Phenomenology in Education: A Case Study in Educational Leadership

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Overheard during tea at an Education Faculty research design course:

"Phenomenology produces interesting and surprising results, but it's just too much work …"

The speaker was a prospective Masters student who had decided against "phenomenological" research, presumably because "it's just too much work". Having been deeply involved in phenomenological research myself for some years, I could identify with his reservation. But his first statement is of course equally true: phenomenological research does indeed produce "interesting and surprising results", as many of my students have found.

I should at the outset describe what I mean by phenomenological research more carefully, since, as Schweitzer (2002) has recently pointed out,

there is certainly more than one meaning out there. The kind of research I am referring to is *not* the kind frequently featured in this journal, which Schweitzer (2002) describes as "Husserlian", but another kind, which he describes as "'what's it like for them' type of studies". In this paper I present a case for the latter, and consider its appropriateness to the field of education. I argue that this approach to phenomenological research (which Schweitzer refers to as *empirical*) is a potentially powerful way of making sense of education practitioners' (and learners') sense-making, and can lead to startling new insights into the uniquely complex processes of learning, teaching and educational managing and leading. I hope to awaken sufficient interest among readers who may have conducted – or are considering conducting – phenomenological research in the field of education, with a view to encouraging

contributions for a special edition of the IPJP. I begin by attempting to delineate some of the differences between these two approaches.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of empirical phenomenology is the fact that it focuses on the meaning human beings make of their experience. In 'Husserlian' phenomenology, in Schweitzer's sense of the word, the researcher's direct contemplation of an object (such as a painting, or a piece of music) is itself the dynamic that becomes the phenomenological hermeneutic. In interpretive phenomenology the researcher contemplates the meaning *others* make of objects, or experiences. This essentially constructivist element has significant implications, chief of which is the fact that the *others'* (the research participants') embeddedness in cultural, political and historical contexts is an integral component of the enquiry. Overlooking this aspect may result in dis-embodied and de-contextualised abstractions, rather than contextually rich findings, as Ratner (undated) has observed. But an even more serious implication is the nature of reality claims the researcher may make. In Husserlian phenomenology researchers make claims which are absolute and universally true, having discovered the essence of an experience. In empirical phenomenology claims can never be true for more than the given case, or situation. In this sense empirical phenomenology is perhaps more modest in scope and ambition.

The interpretive line of phenomenological enquiry was pioneered in a number of University of Duquesne publications,[1] the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology,* and the writings of numerous scholars, notably Amedeo Giorgi (1970, 1975, 1985, 1992a, 1992b, 1994). While its ontological and epistemological base is particularly elegantly described in Van den Berg's *A different existence* (1972), its

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[1] Four volumes of *Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology,* published by the Duquesne University Press.

methodological practice is perhaps most clearly articulated in Giorgi's work. I return to these details later in this paper: first, an attempt to describe and delimit the ontological and epistemological foundations of phenomenological research.

Here I face a dilemma, since phenomenology has come to mean different things to different people. The particularly subjective and qualitative character of phenomenological research has led researchers to refer to any example of highly interpretive, qualitative research as 'phenomenological': indeed, some are tempted to erect phenomenology into a research paradigm. To add to the confusion, the word phenomenology is also loosely applied in the field of education management and leadership, where it typically refers to an approach which is a reaction to scientific and bureaucratic theories (see, for example, Greenfield, 1984). Clearly such generic uses of the word are unhelpful, particularly when one needs to distinguish a phenomenological approach from other qualitative approaches, such as ethnographic and participatory research, also broadly situated in an interpretive orientation. It may therefore be useful to distinguish phenomenology from other interpretive methods by focusing on its unique features.

Of these, the most significant are:

An acknowledgement that research participants' 'reality' is not directly accessible to the researcher, and that the researcher's focus is thus on neither the phenomenon nor the participants, but rather on the 'dialogue' of individuals with their contexts, the "dialectical organization of experiencing-behaving subject and physical social world which essentially defines the phenomenon in question" (McConville, 1978, p. 103);

A focus on 'lived experience', an obsession with the concrete; verbal data are interrogated for how

they 'language' participants' physical, emotional and intellectual being-in-the-world. Other data – such as data collected through observation or filming – are rarely used, an interesting phenomenon, but perhaps the subject of another paper;

An insistence on description, rather than interpretation; while the line between these - description and interpretation - is thin and perhaps contestable, the drive to stay with description until a holistic picture of the issue emerges is fundamental to phenomenological research. It embraces the notion of bracketing (itself perhaps unattainable in its purist form) and works against the tendency to make early judgment calls based on pre-conceived notions.

