Yet this position shifted to one offering more open and generative possibilities:

I am an indigenous woman and I believe in our indigenous rights and we are part of the first people of this country. We are the first national people and we have rights to this country and everything else after that. We [her organisation] are a separate national entity and we – indigenous women – we are ethnic! Without us there would be very little of PWG. Young women in PWG continue to raise questions that challenge us, to say: “what do you do in respect of young women?” So I have to tell them, “I didn’t always look like this...You know when I joined [organisation] I looked exactly like you but it wasn’t just this organisation that I was a member of and these are the groups you need to join first in order to change things. You need experience!” You need to be involved and we can help you to do that.
Women are becoming enlightened. It’s the knowledge and learning happening that is
the most important contribution. The latest workshop we did I was surprised at the
number of women who attended and a lot of them were civil servants, teachers,
nurses, civil servants who didn’t know the structure of the state. So you have to help
them, guide them. To share experiences, you see?

A detached researcher with little prior knowledge of the context could read all kinds of
domineering symbolism into this text: here is a woman telling others what to do, how to
conduct themselves, how to manoeuvre their way through but not cause too many
problems for the dominant power. Yet read as a series of contiguous, shifting signifiers in a
broader chain of signification, one notes a distinct flexibility of underlying constructions.

The signifier ‘Lana’ can be interpreted as sitting within, even anchoring, a broader chain of
sliding signification. The extract begins with Lana’s assertion of belonging to a strong
heritage, which is constructed in totalising terms (“we have rights to this country and
everything after that”). Yet as this extract proceeds, her identification as leader shifts,
adopting the identity of a guide, teacher and mentor. Guides may still be viewed as holding
a position of privilege, in terms of knowledge, experiences and skills to be shared, yet their
role can also be conceptualised as facilitating the experiences of others. The facilitating
identification unfolds throughout a fictitious conversation Lana holds with “young women”,
which does bear traces of a certain exasperation – they are impatient, jump too quickly to
accusations of prejudice in the elder, Indigenous population. Yet by the end of the extract,
Lana’s dominant identification has slid from privileged commander to a developer of others.

Naming does active work. Adopting an identification of leader-as-guide offers a different set
of relationships and conversations than that of a leader-as-conserver/protector: one that indicates a horizon of developing the potential of others.

In development work it is possible to interpret a ‘leader’ as an important discursive nodal point. In such circumstances one might witness a democratizing of the leader-subject as signifier. In other cases, it might be that the leader-subject is relegated in discourse to a less central position, to one signifier amongst many others, with an alternative nodal point offered more prominence – ‘collaboration’ or ‘equality’, for example. Paying attention to discursive sliding might provide an opportunity for discovering openings in conversations, areas for developing lines of thought. Noticing such shifts might enable groups to explore how leader-identifications adopted signal the absent fullness towards which the group aspires to move.

In practice, working with leaders as embedded in contingent discourse holds possibilities and challenges. Hawkins and Edwards (2015) describe a key task of leadership learning as supporting students and participants as they travel between identities, as they sit “on a threshold between one identity and another”, in a “liminal” space (p.25). Certain people may hold strong associations with what it means to be a leader. This may especially be the case within organisations or groups whose successes and group identity seem almost inseparable from the personality of a leader. Others may find the notion of stepping into a leader identity intimidating or even inappropriate. We are not suggesting that democratizing the leader in this sense means forcing individuals into accepting majority opinion. By contrast, democratizing the leader-symbol may mean offering opportunities to experiment with adopting new identities in the workplace and/or development session, inviting them to try a counter-normative identity and to reflect upon the resulting responses.
from colleagues and results at work. A developer may also pay heed to the movement of
to the leader-identity in discourse throughout the duration of a development programme, drawing
on such evidence as a means of taking stock or generating further conversations with
participants: Was this shift intentional? Are there aspects of a previous identity you would
like to revisit?

Inviting development participants to experience being a leader-in-discourse might also help
make more explicit the connection between being-a-leader and the process of leadership:
that both seem interdependent, contested and incomplete. Viewing being-a-leader as being
enmeshed in a democratizing process of contested meaning might make it possible for
participants to see which aspects of an identity they would like to fight for and how this may
be approached through language and discursive associations.

