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New Perspectives on Academic Leadership Moving the research agenda

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Introduction

Universities, both globally and locally, operate in competitive, internationalised dynamic environments. Development of strategic capability at all levels has consequently gained priority (Brown, 2004) including middle management. This has moved academic leadership to the forefront of University management's attention with high expectations of leadership development of middle management academic roles (Alexander, 2000; Leadership and Management, 2003).

Leadership development is not new for HRD scholarship (McGoldrick & Stewart, 1996) and for some (Hamlin, 2004, 2005) it has been a fundamental locus of their research. Nonetheless leadership has not attracted the same level of research interest as other areas. Yet in mainstream management literature leadership is fundamentally linked to successful organisational change (Kotter, 1990; Bennis, 1999; Goffee & Jones, 2005, 2006). The paper is designed to address and better understand this apparent paradox.

Aims

The purpose of this paper is threefold:

1. to expand the theory base underpinning academic leadership and HRD;
2. to expand theoretical frameworks to challenge prevailing myths about the 'unwilling academic manager';
3. to open up new research avenues and questions which have a better chance of constructively supporting HRD practice in HE.

The discussion offered will be of particular interest to HRD practitioners supporting HE transformation globally (Torraco&Ruona, 2005).

Since the 1980s, the HE sector in the UK has seen irreversible changes in terms of size, scope, funding and the organisation of teaching and research. To facilitate these changes, successive governments have required universities to deploy managerial practices across their institutions (Trow, 1994; Jary & Parker, 1998; Deem, 2000). Combined with stringent public scrutiny, the impact of these drivers on the nature of academic work, and on academics, has been substantial. Academic literature concerned with HE change is consequently vast, complex and conflict-orientated. The central theme is the academic as 'managed' and the academic as manager and leader of fellow academics. We define this as the academic middle manager.

This debate is primarily conducted from 'managerial' and 'critical' perspectives. Both are concerned

with examining academics' readiness and willingness to engage with change and embrace management and leadership functions (Hotho, 2006). In this perspective, academic middle managers have mixed reputations. They play a vital role in facilitating change and achieving organisational objectives (Clark, 1995; Dearlove, 1998; Meyer, 2002), but are presented as reluctant to embrace this role (Dearlove 1998; Osseo-Asare, 2002; Rowley&Sherman, 2003). Consequently, academics as managers and leaders are seen as problematic. Managerial effectiveness seems hampered by role ambiguities, conflicts, of out-moded collegiality, their sometimes temporary tenure and self-interest (Massy et al., 2002; Meyer 2002; Rowley & Sherman, 2003; Johnston, 2004).

Deem et al (2000) provide a differentiating picture in which academics in management and leadership roles can be classified and which place academics on a management path either for career purposes (mainly in post 1992 universities), reluctantly, or as good citizens. They conclude that academics are by and large ill prepared for these roles and need greater preparation. From this research, a picture of the academic middle manager in need of training and development clearly emerges (Martin, 1999; Osseo-Asare, 2002; Leadership and Management, 2003). HRD intervention is amply legitimised.

Such legitimacy, however, is contested from the critical perspective which examines sector changes as indicative of the erosion of the educational value base, the relentless commodification of academic labour (Willmott, 1995). What is highlighted from this perspective is the nature of the conflict between management and academic domains, the question of agency and space for resistance and the extent to which academics are collaborating with, have accommodated or 'gone over to' management and its ideology.

Both perspectives are valid, but if we read both discourses side by side they seem designed to confirm that academic and managerial domains are incompatible. Such polarisation, while relevant, precludes a deeper understanding of academics' engagement with managerial and leadership roles in changing environments. This hinders a critically informed yet practically focused HRD approach to leadership.

One problem is that both perspectives focus on the academic collective as their unit of analysis. This produces an over-generalised picture. There is a need for more differentiating research. A second problem is that the managerial perspective in particular is under-theorised and remains prescriptive.