With these guidelines in place, I draw on one of my own case studies in the field of education leadership as an illustration of how an interpretive phenomenological approach may be applied in educational research. Since space and time (yours and mine) are prohibiting factors I limit myself to the following:

1. Background to the study, and statement of the problem and research question

2. Research design

3. A summarized version of the data presentation and discussion

4. Some concluding comments, including a critique of the phenomenological method.

1. Background to the study, and statement of the problem and research question
Leadership has always been – and always will be – a popular field of study in any social or organisational context. In South Africa the need for education practitioners, policy makers and academics to develop a clearer picture of what it

is that some leaders possess (or do, or *are*) that makes their leadership effective has perhaps never been more urgent. Never before have schools in South Africa been in greater need of effective leadership. The democratisation of education brought about by the installation of the country's first democratically elected government places increased and increasing demands on education leaders and managers. Education policy proliferates. Curriculum 2005 (A Ministry of Education policy decree regarding curriculum imperatives that must be in place within a certain time frame) rolls out slowly and painfully. The system has already had to bear and survive a traumatic redeployment process. School matriculation pass rates remain unacceptably low, and teacher morale reels under conflicting reports of over-supply and under-supply of teachers. Further study and qualification is rewarded by one-off payments rather than notch advances. New teacher appraisal systems appear, and whole school evaluation becomes flavour of the year (the Department of Education's response to globalisation accountability discourse). The role of parents and especially students in school governance remains problematic and stronger on theory than practice. At tertiary level, merging of institutions (and the resultant closure of some) spreads anxiety. One could go on, but this list should suffice to underline the huge need that exists for effective management and leadership. I do not argue that leadership is the panacea for these and other ills: but it would be hard to argue that it is not at least one of the cures, if not the chief one. Studying school leadership is thus indeed an imperative, and perhaps the question to answer is not *whether* but *how*.

The story of leadership theory over the past century is a series of pendulum swings. Early preoccupation with "trait" thinking (leaders are born) gave way in the 1920s to an emphasis on context and situation (leaders are made), which in turn fired the task-person orientation that has dominated leadership thinking since the 1940s and indeed into the present. Fiedler's (1967)

"contingency" theory has arguably been the boldest and most influential attempt at synthesizing person, task and situation, but has been swept aside by subsequent re-emphases on personal qualities, team leadership and organisational learning. Burns' (1978) notion of transformational leadership - a modern interpretation of trait thinking – paved the way for moving beyond a behaviouristic instrumentalism to less visible aspects of leadership. Senge (1991) – drawing, perhaps unwittingly, on Greenfield's (1984) phenomenological view of organisation and leadership – re-emphasised creativity in the context of systems and team learning. Sergiovanni (1992), also arguably following Greenfield, contemplated how leadership might change if a 'community' (rather than 'organisation') metaphor were adopted for schools. Lambert (2002) has developed the idea of community learning into 'constructivist' leadership, while Sergiovanni (2000) pursued the personal, subjective elements of leadership in distinguishing between "lifeworld" and "structural" dimensions of leadership. Sergiovanni's concept is essentially derived from the person-task tension that drove leadership research for so long (in the influential Ohio studies, for example), while Lambert's work seems rooted in Lewin's team-learning experiments. One may be forgiven for thinking that there has been nothing terribly new in leadership studies for many decades: theories seem simply to be recycled in increasingly sophisticated ways. Scholars' frustration with our apparent inability to come to grips with the phenomenon in definitive ways is evident in laments such as this one from Bennis and Nanus (1984, p. 259):

> Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it ... and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.

And this from Yukl (1989, p. 267):

> The field of leadership is presently in a state of ferment and confusion. Most of the widely known theories are beset with conceptual weaknesses and lack strong empirical support. Several thousand empirical studies have been conducted on leadership traits, behaviour, power, and situational variables as predictors of leadership effectiveness, but most of the results are contradictory and inconclusive.

Why a lack of clarity and certainty should give rise to such unhappiness and frustration is itself an interesting issue. It is as though scholars have been determined to turn leadership into a science, with all the definitive clarity, predictability and ultimate "teachability" that that implies. It is in this context that the behavioural approaches of the 60s and 70s spurned such influential models and Hersey & Blanchard's (1984) situational leadership model, and Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid. These models have the dubious advantage of presenting leadership as an "un-complex", neat, predictable practice. Effective leadership becomes simply a question of adopting the appropriate behaviour for the given context, or the maturity level of the followers. The tendency is to prescribe – rather than *de*scribe - a tendency that aligns behaviourist leadership models with 'self-help' literature that continues to proliferate and fill airport bookshops.