Process - democracy as radicalizing development

Democratic leadership development can be thought of as a task of facilitating a process of
struggle for purpose (Rhodes and Harvey, 2012: 52). We treat democratic engagement as a
means of conceptualising the struggle inherent between individuals, groups and discourses
within processes of development. Rather than focusing on consensus, accounts of radical
democracy underline dissent as the driving force for healthy democratic practice, a
perpetuum mobile of the political (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe 2009). We live in a
‘pluriverse’ of identifications rather than a universe of fixed identities (Mouffe, 2009);
clashes between opinions, classes, genders, races, and other identifications are inevitable. A
praxis of democratic leadership takes this insight a step further through providing a
framework whereby the point of conflict can be identified as the very limit of people’s symbolic constructions and identifications. We might theorise one aspect of facilitating leadership development as supporting and assisting the transition of people to the point of symbolic ‘agonism’, to “the limit of all objectivity” (Laclau, 1990: 17) and the creation of forums through which such processes might take place.

In the case of PWG, agonistic dialogue was posited as core to the healthy functioning, even solidarity, of the group. Practicing an agonistic form of democracy was regarded as standing in contrast to the high-handed practices of the government. This was starkly delineated by many participants, for example Selina:

I think it is important to have a messy...PWG is...messy. It is messy. It is emotional. It is like...You know when you see cartoons and people are in a scuffle? There is always dust around and you see these hands flying and PWG is kind of like that. It’s like that.

What we have done is created this democratic space within a non-democratic context. We have pushed and pushed and pushed and negotiated and wrangled with each other and created this democratic space and that’s messy and that’s exactly what democracy is. It’s very messy, it’s competing interests, it’s diverse voices, it’s all of that messiness which authoritarian regimes can’t stand but which is what democracy is. I mean, you know, just because you feel you are right it doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re going to win the day. But hopefully we created the space where that is ok. We just keep pushing and negotiating and talking and I think that’s what is most exciting about it. The creation of this space, despite the odds against it and then...that gives us the...You know? The legitimacy in this platform to
speak about women’s issues, women in politics...We have this mandate, we have this group of leaders.

Selina provides an almost textbook description of an agonistic process. There are limits reached in her discursive constructions throughout, via pronounced hesitations and pauses. The “messiness” of a democratic process is placed in a signifying chain with emotion. Her stream of consciousness appears to be triggered by this word “messy”: indicative of the fact that the very definition and principle of democracy means accepting symbolic contingency. The hesitation before and after she enunciates this word ‘messy’ indicates that she is scanning her discursive repertoire to discover a signifier that will provide a satisfactory explanation for the democratic process she has experienced.

Repetition of derivatives of the word ‘push’ indicate that she, and her group, are continuously exploring the limits of democratic practice and identity – and it sounds exhausting, especially when evoked via the image of a cartoon skirmish. This radical contingency is framed in liberating, excited language. A further hesitancy is notable in Selina’s talk when she reflects on the “legitimacy” of PWG. Her confidence in the robustness of her bold chain of signification appears to gain momentum as she identifies herself and her peers as “leaders” – leaders sanctioned to be so symbolically via a “mandate”, a mandate gained through participation in ongoing agonistic engagement. Process and person in leadership are joined at the hip via the contested exploration of discursive limits. Viewing conflict in democratic practice as a source of strength for developing democratic leadership can be seen in itself as providing a form of what Raelin (2011) refers to as ‘leaderful’ practice – people are pushed to (exhilarating) limits and these are drawn upon as areas for further growth and development.
Within leadership development sessions there is a balance to be struck. As facilitators of leadership development, we have experience of discussions that digress and run out of control, losing coherence and purpose. Facilitating development can be seen as preserving a balance between maintaining structure and allowing for constructive disruption from participants, the “mess”, in the words of Selina. “Mess” can generate discovery, unexpected insights and even moments of revelation, as groups and individuals come to see themselves or problems in a new light. “Mess” can also lead to an erosion of confidence in the facilitation team, of whom a degree of content and process expertise is expected (Perriton, 2007). Approaching development group discussions as moments of agonistic engagement can be a useful way of establishing expectations within programmes, of establishing norms and introducing participants to the idea that some sessions will be allowed to travel if the agonistic process appears to be generating new possibilities. Participants in a democratic process should be able to have a say in whether to stick with a line of enquiry or move on. Finally, agonistic practice seems like tiring work and it is unrealistic to expect participants to be continuously engaged in such debates. In practice, drawing on agonistic confrontation within development programmes may be a matter of ‘adaptive’ facilitation (Heifetz, 1994; Smolović Jones et al, 2015), of judging the readiness at a particular time of a group to experience moments of intensity, discomfort and even insecurity.