We propose that social identity theory (SIT) offers a suitable theoretical framework which can both further understanding of academics' engagement with management and leadership, and enhance HRD practice. The proposal also resonates strongly with the need for HRD to continually 'refresh' its theoretical perspectives (Hatcher, 2004; Woodall, 2006). It does not propose a 'theory' of leadership but argues for HRD to be better able to 'theorise' leadership and HRD (McGoldrick et al, 2001)

SIT provides a sophisticated explanatory framework for analysing inter- and intra group dynamics, and the mobility of individuals between groups. Individuals derive their social identity out of the groups to which they self-ascribe (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This social identity reflects a need, and complements the sense of personal identity as it serves to order the social environment in which the individual is located, and reduces uncertainty. Individuals' social identity is influenced by a range of social groups, organisations, institutions or work groups with which they are associated (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p122). Professional groups are prime sites for the formation of social identity and where these remain salient, individuals will see little motivation to seek alternative referent groups.

SIT explains observed differences in the extent to which academics embrace management and leadership, or otherwise, why they return or do not return to academic careers having held management/leadership roles; and how they view the link between management, teaching and research functions to others, and novice academics in particular. From here, SIT assists in opening up new research questions and in developing more finely tuned and effective approaches to the development of academic leadership and leaders and organisational learning.

These assumptions were first tested in a case study which examined how Heads of School made sense of management and leadership practice. SIT was adopted as the interpretative framework to examine the extent to which management and leadership were incorporated into or kept separate from their sense of social/professional identity.

Framing the leadership challenge in HE

Sector transformation and leadership imperative

Over the past 25 years the HE sector, in the UK as elsewhere in Western industrialised countries, has undergone substantial, all-pervasive and irreversible change, and these changes and their impacts on structures, organisation, product and outcomes, and on the nature of academic work have been widely researched and debated from economic, sociological, managerial and critical perspectives. We cannot summarise this literature here but will summarise the consequences of this transformation agenda as it is these consequences which continue to pose the management challenges the sector is faced with and to which HRD researchers and practitioners are required to respond. We are, of necessity, selective and must refer to more detailed discussions elsewhere (Deem, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Trowler, 2002; Shattock, 2003).

HE sector changes of the past 25 or so years have created a leadership imperative. In 1985 the Jarrat Report, commissioned by the then Conservative government, criticized universities' inability to manage their resources and initiated an urgent review of university governance (Jarrat Report, 1993; Dearlove, 1998a; 1998b). Since then universities have embarked on a steady process of restructuring as academic decision making bodies have been widely replaced by smaller executives. Academic self governance has been replaced by a "keener assertion of top down authority" (Dearlove, 1998; 68). Cost efficiencies have undoubtedly been achieved in the face of sector expansion, and as a consequence of staff reduction, and the rationalisation of provision. While economic and efficiency pressures continue, the sector is also tasked to review its economic and societal contributions. The publication of the Dearing report in 1997 (Dearing, 1997) and HE policy since then have required universities to define and standardize their graduate output, to address labour market requirements and employer expectations and to prioritise graduate employability and holistic skills development side by side if not above the development of traditional subject expertise (Dearing 1997; Deem, 2000; Rowley & Sharman, 2003). These pressures have resulted in a widely recognised change imperative which may have sharpened universities' strategic prowess, but has also increased inter-university competition, in particular as the measures of institutional success and funding to date is driven by research performance rather than the entire spectrum of academic activity now required.

Deep and transformative change requires effective leadership and the urgent need to develop leadership capability and capacity is widely recognised in the sector, not least through the establishment of the HE Leadership foundation sponsored by the collective of sector stakeholders.

Policy makers have addressed the need to develop leadership at all levels, not just at the top (Leadership & Management, 2003). Attention has shifted from the top level to the role of academics as 'leaders from the middle' and their development requirements to make them effective leaders (Middlehurst, 1993; Hellowell et al. 2001; Bryman, 2006; Petrov & Gosling, 2006). Herein lies the true challenge for HRD.