Of the dissonant voices that have emerged, few have been as pervasive as Thomas Greenfield. In a paper published in 1975 Greenfield attacked the then prevalent structural-functionalist and systems views of educational organisations as "distinct from the actions, feelings and purposes of people" (cited in Hughes, 1985, p. 18). Greenfield (1984, p. 150) spoke of organisations as "nonnatural entities" and "cultural artifacts". Organisations spring from the will and imagination of people; they are not "natural"

products, like trees and mountains. This radically subjectivist view was later developed by several theorists, notably Senge, who stressed the power of the individual (as the creator of the system) to un-make or re-create that same system. Within this framework, Greenfield argued, leadership needs to be understood as the will and imagination of individuals:

> To talk of leadership, therefore, we must talk about leaders and about those who follow them or who fail to follow them. We must talk too about the meanings that bind leaders, followers, and all participants together in the social setting ... we will see schools and organizations generally as cultural artifacts, as products of human imagination bearing the imprint of individual men and women (Greenfield, 1984, pp. 158-159).

Rather than a study of *leadership*, therefore, a study of *leaders* becomes appropriate

Against this background this study identifies the problem that, in its efforts to erect leadership into a respectable and teachable science, research has paid insufficient attention to individual understandings of the phenomenon. The research question for this study is *what are education leaders' perceptions of themselves, their followers and their organizational contexts?*

2. Research design

In an attempt to gain access to and make sense of the lived experience of education leaders I used the phenomenological method developed by the Duquesne School, and articulated and demonstrated by Giorgi (1971, 1985, 1992b). The chief characteristics of this approach are:

> It is an interpretive methodology, where emphasis is placed on accessing the lived experience of participants (chiefly) through the use of loosely structured interviews;

> Participants are purposively selected on the basis of experience of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as their linguistic proficiency in the research language. Since participants'

language is usually the only data researchers work with, it is essential that participants are verbally fluent and expressive;

> The researcher adopts a position of "conceptual silence" (Stones, 1988, p. 124), or naivety, bracketing *a priori* theories, hunches and suppositions;

> In an attempt to honour all data equally (and not be tempted to analyse and thus set aside what appears to be irrelevant) the interview protocols are reduced to natural meaning units, in which each unit represents a statement that makes complete sense, expressed in the words of the participant;

> The researcher explicates the natural meaning units, and then *describes* what is presented, thus attempting to capture the *lived-world* of the participant;

> Only when a holistic sense of the participant's lived world is obtained through description does it become appropriate to extract themes and compare findings with other sources, such as literature.

The participant's lived experience of the phenomenon is then set within its context, both locally (usually the organisation) and more broadly (perhaps in terms of national or international circumstances, such as policy).

Sampling and data collection
Selection of participants occurred in two stages. An original group of 17 education leaders was asked to participate, and all agreed. I administered a questionnaire to the group, containing only the following six questions:

- How do you see yourself as a leader?

- How do others see you as a leader?

- What are your leadership strengths?

- What are your leadership weaknesses?

- What/who has played a role in shaping you as a leader?

- What is the source of your authority?

These questions were designed to encourage respondents to think deeply and critically about their *being-a-leader*. I deliberately avoided questions which would lead to a listing of tasks, or responsibilities, since my focus was the leader-as-person. I also avoided questions which would encourage theorising (such as *How would you describe the effective leader?*). "Thinking-about" was not what I was after: rather, I needed access to their personal lived-world, concrete experience of leadership.

The questionnaire served two purposes: one, to act as a rough sieve for selecting a smaller group of respondents to act as participants (for in-depth interviewing); two, to provide a framework for the interviews. On the strength of the richness of responses I selected five respondents. Whilst not deliberately looking for racial, cultural and gender representivity, the final sample consisted of:

- A black female university senior lecturer

- A white male school principal

- An Indian male senior teacher and civic leader

- A white female head of an NGO

- A black male college rector

I then interviewed each of these participants, formulating questions from their responses to the questionnaires. Questions typically asked for clarification or more detail. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Transcriptions were then given to respondents for accuracy checking, and in one case, some follow-up questioning. The data were then arranged into natural meaning units and explicated. At this stage, having familiarised myself with the data and gained a sense of the "whole", I wrote a situated description of each participant. In phenomenological research the situated description is an attempt at capturing the essence of what the phenomenon means to the participant. The emphasis here is still on *description*, rather than *interpretation*, as Giorgi (1992a, pp. 121-122) explains:

> … description is the use of language to articulate the intentional objects of experience within the constraints of intuitive or presentational evidence. The key point here is that a descriptive attitude implies necessity demanded by saying that one describes what presents itself precisely as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it. The description also implies the adoption of the attitude of phenomenological reduction, which implies the bracketing of past knowledge about the phenomenon being experienced as well as the withholding of existential affirmation.

As already explained, I present only one of the five cases here. I have selected the case of Simphiwe, a black, male, rector of a teachers' training college.

