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## Leadership, anxiety and the search for liminal space: a visual auto-ethnography

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## **Australian Caucus of the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (ACSCOS) Conference 2015**

**TITLE: Leadership, anxiety and the search for liminal space: a visual auto-ethnography.**

**AUTHOR:**

**Mike Lucas**

**Senior Lecturer in Management**

**Open University Business School**

### **Abstract**

Recent scholarship on leadership identities (Nyberg and Svenningsen, 2014; Ford, 2010; Svenning and Alvesson, 2003) views the process of identity construction, or the creation of a narrative self-image, as intrinsic to the practice of leadership. Some see this as part of the symbolic work required to establish and maintain leadership (Grint, 1999; Sims, 2010) while others view it more as a symptom of the narcissism engendered in the assumption of a leadership role (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). All recognise however the anxieties that underlie the process, assigning them in turn to: struggles over authenticity (Nyberg and Svenningsen, 2014); the expectations of followers and crisis addiction (Grint, 2010); dissonance between self-image and practice (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008); personal psychological history (Ford, 2010); and the absence of time or space for reflection (Simpson and French, 2006).

While recognizing these theoretical interests in the causes of leadership anxiety, this paper examines the lived experience of a manager in a leadership role (an Associate Dean in a University Business School), exploring the manifestation of anxiety in the adoption of a set of practices which are spatially enacted. The starting point for this is an understanding of leadership as situated practice which is both embodied (Fisher & Robbins, 2015) and aesthetic (Grint 1999; Sims, 2010). While recognizing the importance of debates about the discursive nature of leadership (Collinson, 2012), the paper challenges dominant textual discourses absorbed by practicing managers (Ford, 2008) which appear to constrain narrative identity construction, by exploring an embodied narrative of fragmented, mobile spatial experience

The method adopted for this exploration is a visual auto-ethnography (Watson, 2009), based on a selection of photographs, like the ones displayed below, all taken between 2009-2015. This draws in part on the long tradition of visual ethnography (Harper, 2003; Pinney, 2011) in sociology and anthropology, and in part on the work of Roland Barthes in examining the power of photography as a medium for self-examination and discourse construction. Some of the author's photographs were taken in the field as part of a previously reported ethnographic study (Lucas, 2014a), and some taken in the workplace with the aim of reflecting on spatial aspects of the author's own practices as a manager. They reveal an evolving auto-ethnographic story, which emerged at first as a story of 'nomadic journeying' (Lucas, 2014b), but is now becoming part of a more open, dialogic exploration, a search for liminal spaces – material, psychological, intellectual and social - which allow the discourses of leadership and anxiety to be articulated not simply as an individual narrative but as part of a spatial, organizational intertext (Schmitt, 2012).

The 'paper' will be presented as a carefully curated photographic slide show, juxtaposed with readings from the author's own notebook and from theorists of: leadership anxiety (mentioned above); space and the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Lefebvre, 1991; de Certeau, 1984; Massey, 2005, Küpers, 2011; Beyes and Steyaert, 2012); photography and identity

(Barthes, 1982; Harper, 2003); and liminality (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). The aim will be to offer a partial narrative which is spatially and visually performed, and which provokes dialogue, engaging watchers/listeners/participants in the ongoing construction of a critical understanding of leadership anxiety. The photo-presentation will last approximately 15 minutes and be organized into the following segments:-

## **Introduction**

The context of this paper is the 7 ½ years I have just spent as an Associate Dean in a University Business School and this was an attempt to both enact and articulate through research something of the embodied, affective experience it engendered. At the same time, the directions in which my research has taken me during that period has suggested particular lines of inquiry into the subject. My work with my colleague Alex Wright in (dialogically!?) theorizing aspects of practice as intertextual has provided rich intellectual nourishment, offering a development of my initial empirical work, which based as this piece is on auto-ethnography, I originally viewed as rooted in the phenomenology of aesthetics.