Direction - Grappling with targeted, reflexive acts of symbolic violence

Viewing leadership as an act of symbolic violence is rooted in the underlying ontological stance of post-foundationalism that the imposition of language upon a subject is in itself an inherently violent act. None of us choose to enter language; it is an imposition, and
symbolization similarly imposes its simplified orders over complexity (Žižek, 2008). This may explain why leadership, in populist-cultural terms, is celebrated for simplifying and clarifying, either through directive or emotive masculine language, or both (Oseen, 1997). As subjects, we are integrated into a symbolic fabric that is constructed in patriarchal ways – a masculine universe of symbolic norms that privileges a certain autonomy and rational order (Fotaki and Harding, 2013; McCabe and Knights, 2015). Against this Laclau seeks to redefine what it means to work within the (necessarily) violent impositions of language. As noted above, inherent in his work is this notion that in any hegemonic formation, one particular discursive position will always adopt a more prominent role than others (Laclau, 2014). There is a certain symbolic violence, however, in this stance, with other positions necessarily emerging in diminished discursive form.

Leadership, as a construct, seems to imply a necessity of one particular discourse, or collection of discourses, enjoying a position of prominence, of leading other discursive positions. Vince and Mazen (2014) note that such symbolic violence in leadership often comes cloaked in ‘innocent’, even romanticised language, and yet the cloak of innocence does not obviate the violence of staking a leadership position in discourse. Nor within collective forms of leadership development does this innocence negate the inherent violence of infringing upon previously held ‘sacred’ identifications rooted in more passive hierarchical relations (Grint, 2010).

Our framework suggests that democratic leadership development will require a degree of shaping, of provoking and of excluding – of directive (rather than domineering) discursive work. The tension at play is that such direction may slip into norms of symbolic domination. Our intention is not to somehow solve this dilemma but to highlight the immanent challenge
of re-enacting oppressive leadership practices (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). By situating the directive dimension of leadership in relation to the contingency of the symbolic itself, we can be better positioned to encourage reflexive practice concerning the type of symbolic direction a group believes will best unite and stretch its horizons.

In the case of PWG, the role of directing was adopted by a few individuals, people who sought to unite the group around the signifier of ‘women’. To some this category may seem benign, but in the context of PWG, placing ‘woman’ ahead of ‘ethnicity’ is a bold discursive move. One of these leaders, Ellen, offered the following explanation for her leadership work:

It is important to have, I think it is important to have someone who can constantly push the line, who knows what the goal is: “Ok, cut out the white noise. Focus. Focus. This is what we have in common. This is what we said we were going to do. This is what we stand for, what we’re about. Let’s not worry about all this other stuff. We can deal with it later. Let’s try to focus on this. Stop squabbling like kids.”

So I am always trying to play that...trying to translate, because I think a lot of the discussion gets lost in translation. Because of culture, a person might misinterpret it but they don’t mean to be offensive, they mean it in another way, you know what I mean? So I am constantly trying to negotiate that and extend it. We are all here for the same reason, for women. It comes back to connecting shared experiences.

Some of us have to take the leadership role in doing that and trying to unpack, unpack a lot of these things. And it doesn’t happen overnight. It is a process that is going to take a long time...I try to make it real for them. It is not some fluffy thing.
And, you know, a lot of people actually feel that I can be quite a bully...Because I was quite strong about these things. I was like “You have to understand”. Yeah because I am a very, quite focused person.

Ellen’s extract brings to the fore what she constructs as a “leadership” role within a developmental frame. Read in one way, this participant’s focus upon placing boundaries around discussions, around the agonistic explorations of participants, whose utterances are characterised as at times resembling “white noise”. Her language is declaratory (“this is”) and is peppered with staccato commands – “Focus”. But what is it that Ellen is attempting to focus the rest of the group upon? The answer to this question is hinted at in the extract but elaborated upon elsewhere in her talk. Ellen believes she is speaking on behalf of a unifying cause – that of women’s rights, and specifically, a woman’s right to be a full participating member of society. For Ellen this hegemonic position acts as a kind of nodal point informing the rest of her textual work. Other positions are acknowledged but are subsumed within an admittedly broad focus upon women’s rights.