Simphiwe was (at the time of interviewing) the rector of a teachers' training college in the Eastern Cape. He started his professional career as a teacher, and was soon promoted to a headship of a senior secondary school. From here he moved to a training college, where he soon became rector. Simphiwe is also a trained pastor, and is active in his local church where he occasionally preaches. He lives with his family in Bisho, a small town in the Eastern Cape Province.

3. A summarized version of the data presentation and discussion
Simphiwe as leader (situated description)

The essence of Simphiwe's experience is a sense of conflict between who and what he would like to be as a leader (and tries to be) and who and what he is allowed to be (by circumstances).

Simphiwe experiences the context in which he serves as Rector of a Training College as a bureaucracy, characterised by hierarchical structures in which power is concentrated at the top. He describes himself as a bureaucrat. He makes reference to "rules and regulations" which he must obey, and to the fact that the department could discipline him ("you get a rapping for it") if he fails to follow laid down procedures. He calls it a "very autocratic hierarchical structure", and sees himself accountable to his immediate superior, the chief education specialist. From there the chain of command runs in clear lines through the deputy general director, the director general, and finally the minister of education. Problems have a tendency to move up the line of command almost immediately; it seems as if there is little attempt, at the various subordinate levels, to solve problems.

Simphiwe is not comfortable in this system. Although he is mindful of the need to "stick to ... rules" he prefers at times to use his discretion when a call has to be made and he finds procedure limiting, even though he knows this could lead to a "rapping". This means that he consults his senior staff, and then informs the rest of the staff of their joint decision and obtains their views. He feels, however, that he needs to make decisions on his own most of the time, because he is the one who is accountable.

Another facet of Simphiwe's discomfort in this bureaucratic context is manifest in his interaction with people. He enjoys sharing ideas with his colleagues. He believes he does not have the right to impose his ideas onto others. He likes to get feedback on new ideas. He values others' input. This respect for others reveals itself as a caring attitude. He believes that staff are keen to bring their problems to him because he is not just sympathetic, but empathetic; "there" with them. Some see this as "the ministry" coming through him. This tendency is potentially problematic, however, because some see it as weakness. Rather than follow rigid disciplinary procedures

against students or staff - "report that thing upwards" - he tries to talk to the offenders to understand why they are behaving in this way. Some would then accuse him of "bending over backwards". He believes in counselling, rather than punishment, but in the context of his work this attitude is interpreted by some as weak leadership.

Comparing himself with other principals, he believes he is less formal and less subject to officialdom. He thinks this may be a personality difference. He tries to be himself, "not to wear a mask", which allows people to accept him for what he is. He perceives himself as being very approachable; people do not try to avoid him. However, the fact that he insists on being himself may lead others to regard him as rigid and inflexible. His strong moral principles are an essential part of who he is, and cannot therefore be compromised. He believes moral standards generally have declined; people are reluctant to say "No" these days. Simphiwe trained to be a pastor, and he believes this has played a determining role in his leadership. He was given leadership positions as part of his training. He was strongly influenced by the "prayerful nature" of his pastorship.

Yet he is also wary of the notion of democracy. He believes the concept is poorly understood, and indeed abused. He cites examples of students who demand democracy but make decisions without consulting any other stakeholder. He believes students want to have "their views prevailing over everything" under the guise of democracy. His view of the prevailing conditions in South Africa is that they resemble "anarchy" which people think is "democracy". Because the word has so many negative connotations for him - such as "buying cheap popularity" - he would prefer not to be thought of as democratic. He stresses, however, that democracy is not bad *per se*.

A strong influence in his leadership life is his family - his "backbone" - especially his mother, for whom he has enormous respect and love. He admires her strength - "I've got a rock behind me" - and he needs to spend time with her regularly. Thus he touches base regularly and frequently - about once a month - and finds it really painful to leave 'home' and return to his place of work.

He also ascribes most of his success as a leader to God. He does not believe that he <u>himself</u> possesses the ability to lead; his achievements are entirely due to God. Thus when he is commended for saying or doing the right thing, he thanks God for helping him.

Other strong influences in his life have been Martin Luther King - whom he "used to adore" - and Nelson Mandela. He particularly admires Mandela for never even alluding to the fact that he was in prison for so long. In these times political prisoners made much of the fact that they had been in prison, even if it was only for a few days. But Mandela has never used this as his "trump card".

Simphiwe perceives his self-concept as having improved along with his gaining knowledge and experience. He had a poor self-concept when he took up his first principalship, but found that when he discovered he <u>could</u> do the work, his concept of himself improved. This has also influenced his response to failure, which he now views as positive. His self-concept can now embrace the reality of failure.