The notion of effective leadership

While earlier person-centred theories of leadership might have emphasised individual traits or adaptability to contingencies as central to effective leadership, contemporary understanding of effective leadership can best be summarised in terms of an interdependent relationship between structure, process and outcome. This recognises the situated ness, social dimension and goal orientation of leadership and safeguards against notions of 'heroic' leadership myths. Definitions of what leadership entails in terms of skill and competence abound but tend to be extremely wide-ranging as they span anything from creating vision to inspiring trust, team building and emotional intelligence and alignment (Gill, 2006). The process-outcome nexus can perhaps best be summarised by juxtaposing two definitions: Hooper & Potter observe that effective leadership entails "developing a vision of the future, crafting strategies to bring that vision into reality and ensuring that everybody in the organisation is mobilising their energies towards the same goals" (Hooper & Potter, 2001; p. 5). O'Toole asserts that "to be effective, leaders must set aside that 'natural' instinct to lead by push, particularly when times are tough. Leaders must instead adopt the unnatural behaviour of always leading by the pull of inspiring values" (O'Toole, 1995, p. 11). We are not aware of research that addresses the extent to which academics practice such leadership. The picture of the academic that is presented in the HE change management literature to date is set to highlight deficiencies rather than achievements as the following section will outline.

Leadership and the nature of academic work

The need for enhanced academic leadership, as stated, has been widely recognised, and individual institutions and sector partnerships are active in offering development programmes. The extent to which such costly and resource-intensive managerial initiatives can bring about more effective and efficient academic leadership is as yet impossible to say. This is partly due to the fact that to date we have an under-theorised understanding of the nature of academic leadership and of what renders such leadership effective. What we have instead is a polarised discourse promoted by universities managers and academic researchers alike (Hotho, 2006; Hotho & Pollard, 2007), which, as we propose, limits our understanding of the nature of academic leadership, of the challenges of leading academics, and consequently our chances to develop robust HRD approaches that can move universities forward.

The issue of academic management and leadership is debated by both managerial and critical researchers. Authors adopting a more managerial stance assume an inherent contradiction between academics and management, and the academic as unwilling to manage and unwilling to be led is widely debated in the literature. The non-manageability of academics is causally linked to the specific nature of academic as archetypally professional work (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997; Rowley&Sherman, 2003; Deem et al., 2000). Independence, autonomy and control over their work and in particular their research, notions of intrinsic motivation over economic motivation, professional trust base and collegiality of decision making and governance have been identified as some of the key explanations

why academics are unwilling and reluctant to engage with management or seek management and leadership roles (Rowley & Sharman, 2003; Dearlove, 1998a; 1998b; Deem et al., 2000; Hellawell & Hancock, 2001; Meyer, 2002). Notions of traditional value bases anchored in a humanistic rather than economic rationale of education, collegiality and peer judgement have been cited as being deeply rooted in the academic profession and non-compatible with modern managerial requirements and as hindering progress and change (Massy, 2000; Johnston, 2004). Academics who assume leadership and management roles are consequently often seen as somewhat deficient, reluctant decision makers, or agents of their own academic community rather than as corporate agents of change and transformation. "Stereotypical sentiments" against management and change (Rowley & Sherman, 2003) are said to be widely held among the academic community.

Further, more general evidence concerning the incompatibility of academic and management activity in principle – or allegedly poor or inadequate academic management practice – is provided by organisational commitment literature which argues that while workers hold multiple commitments, their commitment to their closest organisational unit will be stronger than their commitment to the more distant organisation. Professional workers and academic communities are cited as typical examples of such commitment bias (Mueller & Lawler, 1999).

Various conclusions are drawn from such positions. Similar to discussions in health sector management, the suggestion to develop a management cadre in HE that is entirely separate from, but coordinates and manages academics is no longer muted. Notions of hybrid management, i.e. academics assuming management and leadership roles, is the preferred model, and in recognition of the fact that academic work, i.e. teaching and research, constitute the sector's core strategic activity from which its competitive advantage will stem. Because of the nature of academic work, academics are still acknowledged as possibly the best leaders of their peers, and prescriptive leadership models have emerged which combine a variety of soft leadership dimensions (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1999). These are often, however, hardly more than leadership recipes loosely grounded in current leadership theory familiar from the wider management literature. Rowley & Sherman's recommendations are as illustrative here as Kennie & Middlehurst's concept of professional leadership which is grounded in distributed leadership thinking (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1995; Kennie & Middlehurst, 1997). What various commentators share is the implication that such leadership practice, whilst extended from the nature of academic collegiality and work, is new to the academic community, and that substantial training and development efforts are required to develop the required skills and competences (Meyer, 2002; Rowley & Sherman, 1997), and to overcome widespread resistance against such development or management at large. This is a particular requirement as and when academic managers/leaders experience the inherent ambiguity and role conflicts in their role as academic middle manager which Hellawell and Hancock describe as an inherently vulnerable position (Hellawell & Hancock, 2001).