I was led to consider this particular piece by a combination some recent discussions about collaboration with a theatre practitioner interested (as they are!) in ritual symbolism and the related concepts of liminality, ongoing discussions with researchers and practitioners over the nature and future of photography, and a vague but nagging sense of personal anxiety over both my work as an AD and the future beyond a fixed term of office.

It is offered as a series of loosely connected fragments without a coherent narrative, but with a sense of cohesiveness which at the moment I am struggling to grasp. I hope this prompts a discussion – or at least the start of one - which helps me resolve the struggle. The photographic presentation comprises all my own 'data' taken between 2009 -2015, but the 'script' adopts the approach of verbatim theatre, where the script is made up of the past written work of others (barring one quote from my field notebook!). So the aim is that my 'voice' is deliberately subsumed in the photographic practice of the piece.

## Leadership anxiety in theory



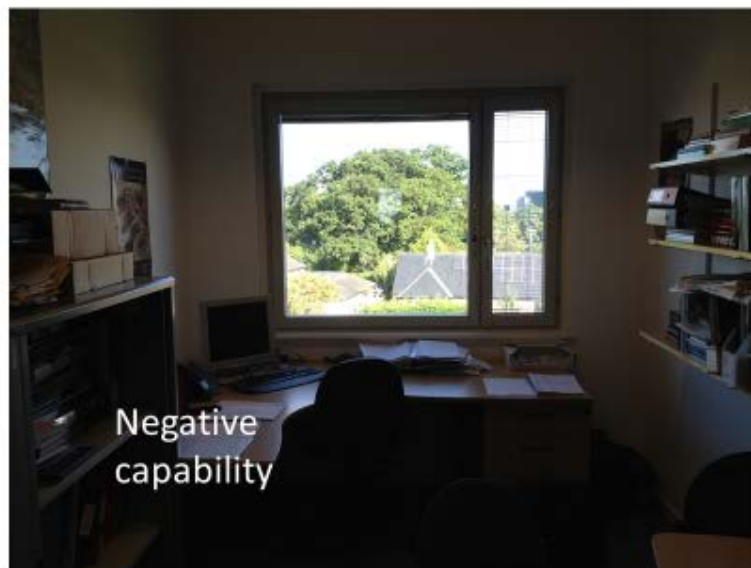
**Sveningsson, S. and Alvesson, M. (2003)** “Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle”. *Human Relations* 56 (10): 1163-1193

“In contemporary business life, in particular, social contexts are frequently portrayed as unstable, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory (Gioia et al., 2000; Jackall, 1988; Sennett, 1998; Watson, 1994). Even though turbulence and instability may sometimes be exaggerated, in many organizational and life situations, the elements of change, contradiction and fragmentations are salient and create reactions such as curiosity, anxiety and search for ways of actively dealing with identity.”

**Nyberg, D. and Svenningsen, S. (2014)** “Paradoxes of authentic leadership: leader identity struggles” *Leadership* 10(4): 437-455

“The identity work among the managers (studied) seems regulated by two somewhat contradictory discourses of leadership, both with identity appeals: the transformative approach with its emphasis on heroic abilities (that the managers regard themselves to have) and the post-heroic approach with its emphasis on recognition and participation (that they also want to express). This produces identity tensions and the struggle to maintain a coherent leader identity.”

“These tensions are expressed in ways that appear to indicate anxiety and perhaps even guilt. To overcome the anxiety and, at least temporarily, restore a coherent managerial identity and a valued sense of self, the managers employ different metaphors.”



**Simpson, P and French, R. (2006)** "Negative capability and the capacity to think in the present moment; some implications for leadership practice" *Leadership* 2(2): 245-255

"It may be misleading to try to separate the 'positive' pole of leadership, which we called above 'decisive action', from the patient and reflective pole, represented by the term negative capability. The more turbulent and uncertain the environment, the more the ability to produce results may depend precisely on a negative capability that allows us to tolerate ambiguity and to remain 'content with half knowledge'"

"The anxiety that tends to drive us all towards a desire for certainty – the need to have *an* answer at least, if not *the* answer – is likely to be particularly strong for those in leadership roles. Externally imposed changes are one thing, but anyone who initiates change also inevitably *stimulates* uncertainty."