Much of what he describes as his natural leadership behaviour - such as his sensitivity to other people, and his Christian attitude to people, believing that they are all "images of God" - he is beginning to regard as weaknesses. He has found that "People can take you for a ride". Experiences of people taking advantage of his trusting and naive nature have made him respect leaders who have an uncompromising attitude to others; "tough" leaders who have "got this cut and dried" and allow "no exceptions to the rules". Often when he has tried to be particularly helpful to the community this has led to problems; so he now regards these attitudes (of helpfulness and trust) as potential weaknesses.

Data analysis

I chose to make sense of these data by drawing on the framework developed in Van den Berg's classic text, *A different existence* (1972). Writing in the context of psychotherapy, Van den Berg sought to subvert the medical model of therapy which typically identifies symptoms, presents a diagnosis and prescribes a remedy. The thrust of Van den Berg's work was to attempt to understand the patient's pathology from his or her point of view. Thus he wanted to discover how the patient's experience of self, others, the world and time might differ from what we might consider as 'normal'. Here he sought to enter into and understand the patient's *lebenswelt*. Binswanger's subsequent identification of three dimensions of an individual's *lebenswelt* - *Umwelt, Mitwelt,* and *Eigenwelt* - and Van Deurzen-Smith's subsequent addition of the *Überwelt* (Spinelli, 1989), may profitably be considered alongside Van Den Berg; the two together present a comprehensive network of routes through the uncharted terrain of the individual's being-in-the-world.

Consistent with the phenomenological stance of viewing an individual holistically and fully contextualised, Binswanger argued for an examination of a patient's "unique meanings and interpretations of the physical world" [my emphasis] (Spinelli, 1989, p. 128). This he called the *Umwelt*. In terms of Van den Berg's categories, *Umwelt* would include `body' and `world'. Binswanger's notion of *Mitwelt* corresponds roughly with Van den Berg's `others' category: it is the world of people around us, our public, everyday interaction with others. *Eigenwelt* refers to "the private and intimate relations each of us has with ourselves and the significant others in our lives" [my emphasis]

(Spinelli, 1989, p. 129). The dimension of one's relationship with "significant others" is included in Van den Berg's 'others' theme; and though Van den Berg has no distinctive category for relations "with ourselves", it is clear that this dimension is the unifying theme in his work: it is only through examining the individual's relationship with `world', body', `others' and `time' that the therapist begins to understand the patient's world, and therefore the patient's `self'. These are the dimensions though which we relate to ourselves.

Überwelt is a dimension not explicitly dealt with by Van den Berg, though it may by implication be subsumed under the 'world' or 'others' themes. It refers to "a person's connection to the abstract and absolute aspect of living" (Van Deurzen-Smith cited in Spinelli, 1989, p. 120). These are fundamental positions we hold about life and death, beliefs that underpin all other beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes. *Überwelt* includes ideological and, by implication, spiritual beliefs.

By the same token, Van den Berg's notion of the individual's temporality - our situatedness in time - is not explicitly included in any of the four dimensions identified by Binswanger and Van Deurzen-Smith. I do, however, imagine it to be integrally part of the *Überwelt* dimension: a belief in an eternal after-life, for example, will surely colour the way one experiences the temporary nature of this life. It is along these routes, then, that I undertook a second description of the worlds of my participants. I present here Simphiwe's world here.

A different description
Simphiwe experiences his world as confusing, contradictory and perhaps even threatening. At the heart of his uncertainty lies the fact that he finds it difficult to live out his life-view in the context in which he works.

Simphiwe's life-view - a composite and inter-related picture of his *Überwelt* and his view of other people - is essentially driven by humanist ideology, though he believes he owes everything he achieves to God, that people are essentially created in God's image, and are therefore deserving of his help and support. He draws strength also from significant others, his mother in particular, with whom he must spend time on a regular basis. The pain he experiences when his visits with his mother must end is well captured in the physically felt exclamation: "It's eina!" [It hurts!]. In terms of his situatedness in time, events from his past - such as his pastorship training and his mother's abiding influence and strength - are strongly present in his leadership. Although no clear vision of a different future emerges, Simphiwe mentions "new ideas" he shares with staff, indicating how future plans influence his present being.

This life-view suggests the approach he would like to take with staff members, students as well as parents. His caring quality is apparent in his stories of dealings with people. In one case he tells of how a white female member of his staff came to him with a problem. When he asked her why she had come to him, she replied that the staff sensed that he could empathise strongly with their problems. She felt he was "there" with them. A strong physical and emotional presence seems to characterise his dealings with people. This feature is further evidenced by the fact that people seek him out, and are not afraid to confront him; likewise he would rather confront and reason with aggrieved students or parents than simply apply rules mechanically. This, in essence, is how Simphiwe would like to lead. He likes to be visible, accessible, "there". He enjoys sharing professionally.