In the absence of more detailed or more theoretically based discussion we take some issue with these assumptions and propose that privileging such prescription over more sophisticated locally situated explorations of actual academic leadership practice limits our understanding of what ultimately conditions effective academic leadership. Further research into how and why academics engage with change and leadership roles, and the dynamics between academics as leaders and academics as led is still required.

While the managerial perspective thus limits our understanding of actual leadership practice and tends

to reduce phenomena to broad generalities, more critical writers tend to overemphasise broad generalities. Here the issue might be one of over-theorising and as a result neglect of local level variation of practice and engagement. Critical commentators are concerned with the impact of managerial intervention on academic work and often frame the debate, from a labour process perspective or a broader emancipatory perspective, around notions of contest and control (Wilmott, 1995; Prichard & Wilmott, 1997; Prichard, 2000; Trowler, 2001). Conflict-orientated perspectives frame academic engagement with managerial agendas in terms of resistance to or accommodation with management. Overly determinist perspectives comment on the de-professionalisation and commodification of academic work; alternatively spaces of resistance are explored where academics assume management or leadership roles and buy into the managerial discourse to either defend or strengthen the boundaries of their academic sphere against managerial intervention.

While conflict perspectives remain of vital importance, they also tend to reduce what academics do when they become managers in terms of resistance, defence or collaboration. Once more we might ask whether such perspective sheds sufficient light on academic management and leadership practice. Importantly we must explore – but importantly not question – the link between this perspective and improved management practice and leadership.

The challenge – from discursive impasse towards a debate on effective academic leadership

Two main issues arise from the above. Research located in the managerial paradigm shed light on organizational phenomena where it is concerned with empirical study of change interactions among academics. It frames academic behaviour, from a managerial perspective, in terms of deficiencies which can be addressed and resolved through appropriate management and leadership training. Its recipes and conclusions are, however, limited and reductivist to the extent that the central explanation for academics' management and leadership capability and skill is related to the assumed specifics of academic work. This leaves little scope for the explanation of local variation, or an exploration of other sources that might shape academics' behaviour and orientation. Critical perspectives examine relative manifestations of agency in the face of managerial intervention and imposition but this renders academics' activity as they interface with management in reactive rather than constructive terms of any kind. From an HRD perspective both paradigms offer only limited guidance as to how best to develop academic leadership effectiveness. We propose that social identity theory may offer a theoretical framework that provides more differentiated insight into academics and their engagement with change and management and leadership agendas and roles. Its explanatory and predictive value may assist in moving the debate beyond the current polarisations towards a debate which recognises the multiple causes that impact on leadership effectiveness.

The contribution of Social Identity Theory

The following section briefly outlines the key tenets of SIT and examines the current status of SIT in organisational research. From there we will discuss the contribution SIT can make to our understanding of the specific problematic of managing and leading academics in universities today, and to our conceptualisation of academic leadership and its effectiveness. It will be proposed that SIT can make a significant contribution to strengthening the theoretical robustness and the evidence base of HRD practice, an imperative strongly argued by Hamlin and particularly relevant in the context of strategic and organisational change (Hamlin, 2002; Hamlin, 2005). More specifically it will be demonstrated how an application of SIT questions notions of 'universalistic' models of HRD and leadership development

and consequently challenges HRD academics and practitioners to move towards a more situation-specific application of HRD strategies and practices. From here new research agendas emerge. In the context of HE management this is an imperative of utmost importance.