In practice terms, this is undoubtedly a subtle, even precarious, balancing act. A contrariness is offered by this dimension within our framework. On the one hand a certain pragmatism is involved in recognising the symbolic as violent in and of itself, and of the act of directing via symbolism as perhaps more symbolically violent than alternative organisational constructs. Viewing directive ‘leadership’ as one dimension amongst others within a development framework, however, points to a notion of a more reflexive and therefore accountable form of symbolic violence.

Transparent and accountable intentionality are important when thinking about the role of symbolic violence in development interventions. A degree of direction-setting appears
necessary within leadership development and the notion of leadership, no matter its
incarnation, evokes direction and purpose. Such direction-setting need not be reduced to
the symbolic violence of imposition but can be incorporated within a broader agonistic
frame. In metaphorical terms, perhaps such symbolic violence may be thought of as akin to
curating a provocative art exhibition, holding loose thematic boundaries with the intention
of discovering new possibilities and encouraging their exploration. Thought of in terms of
leadership development, a facilitator might treat symbolic violence as the grounding of
nodal points, of how much one is prepared to let a signifier slide before it starts to lose
meaning. For Ellen, the boundaries not to be crossed were notions of feminist solidarity; in
other contexts such boundaries will manifest differently. The danger here, of course, is that
groups may miss important external insights and possibilities if the discursive boundaries
are set too rigidly.

The unknown - Limits of democratic leadership development: acknowledging and
interpreting eruptions of the Real

This dimension shifts perspective to explicitly focus on the gaps and lacks implied by
contingency. In doing so we adopt the terminology of the ‘Real’ (Cederström and Spicer,
2014; Laclau, 2014). The Real from a post-foundationalist perspective indicates points at
which incursions from a radical outside of the knowable symbolic system appear. These are
points where the discursive and symbolic repertoire of groups fails to capture the
experiences or ambitions of the group; it becomes insufficient. The Real inhabits language as
a persistent and even constitutive absence/presence, an intrinsic “moment of antagonism”
(Laclau, 2000: 77) in any discourse. The Real, for Laclau, is what prevents language from being fully representative, from discourse completing itself.

Of particular interest to us is analysing points at which the ‘Real’ may become visible in language, via a “positivization of the negative” (Laclau, 2000: 185). These are points of negativity, points where language falls short of expressive ambition, such as pauses in talk, half-finished sentences, and so on (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002); or such negativity comes packaged in the form of the construction of a “partial object”, which comes to represent “a fullness which always evades us” (Laclau, 2005: 116) - a Real that always slips beyond our lexical repertoire. By contrast with Lacanian accounts that stress the role of desire in the practice of leadership (Driver, 2013), Laclau’s emphasis is more formal; concerned with the political role of this unknown Real in generating and disrupting alliances. Such a political function of the unknown in leadership might be more akin to ground touched upon by Grint (2005a) and Heifetz (1994) in the leadership literature when they posit ‘wicked questions’ and ‘heat’ respectively as means for people in a process of leadership to open their work up to new possibilities in tackling intractable problems – the unknown, in other words.

Acknowledging and allowing space for interruptions of the Real is therefore an important dimension of democratic leadership development praxis, for staying reflexively accountable to what lies outside a group’s regimes of discourse. To illustrate this point we draw on the following narrative from Filo. The extract follows a seemingly innocuous line of questioning from the interviewer, which yet seems to trigger a response of insecurity and loss on the part of the interviewee:
Filo (F): Speaking as someone indigenous of this country, the level of things that
were going on in equality with every race was ok. I understand and I accepted that.
But...we were not recognised as indigenous...to give us some recognition.

Researcher (R): Like special recognition?

F: Yes...no...to take us away from the main...you know, to at least recognise that
these are the first people of this country. Because according to this country
development and things like that...within the rural areas and things...to understand
us as a nation, or globally - they are left out.

R: How, in your view, have other women failed to recognise you?

F: My expectation is, for example, women from the rural areas to be...We cannot
involve them, the transportation and getting them across is expensive. To go to them
and see how they feel, how they view things. Mostly we are meeting on the level up
here. A higher level.

R: You feel that women from rural areas should also be included?

F: Now and then to be represented...from the rural areas...from the grassroots level.
There are some who are only in the rural areas, which are only indigenous. Mostly
that’s how I feel...Only the heads are coming.

R: I see, but what was the reason for not voicing it with other women?

F: I was thinking it was, like, selfish.