Yet, as I have said, Simphiwe is unable to live out this life-view. Discouraging and destructive experiences have coloured his view of others, of his context and most significantly, of himself. An example of how *Mitwelt* has affected

Eigenwelt is the criticism he has received from colleagues for his willingness to talk and listen; to try to resolve problems through discussion rather than by reverting to rules. Colleagues have seen this as "bending over backwards" and "weak" leadership. In similar vein, he has had bad experiences of parents and students taking advantage of his generosity and willingness to help, "taken for a ride" as he puts it. These experiences have seriously damaged his faith in people, and in his chosen leadership style.

Simphiwe sees his organisational context as a rigid, hierarchical structure. This is clear from the way in which he depicts the four tiers of authority between himself and the minister of education. He clearly has the classical pyramid-image in mind. Working in this context has adversely affected his leadership. He seems resigned to be a "bureaucrat", one who will "stick to rules and regulations", accept punishment ("a rapping") when one breaks the rules, and is accountable to his immediate superiors. He has become cynical about "democracy", believing it to be a euphemism for "anarchy". In other words, Simphiwe has little faith in his ability to rise above the system of which he is part, and do things his way. He is a victim of the system that produced him, and which he now serves.

Discussion of findings

It would be difficult, within the confines of this paper, to engage fully with findings emerging even from this case. I therefore select a few issues only, which I attempt to discuss in terms of their significance for what they say about leadership, how they relate to literature and how they interact with the context in which leaders operate.

The first and most striking feature of Simphiwe as leader is his inability to shape, take control of and give meaning to his leadership. This single theme is a complex interplay of meanings, connecting notions such as sense of self (identity), sense of others (significant others as well as the organisation and broader authority structures), and the complexity of context (sense of the world). Though this study did not set out to develop a measure of 'effectiveness' or 'success' as a leader, it seems clear that Simphiwe does not regard himself as 'successful'. He is in conflict with both the staff of the college and 'higher' authorities (the Department), to the point where he describes himself (disparagingly) as a 'bureaucrat', and is cynical about 'democracy'.

Simphiwe's case is characterised by *a lack of coherence*. The person he wants to be – drawn from Christianity and a sense of pastorship – is in opposition to his *Mitwelt*, and a cause of frustration to him. People misunderstand his kindness. Empathy is regarded as weakness. He feels the disapproving pressure of authority. Indeed, he cynically suggests that he'd be better off being an autocrat, people for whom life is simply a matter of right or wrong. His *Eigenwelt* is challenged by a hostile context, so that he begins to question its validity. The only point of real security in his life seems to be his mother, the 'rock' in his life, the stable point in his *Überwelt.* Thus, a lack of coherence renders him powerless and unhappy. It is a story of failure.

Theories of leadership that stress in-born traits (Aristotle's 'great man' (*sic*) approach) can have little to say here. Clearly Simphiwe exhibits what appear to be 'natural' leadership qualities: His compassion, his caring and empathetic attitude to others, his tendency to disregard inappropriate regulations and follow his own lead. Equally clearly, though, these behaviours have been socialised into his being-in-the-world to the extent he also *is* those traits. It seems clear that Simphiwe's training as a pastor and the spiritually strong centre of his almost archetypal 'mother' figure have fed his self-concept and behaviour. Situational theories (which stress context) thus surely also play a role. More elaborate contingency theories (such as Fiedler's) do better at accounting for the complexity of the dynamic of leadership. But Fiedler's notion that

where a mismatch of leader and context occurs, it is the context that should change has nothing to say to Simphiwe's predicament, chiefly because the context (or situation) is much more complex than an American psychologist working in the 60s and 70s could possibly have imagined. The idea that Simphiwe should have 'changed' his working context is ludicrous. It would entail nothing less than instilling positive and supporting mindsets into demoralised and cynical lecturers, already (in the late 1990s) anxious about rumours of college rationalisation (closure, really). It would entail changing the traditionally authoritarian mindset of departmental authorities, long conditioned to top-down approaches to management and themselves suffering from apartheid dependency syndrome. More simplistic theories, such as Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model, would advocate an adaptation in leadership style to suit the maturity level (readiness) of the followers. In Simphiwe's situation one might describe his followers as immature and 'unready' to take control of their own professional lives. The model would then recommend a more authoritarian, 'telling' style of leadership. The consequences of such an approach would clearly have been disastrous, and the backlash from the very followers who accused him of being too 'soft' and 'bending over backwards' can well be imagined. In any event, adopting more authoritarian styles of leadership flies against what theorists and policy makers advocate as the way forward in education management.