The contribution of SIT to leadership and management research and practice

It is widely recognised that social identity theory (SIT) can make a significant contribution to our understanding of organisational behaviour (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Haslam, 2001). Developed and refined since the early 1970s SIT recognises the interplay of psychological and structural or contextual dimensions in shaping human behaviour. It thus bridges the gap between overly individualist and overly collectivist perspectives on the self, the group and the larger social system (Operario & Fiske, 1999; Hogg & Williams, 2000) as it aims to understand the cognitive bases of (initially) intra-group behaviour, and, more recently, inter-group behaviour (Hogg, 2001) In the latter context, leadership is addressed as a function of group processes, and this opens new insights into cause and effect of effective leadership.

SIT can thus assist management research in exploring a 'fourth way' between overly structuralist, interpretivist approaches to theory building, research and practice (Haslam, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). This potential is reflected in the growing body of research that deploys SIT as a theoretical framework to explain both individual and intra-group behaviours in organisational contexts (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Ellemers et al., 2004).

To date, however, most SIT-based organisational or management research is explanatory in nature (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Alvesson, 2000; Hallier & Forbes, 2005) and designed to test hypotheses, antecedents of individual or inter-group behaviour, and individual social mobility (ibid). In particular there is interest in the predictive utility of SIT (Hallier & Forbes, 2005). An application of insights from SIT research to management and HRD practice is still outstanding

The key tenets of Social Identity Theory

Individuals conceive of themselves in terms of personal, i.e. individualistic, and social identity. Where personal identity is about differentiation from others, social identity reflects a human need of belonging to others and refers to that part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from his or her sense of belonging to a social group that is meaningful in terms of emotional attachment and values (Farfel, 1979). What drives the search for social identity is the individual's need to locate him- or herself within a social system, and a sense of positive self-esteem (Operario & Fiske, 1999). Individuals derive their social identity from a range of social groups, including the organisations, institutions or work groups with which they are associated (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Ashforth & Mael, 2001). Work groups, departmental units or professional groups are therefore central for the formation of social identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000), and its underpinning value base and attachments.

Social identity is achieved in social interaction as individuals engage with social contexts (Operario & Fiske, 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2000), classify groups therein and ascribe themselves to those groups they see as salient, i.e. as positively different from others (Hogg, 2001). Ashforth & Mael refer to the process of social classification which allows individuals to locate themselves in their social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The cognitive strategies deployed to achieve a social self are strategies of social comparison between in- and out-groups, and social evaluation of group status (Hogg, 2001;

Haslam, 2001). Individuals will show positive bias or favouritism towards salient in-groups to achieve positive discrimination of self and in-group from out-groups. Such close identification with a salient group results in de-individuation or depersonalisation as individuals adopt the norms of behaviour, attitudes and beliefs that demarcate the boundaries between salient in-group and non-favourable out-groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Individuals, it is important to note, hold multiple social identities, and draw upon these differently. Different social contexts offer or require different sources to achieve positive self-esteem and self-enhancement, or reduce uncertainty. Depending on context social identities grounded in gender, ethnicity, hierarchy or profession may be foregrounded. Equally, individuals may 'part with' or revise their set of social identity as opportunity arises, for instance in the context of organisational change. Consequently individuals will re-examine the relevant salience of social groups in their environment (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Ethier & Deaux, 2000), and detach from or reassert previously held social identity/ies (Ethier & Deaux, 2000). In other words, change pressures may result in revised social identities and consequently different behaviours and action. These depend on the cognitive evaluations of social mobility undertaken by the individual which shape his or her social change beliefs. Where social mobility into higher status groups is seen as possible, individuals may do so to assert positive social identity. Where this is seen as not possible, individuals may reassert the features of the current in-group to maximise group distinctness (Haslam, 2001).