R: How was it selfish?
F: ...Just because I don’t want to be named like...They probably think otherwise, not
the way I think. Sometimes when you say things, get involved emotionally...it
touches.

Filo grapples with the symbolic limits highlighted by her attachment to an indigenous
identification but also her identification as an active participant of PWG. We note her
dissatisfaction with the dominant discursive repertoire via repeated pauses and a stumbling
over words in contrast to the remainder of the interview, which is lucidly enunciated.

The eruption here, which sabotages Filo’s chain of signification, is this notion of the other as
represented by an imprecise category of rural indigenous women and an insistence on a
vague, and lost, affirmation. This other seems to be invested with a significance that
destabilises the consistency of other symbolic meaning. The specific identity of these actors
– and the source of affirmation - remain imprecise. Filo experiences her uncertainty as a
form of shame, that articulating her feelings within the symbolic boundaries of PWG would
somehow violate its symbolic norms. The significance of this subjective conflict is
underscored by its emotional weight – “it touches”.

We interpret this negativity as creating space for contesting the underlying purpose of
leadership within democratic development work. Filo knows that something is amiss – she
can feel it in the gaps of her own symbolic identifications, in the Real of what is missing in
the constructions of the group. The universality of a certain position (universal women’s
rights in this case) is counterposed and undermined by the particularities of subjective
experience, of living life as a woman from a specific time, place and culture. Noticing and
building upon such interruptions provides a necessary supplement to the leadership that
tries to restrict and direct – or even perhaps to an internally-focused group process.
From a practice perspective, identifying such moments might enable the growth and further development of democratic work, generating insight into the kinds of challenges organisations might seek out if they want to extend their hegemonic reach. In facilitation terms, two points are relevant. Firstly, a facilitator might seek out points of uncertainty in participants’ speech, particularly if a pattern seems to be emerging over the duration of a workshop, or longer, probing such gaps and the construction of ‘partial objects’ with further questions to a group – noting that such practice might veer off course, into obscure territory. Secondly, paying attention to the Real offers opportunities for interventions with individual participants within, for example, coaching sessions, peer mentoring relationships or aside conversations during a leadership development programme. The benefit of this approach is to assist participants in seeing the limits of their constructions, of their discursive community, even if the result of this work is that participants decide to defend these boundaries more carefully, to more tightly ground and define their purpose. On the other hand, we are also cognisant of the danger of creating anxious participants, eroding confidence by picking over and deconstructing micro-language.

Discussion and conclusion: the practice and research-relevance of a praxis of democratic leadership development

Having presented our framework, we turn to consider points of practice relevance that cut across each dimension. We conclude by reflecting on some of the implications we believe our framework holds for future leadership development research.

Within a formal, largely classroom-based leadership development programme, the framework can be used as a means of monitoring and normalising a particular culture of
discussion, as a means of maintaining “free expression and shared engagement” (Raelin, 2011: 196). It could be utilised to embed democratic principles whereby the signifiers adopted in discussion, particularly empty signifiers, as well as the identities represented by participants, are ‘democratized’, opened up for debate and re-structuring. Approached in this way, designing development workshops as democratic forums would go some way to ameliorating the ethical concern that such programmes can be adopted as a means of discipline, vehicles for engendering acquiescence to certain loaded signifiers that in practice disguise a tranche of ideological assumptions (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014). Democratic leadership development praxis can be seen as one means of building upon resistances within development programmes as a basis of strength, whereby participants enact free expression concerning the problems and possibilities generated through discursive contestation. The ultimate strength of post-foundationalism, in highlighting the radical contingency of language, is that it facilitates such collective processes. Likewise, for the researcher observing development programmes, analysing chains of signification and empty signifiers may act as a means of exploring points of democratic potential and points whereby democratic contestation is less tolerated; thereby offering novel insights into normative and ideological assumptions of organisations, participants and development professionals.

Our framework could be adopted as a means of informing post-event, critically reflexive interventions. The fundamental notion within post-foundationalism of examining people’s investments within contingent signification suggests rich possibilities for engaging in activity that seeks to connect and make visible ideological and political identifications. Working with the language of critical reflexivity, post-foundationalism provides a framework for analysing
and rebuilding our very structures of thought, our “foundational assumptions” (Hibbert, 2012: 805), based upon identified fractures within these frameworks. Researchers will be interested in the utility of a post-foundational framework in deepening insight into the development of leadership processes and identities in a variety of settings, whereas a practitioner might be more interested in how sessions can be made more energetic and developmental through developing democratic practices.