What of more contemporary views of leadership? Burns' (1978) articulation of transformational leadership has held sway for decades, to the extent where it now routinely occurs in texts and even in policy documents, where it is hailed as the desired style (perhaps especially in these times of social transformation). Its chief characteristic lies in its appeal to 'higher' needs, such as followers' values and personal visions. It moves beyond the level of 'transaction', an exchange of service for reward, into realms of spiritual fulfilment and the development of selfhood. Phenomenologically speaking, transformational leadership is in the realm of *Eigenwelt* and *Überwelt*. But however powerful the theory might seem, it has little to say about Simphiwe's life-world. Ironically, Simphiwe possesses some of the qualities that are indeed transformational, notably his huge capacity for care and empathy. His central concern seems to be for people, rather than 'getting the job done', nowadays often referred to as a 'feminine' trait and an argument for claiming that women are natural transformational leaders (Mwingi, 2000; Rosener ,1990). He also has a strong value base, fed by the enduring image of the rock in his life, his mother, and supported by Christian ideology. One would think that from this position he is likely to succeed as a transformational leader. Yet he appears virtually dysfunctional.

Thus Simphiwe's case draws stark attention to the limitations of leadership theories, including transformational leadership. The latter suffers from the same naivety that cripples earlier theories, namely the tendency to underestimate the complexity of context and thus ignorance of how politically fraught education in a particular context (in this case South Africa) can become. Indeed, political acumen would stand Simphiwe in much better stead that any amount of inspirational, visionary leadership. The ability to negotiate with so may varied groups of stake-holders, each with its own agenda, is clearly one of the most pressingly needed skills for South African education leaders. Transformational leadership presupposes levels of willingness, dedication to noble (and like-minded) ideals, sharing of common values and perhaps above all, a leader whose life is a shining example of these values that would be difficult to find in South Africa today. However charismatic and influential Simphiwe may be as a pastor, as an education leader he fails, essentially because his personal value system fails to *cohere* with the hardened and politics-smart lecturers on his staff.

What emerges from these case studies (of which Simphiwe is butt one) is the realisation that leadership is indeed too complex a phenomenon to define and one understands the frustration of many scholars in the field who mourn this fact (as discussed earlier). It would, however, be fatuous to suggest that theories of leadership have nothing to offer. This study has hopefully shown that, whereas leadership theorising usually falls short of capturing the real complexities and subtleties of leadership, they are useful in framing discussion and analysis of the phenomenon. They provide points of entry that lead to fruitful and potentially useful debate. But they do, in the end, want to present leadership as a recipe, a formula, simply a way of doing. Here I argue that leadership is *being* rather than *doing*. I base this conclusion on the cases presented in this chapter.

In this context, I find the story (or autobiography) a rich and powerful metaphor for the human condition. I can agree with Laing (1969, p. 93) that "one's self-identity is the story one tells one's self of who one is". But I will also have to embrace Dunne's (1973, p. 2) question: "What kind of story are we in?", for this presupposes a position of critical reflection, what Heidegger would call "authenticity" (Griffiths, 1993, p. 152). Fanon (1986, p. 231) puts it powerfully:

> In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle of freedom.

The extent to which one is able to tell one's own story – as opposed to one's story being told by someone (or something) else is the measure of how authentically we live. Simphiwe's frustration and disappointment arise from a lack of coherence, so that he is unable to live his own life, and tell his own story in his leadership. Simphiwe's story is told by his uncooperative staff members and authoritarian departmental officials. He seems powerless to change this.

No theory can account for or explain this obvious truth. It is not possible to reduce such complexities to formulae or grid-like models. Nor is it desirable. Nor is there any reason to become anxious about this.

The implications for researchers are clear. Useful as it may be to identify 'typical' behaviours that lead to 'success', contexts differ so hugely that transfer is unlikely. Asking for performance indicators for successful leadership may be useful, but each study will need to be comprehensively contextualised so that the subtle interplay of person and context may be understood. Traditional and emerging theories of leadership need to tested and interrogated as launching pads for critical engagement, but failure to 'prove' hypotheses should be received with relief and excitement, rather than alarm. Each step is nothing more than a step towards greater clarity and sharper awareness of a uniquely complex human condition.

More profitable, in my opinion, would be large numbers of case studies of the kind presented here. Qualitative case studies have the power to present convincing portraits of 'reality', rather than glib generalisations. They can ring with authenticity, so that readers recognise themselves and their working contexts. They also cumulatively construct larger pictures, different facets of a multi-faceted phenomenon. They are also sufficiently flexible to respond to rapidly changing circumstances, and thus reflect emerging tensions. In the case of Simphiwe, for example, his mis-reading of the importance of political realities among his staff (and in South Africa) draws attention to an area of leadership research that clearly needs attention.