SIT provides rich explanation for the social behaviour of individuals in inter-group contexts but can also and importantly enrich our understanding of intra-group behaviour. As such it can shed further light on our understanding of the origin and emergence of leadership in groups. Central here is the formation of group prototypes which increase in relevance as group salience increases. Group prototypes, i.e. the embodiments of the salient norms, values and scripts that structure patterns of behaviour and action in relation to other groups are thus constitutive to the formation of the social identity or self-categorisation of an individual (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Group prototypes as means of facilitating in-group salience qua meta-contrast (Hogg & Terry, 2000) are rooted in the group's collective past and thus comparatively enduring. As referents they are, however, not static but can undergo change as the comparative social context changes in which individuals or groups strive to establish their social identity. Features of prototype content may be foregrounded, recede or be replaced as intra-group constellations change and groups and their members need to protect or revise their group's positive distinctiveness (Hogg, 2001). In other words, group prototypes are dynamic and context-sensitive. Their malleability does not reduce but rather confirms their importance. Group prototypes are essential for the process of de-individuation and depersonalisation without which social identity or social self-categorization would not be possible (Hogg, 2001) as group prototypicality accentuates in-group similarities and out-group differences. Group prototypicality is not equally held by all group members but embodied by and attributed to them to different degrees. Group members seen as being most prototypical summon not only maximum social attraction and as such the origin of emergent leadership within groups (Hogg, 2001).

An emergent model of leadership – the SIT perspective

While SIT's initial focus was on intra-group behaviour (Hogg & Williams, 2000) its predictive utility for individual behaviour was soon recognised. More recently, and in parallel to developments in leadership research, its possible contribution to understanding of leadership and the emergence of leaders in

groups has been recognised. Notions of leadership as a distributed function have been addressed in leadership research but remain fraught with conceptual opaqueness. In the context of HE change and management there has been a pronounced shift towards a 'democratisation' of leadership as a democratic, devolved and shared means of management, direction setting and organisational purpose. But whether such trends provide either greater clarity of understanding or a more informed practice is arguable. Advocates of a new approach to leadership are right in encouraging a dissociation from traditional models of leadership (which are basically individual, trait based or contingency models of 'best leaders') but their alternative is, as yet, unconvincing. Lumby (2003) for instance proposes that "we may need to understand leadership differently" and that we may need to revise notions of leadership as something "enacted by an individual or small group" – but the suggestion to see leadership as "the volition of an organization, and as such, outside the gift of any single individual or small group" (Lumby, 2003, 291-292) is only partly convincing at most. Talking about the volition of an organization points towards the reification of organizational purpose and is probably best avoided. Suggesting, in the context again of educational leadership, that it is "about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (Harris, 2003, p. 314) evokes pictures of a communal leadership 'happening' which distracts from qualities of power, influence and bias which are inherent to any concept of leadership. In contrast, SIT offers a more pragmatic but also more convincing approach to extending our understanding of leadership is indeed offered by SIT. Research to date is still emerging, and SIT-based models of leadership are at an early stage, but we see potential here both in terms of heuristics and HRD practice. We will set out the key positions of the emergent model and then articulate these and general SIT issues with academic management and leadership issues.

A starting point

The need to shift leadership towards a post-heroic paradigm is widely recognised (Haslam et al., 2001; Reicher et al., 2005) as is the fact that without followers there are no leaders, or at least no effective leaders. Consequently one of the main deficiencies of leadership theories to date is their neglect of the fact that leaders are not merely leaders but also group members (van Kippenberg Hogg, 2003; Haslam, 2001; Hogg et al., 2006). SIT offers a "group-orientated meta-theory of leadership" (Hogg et al., 2006, p. 336) that frames leadership and leaders as a property of social interaction in groups, and between groups, as an outcome of group processes and inter-group relations (Hogg et al., 2006). The starting point of an SIT based leadership theory is the individual and his or her need to establish a social identity qua de-individuation and reference to salient in-group prototypes. The more cohesive a group in terms of social identity salience, the less important to individual or personal characteristics, perceptions or behaviours, and the stronger the normative and behavioural effect of group prototypicality (Hogg, 2001).

As group salience increases, individuals turn to other group members to find notions of group norms confirmed to which they seek to conform. As noted above, individuals are perceived as embodying group prototypicality to different degrees, and those individuals who are perceived to embody the group prototype most fully will appear to have the most influence over less prototypical group members in emerging groups, and actually have the most influence in established groups. In other words, "as group membership becomes more salient [...], group prototypicality becomes an increasingly influential basis for leadership perceptions" (Hogg, 2001, p. 189). Perceived and actual group prototypicality is thus a central variable to explain emergent and continued group leadership.