Our framework also holds relevance for more dyadic settings, such as mentoring or coaching sessions, where researchers or practitioners might be able to explore the movement and attachment to certain empty-floating signifiers in these sessions. Potential may exist in envisaging more intimate development encounters as co-constructed coaching interventions, forums in which the expertise of each participant is brought to bear as a means of deconstructing discursive attachments in order to build new constructions (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2012). Post-foundational thought provides one way in which the foundations of the relationship of power in a coaching (or teacher-student) relationship, enacted via particular privileged signifiers can “become a visible part of the dialogue” (Hibbert, 2012: 809).

This praxis framework is more readily suited to more experiential and social forms of learning; a certain affinity exists between our framework and the leadership-as-practice area of theory and practice (Carroll et al, 2008; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Raelin, 2011). This approach claims that leadership should be sought in the actually-existing, “every-day” and “in-the-moment” relational practices rather than in advance via a rationalist construction of best-practice competencies (Carroll et al, 2008: 367). As envisaged by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) a focus on practiced relationality involves taking seriously what
is “embedded in the everyday” (p.1428), with “conversation [approached as] a process of interaction and struggle” (p.1436). Our framework offers a set of analytical tools to enable developers and researchers to track the attributions made in the name of certain empty-floating signifiers within conversation, to observe how and where they float (who, where and how people seek to contest meaning) and to analyse the range of contiguous connections made via chains of signification.

One valuable contribution of post-foundationalism for leadership-as-practice theory exists in its potential for ameliorating the dangers of researcher (or developer) attribution, of attributing signifiers such as ‘leadership’ and variants thereof to interactions where participants themselves do not explicitly use such language. Are these signifiers of leadership and democracy freely adopted and contested by participants or are they signifiers applied retrospectively by the researcher? If the latter then one could add a further post-foundational twist and question whether such attributions might be examples of academics exercising power over the meaning-making of research participants. A post-foundational framework is valuable here in that it seeks to identify and work with the signifiers actually used by research participants. The absence of the signifiers ‘leadership’ and ‘democracy’ within organisational talk does not mean that such signifiers should not be adopted by the academic writer but it does mean that their use becomes an exercise in reflexivity on the part of the writer: why posit these signifiers and not others and what does this say about the writer’s own preferences and commitments?

We conclude the paper with a brief postscript on the ethics of adopting a post-foundational perspective within development work. Having observed the presentation of post-foundational ideas at academic events, we note a tendency for such ideas, if not fully
discussed, to engender a form of postmodern fatalism amongst listeners: if human experience is without foundation, then one construction is as good as another. Such a view may be countered via the foundational premise within post-foundationalism of the ontological ground of attachments and constructions being meaning-full, rather than without any ground whatsoever. Post-foundational perspectives should precisely be interested in the value and meaning people attach to certain constructions and signifiers and seeks to amplify the points of contestation and movement around these. In this sense our framework can be said to offer more transparent and democratic scrutiny and contestation of foundational constructs commonly adopted within leadership development work. We do note the possibility of development participants experiencing a degree of vulnerability or even animosity when the implications of symbolic contingency are contemplated. “Are you saying my commitments and beliefs are not real? Are you saying that I am not real?” People do become attached to certain management and leadership approaches, as well as to political causes, to certain views of the self in work, as well as to the self in activism. A post-foundational approach does not seek to chide such attachments as naïve but does seek to make them more open to democratic scrutiny and discussion. As such, this approach may not indeed be suitable in practice terms for organisations and groups that want more of the same and as Heifetz (1994) states, it is worth reflecting upon the tolerance and readiness of people in context before introducing more moments of ‘heat’. Bearing this in mind, a post-foundationalist might respond to a sceptical participant or researcher: “You and your concepts are real, but not the Real, i.e. not everything.” Furthermore, we could add: “We work towards the everything, the complete all, but it is probably to be welcomed that this destination is never fully reached – life without contestation would be quite a boring, unemotional and anodyne life.” We hold that
adopting a framework of democratic leadership development praxis holds the possibility for
liberating and energetic interaction: at its root is the idea that we continuously seek real
meaning, even if such attempts are only ever partially successful, and that along the way we
can build in powerful ways of relating to and analysing the power that is enacted over us
and in our names.

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