Finally, what does this study say to the fashionable notion of 'leadership training'? If leadership is *being* rather than *doing*, how can it be taught or learned? It would of course be absurd to claim that leadership cannot be taught or learned. There are some very obvious

leadership behaviours which can be learned and practised, through workshops and role-playing. Of course, the rich legacy of leadership theory developed over the past century should be engaged with: awareness of theoretical tensions and dimensions of leadership create a meta-awareness which may result in reflexive practice. But the question of how one becomes a human being for whom 'reality' is a construct, simply one version of how things may be, and for whom change comes as naturally as life itself is a much more complex issue. The ability to tell one's own story in one's leadership is ultimately a complex interweaving of personal in-born qualities and early contextual influences and situational forces, both intrinsic and extrinsic to the context in which one leads.

4. Some concluding comments, including a critique of the phenomenological method

Empirical phenomenology lays itself open to several criticisms, two of which I address here.

The first, one of the most pervasive, is the very feature I have highlighted in many of the leadership theories which seem to ignore or simplify the context in which leaders operate. Ratner (undated) makes the following point:

> Phenomenological research does not share sociohistorical psychology's emphasis on elucidating the concrete social character of psychological activity. Phenomenology developed as a reaction to mechanism. It sought to restore the active, creative individuality of the human subject which mechanism had repudiated. Phenomenologists therefore illuminate the intentional meaning of the subject in detailed, descriptive, qualitative accounts. Phenomenology is an important corrective to mechanism, but it is insufficient It stops at the individual level and ignores the social character of individual psychology (p. 4).

Ratner (undated) goes on to illustrate his point by referring to a study of learning by Giorgi in which he finds that the

general description is regarded as essential and universal, timeless and ahistorical. However, it actually is shot through with sociohistorical facets which escape Giorgi's attention. He never indicates that the S's description of learning, as well as Giorgi's own summary of this description, has sociohistorical characteristics (p. 5).

Ratner proceeds to argue for an approach that combines the subjective richness of phenomenology with a more context-aware socio-historical approach. My response is that *one need not*, in adopting a phenomenological approach, abandon or ignore context. Indeed, the case I have reported hopes to demonstrate that it would be difficult to make sense of Simphiwe-as-leader *without* taking into account the politically and emotional charged context of education in South Africa. But in making that claim, I am aware of how I am (again) pointing to a difference between the phenomenological hermeneutic ('Husserlian') and what I have called empirical phenomenology. As a social scientist in education I see little potential value in pursuing the former approach.

A second criticism is one levelled at qualitative research generally, and would may certainly be levelled at the case study I have presented here. In the context of education in South Africa today the approach I have followed here is likely to be considered less than useful. The call that research needs to answer the hard questions, to feed into policy making, and to enable replication of good practice thus making a *real* difference is growing both here and internationally. This is partly the result of the pressure brought about by the commercialisation of academic research, together with arguments for accountability and increased competition among higher education institutions. In South Africa the newly established Higher Education Quality Assurance Commission has completed its first round of introductory visits to tertiary institutions, and one would be naïve to imagine that accountability is not at least as high on *that* agenda as professional development and

growth. It is no coincidence that academics too are questioning what are now considered to be a well-worn line of constructivist enquiry. Muller's (2000) plea for more *realist* research is an example. While acknowledging that "ideas of certainty, objectivity and neutrality can no longer be supported" (Muller 2000, p. 145), he continues:

> For all that, and accepting most of it, it is still possible, and more important than ever, to maintain that there is a real social world relatively independent from our ways of viewing it, about which we can make assertions of whose veracity we can reliably judge.

It may well be that the epistemological pendulum has swung too far, and that extreme constructivist (or qualitative, or interpretive) approaches to research produce little in the way of 'useful' findings. Muller is arguing for 'real' research, research which produces general truths, information on which the Minister of Education might be able to act. Of course, in South Africa today such research is sorely needed. But I would argue that a focus on "a real social world relatively independent from our ways of viewing it" at the expense of trying to understand individual role players' experience of that reality would be equally valueless. Muller's argument

also suggests that it is not possible to access the "real social world" in interpretive research, an assertion I hope to have countered in this study.

Perhaps the answer lies in challenges identified by Peterson (1994, p. 174) in his sharply critical review of the weaknesses of qualitative research, phenomenology in particular. Of the many excellent points he makes, I highlight "tentativeness" and "humility" in research reports. Claims to absolute 'truth' are not likely to advance critical debate; humility results in seeing research findings as partial answers to a multitude of questions. The fact that no single approach can reveal 'the whole truth' of multi-faceted phenomena does not render the approach invalid.

To return to the student's lament: Working with qualitative data in a way which honours their rich significance is indeed hard work. But the outcome is likely to be richly rewarding.

About the Author
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