Consistent with interactional models of leadership developed, for instance, by Fiedler (Fiedler, 1971, quoted, in Hogg, 2001), SIT argues that leadership is attributed to or conferred upon those individuals who are seen as “maximally representative of the shared identity and consensual position of the group” (Haslam, 2001, p. 61) as therein lies their “social attraction” (Hogg, 2001). But as the comparative context changes, notions of prototypicality and consequently of leadership attributions are set to change. To that extent leadership is of relative endurance and contingent upon the comparative social context. This, however, is markedly different from conventional contingency approaches which talk in more mechanistic terms of achieving ‘fit’ between leadership style and context.

The SIT perspective on leadership emphasises cognitive attribution processes but does not render leadership passive. This is captured in Haslam’s attempt to define leadership as “a process of mutual influence that centres around a partnership in a social self-categorical relationship” (Haslam, 2001, p. 85). As one might take issue with the notion of partnership – it ‘romanticises’ group interaction where traditional leadership models ‘romanticise’ the individual leader (Haslam et al., 2001) -, a more neutral conceptualisation of leadership might be to define it as a cognition-based function of group interaction and followership and leadership as interdependently associated. This recognises that leadership is not a passive outcome of attribution but actively influenced to the extent that individuals strive to best embody group prototypicality and exert influence from that position (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). The effectiveness of leadership from this perspective depends on the ability to express and translate into vision and collective action what constitutes the salient features of group identity. Leaders are effective leaders only to the extent that they are “entrepreneurs of [group] identity” (Haslam et al., 2001, p. 194). This ability confers leadership and is the source of (perceived) power, charisma and finally leadership effectiveness (Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), both in perceived and actual terms.

If we acknowledge that SIT approaches provide powerful explanatory insight into individual, group and leadership processes, we now need to turn to the question how such insights might assist in deepening our understanding of such processes in specific contexts such as HE leadership and management.

Managing and leading academics – the SIT perspective

SIT can be usefully applied to better our interpretation of work place phenomena, and this applies to the HE context in particular. SIT does, for instance, challenge the notion that inherent qualities of academic work hinder alignments between management and academe per se as it draws our attention to the cognitive base of social association, and to social comparison and comparative context in particular. As empirical data that examine SIT in the context of HE are outstanding, we refer to the predictive and explanatory utility of SIT in suggesting that the theory might usefully assist in addressing the following issues, questions and paradoxes:

1. SIT suggests that academics hold different notions regarding the attractiveness of management and leadership roles depending on the context in which they work. In HE institutions where traditional academic career paths are powerfully asserted by the academic community, for instance through RAE achievements, management and leadership roles can be expected to hold little attraction as academic roles offer greater salience. This allows for a reinterpretation of ‘reluctance’ or ‘unwillingness’ to assume management/leadership roles in much more positive and potentially constructive terms than the prevailing notions of ‘resistance’.

2. Equally SIT suggests that individuals differ in their readings of comparative contexts depending on the social mobility beliefs they may hold. A much more sophisticated understanding of why academics seek or accept management and leadership roles could thus be seen in better focus through an SIT lens as it allows for multiple social identities and shifts in salience. Academics, for instance, who are excluded from RAE submissions can be expected to undertake substantial revisions of their salient referent groups, and employ diverse social strategies to move on or out of previously held groups. Equally, academics in less research-orientated universities might hold different notions of in-group salience than those in research-driven institutions. Debates on management, leadership and manageability of academics can thus be moved beyond any essentialist notions of what constitutes academic work towards more context specific interpretations.

3. Academic leadership can be defined and developed in SIT terms and around notions of prototypicality. If leadership is redefined as a function of group processes and its effectiveness as a function of the relative extent to which an individual embodies the group prototype, who becomes an academic leader, and who and how s/he is selected, becomes an important issue. The problematic nature of leadership appointment is highlighted by Haslam (2001). Where leadership does not emerge out of group processes but is seen as imposed, leadership acceptance and consequently leadership effectiveness are likely to be affected. Equally, selecting the most prototypical group member as the leader might be neither advisable nor feasible where the divide between academic community and management is perceived to be particularly pronounced. Increased group orientated behaviour on the part of the group leader might increase group acceptance and leader effectiveness as perceived by the group (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). But this might be effectiveness in defending and protecting the academic community, not effectiveness as defined by management. Follower self-concept and social identity processes are seen as key mediators of leadership effectiveness and this must be recognised as a reality as universities aim to develop their academic leadership capability and capacity. Group endorsement is the precondition of trust, and this is the precondition of follower motivation and also of followers' willingness to change (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) and hence an essential dimension university managers need to address as they promote academic leadership.

4. SIT draws attention to the fact that group identification, group salience and hence the emergence of group leadership are only partly functions of subjective sense making efforts, and to a large part functions of broader societal structures, values and changes. This draws attention to the nexus between career, career socialisation and prototype formation. As long as management is seen as alien to the work of academics and academic leadership is conceived as alignment with corporate rather than academic or discipline goals, these domains are unlikely to form a constructive part of group salience and group prototype. It should therefore be in the joint interest of all stakeholders in HE to reflect on and remove conceptual barriers between the domains. SIT can provide powerful theoretical arguments here – but obviously not easy recipes for practice.

These observations provide an initial sketch of the questions an SIT based approach might address. The immediate conclusion we draw is that substantial empirical research is required to develop a fuller understanding of what motivates academics to engage with or disengage from management and leadership roles and opportunities.

Conclusions

Some research questions

Our argument in this paper has clear implications for HRD in terms of an emergent research agenda and will also have profound implications for HRD practice. We propose that an emergent research agenda in the field of HE management, leadership and leadership development should undertake to address the following eight broad questions:

1. What impact do the consequences of ongoing sector transformation have on academics' sense of social identity as academics?
2. How malleable or otherwise is the notion of 'academic identity' and what is its content in different contexts?
3. Do academics in different institutional contexts show different in-group preferences and different social identities, and different responses to change?
4. What other social identities do academics hold and what dynamics are displayed, and are identities related to ethnicity, age, or gender relevant too?
5. Have we overestimated the salience of academic group membership over that of other social identities?
6. Do academics in different institutional contexts interpret management and leadership roles and opportunities differently in terms of salience and social enhancement?
7. How can academic leadership as an emergent group process be understood, and once more are their differences, across disciplines, institutional contexts?
8. How can we relate perceived leadership effectiveness and actual leadership effectiveness measured in terms of desired outcomes?

Some implications for HRD practice

Based on a richer evidence basis the following implications for HRD practice can be formulated as a starting point for further dialogue:

1. Universalist management and leadership programmes framed around competence models and incorporating conventional content such as knowledge about structure and culture, change context, leadership competencies, communication, team building and other soft management tools remain useful but not sufficient as they locate leadership merely in the individual, but ignore the mediating effect of group processes.
2. If leadership is a function of group processes it must be acknowledged as such in the sector. HRD practitioners might reflect on practical levers they might generate out of insights from SIT based research.

Emerging research agenda

SIT significantly furthers understanding of how academics view management and leadership as roles they will assume at some stage in their careers.

From here we propose a research agenda that takes as its ultimate aim a contribution to enhanced practice. The emerging research agenda must take issue with a range of as yet unexplored questions around whether, and to what extent the salience of 'management' and 'leadership' can and should be increased as part of the academic professional identity. It needs also to determine how this would be achieved.

The socialisation of novice academics becomes a much more important focus of attention for research and HRD intervention than has hitherto been assumed. This raises a raft of issues concerning HR research around talent, careers and succession management. To address these issues, appropriate leadership is required. What such leadership involves in the context of academe requires much more research than is currently available.

It is our hope and expectation that this paper will generate considerable study, not only around the contesting theories of leadership but also the challenges posed by SIT as an emergent model of leadership. It is in the nature of emerging phenomena that we cannot draw hard and fast conclusions to the paper, but rather that we have identified what we regard as a set of important questions for research that we would like to see taken forward

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