## Narcissism

**Pullen, A. and Rhodes, C. (2008)** “It’s all about me!’: gendered narcissism and leaders’ identity work”. *Leadership* 4(1): 5-25

“Narcissism in organizations can be identified by the way it manifests in particular behaviours that seek to fuel and justify the narcissist’s self-obsession.

6. *Anxiety*: the experience of an ongoing difficulty in maintaining self-esteem accompanied by hyper-sensitivity to criticism, and persistent feelings of insecurity.”

“For Timothy it is important not only that he preserves his self-esteem, but also that he does so by having this reflected back through others opinions of him

### **Extract 3**

3.1 Sometimes when I’m at home and I think about the day I’ve had, I wonder why I do it all.

3.2 I also feel that I’m being watched and I need to manage this.

“Despite Alan projecting an image of being a successful and competent leader when he was interviewed formally, a different form of self-presentation manifested some days later.

### **Extract 3**

3.1 I was totally lost for four weeks . . . the change was absolutely astronomical. . . a massive change.

3.2 The change in role was totally different than I had imagined, it was an imaginary role . . . I haven’t had any managerial training, but I think I’m coping . . . it’s more comfortable now.”



**Grint, K. (2010)** "The cuckoo clock syndrome: addicted to command, allergic to leadership".  
European Management Journal 28: 306-313

"When leaders and managers make an error of judgement they are not usually forgiven their human frailties but dragged through the proverbial public streets on symbolic tumbrils. As [Durkheim](#) (1973) argued, many followers like to perceive their leaders as gods – omnipotent, omniscient, and flawed; so when the inevitable error occurs, those same followers that hailed the leader as a god can then have the satisfaction of watching the public execution of the leader who 'betrayed' their trust. The result is an abject fear of responsibility."

"We seem to have a problem with Nietzschean Anxiety over the determination of causation. In other words, when situations appear both threatening and ambiguous we seem to demand a clear causal agency; because if we cannot establish this agency then 'the problem' is potentially irresolvable."



**Ford, J. (2010).** “Studying leadership critically: a psycho-social lens on leadership identities”.  
Leadership 6(1): 47-65

“Managers are far from being free agents who enjoy the power and privileges of their positions, but people with complex identities that contain within them forms of coercion and control over the leadership self. The managers gave the impression of searching for a (highly elusive) sense of security and stability in their lives which seemed to be eluding them. This seemed to create considerable insecurity, tension and anxiety.”

“The managers’ *investments* in hegemonic discourses of leadership, career and public/private lives relates to an individual’s desires and anxieties (which may not be conscious or deliberate) which induce the specific positions they take up and the choice of accounts through which they depict themselves.”

“Many studies of leadership continue to construct a vision of an omnipotent, transcendental being of a leader, and this transcendental being has to be challenged: no one can be that person. Research accounts seem to lose the individual in their explorations and neglect to consider the impact on peoples’ senses of who they are and where they are going...What is striking is that the roles of leader appear to be inherently anxiety creating. This is in contradistinction to how leaders are perceived in the much academic and practitioner writing on leadership.”



## Movement, photography and spatial production



**Merleau-Ponty, M.** (1962) *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Abingdon: Routledge.

“the lived present holds a past and a future within its thickness. The phenomenon of movement merely displays temporal and spatial implications in a more striking way.”(1962: 321).

**Fisher, K. and Robbins, M.R.(2015)** “Embodied leadership: moving from leadership competences to leaderful practices”. *Leadership* 11(3): 281-299

“According to Merleau-Ponty, we live the world through our body; moreover, the body is not separate from the self. When two individuals meet, they are embodied consciousness that bring their own spatiality and temporality, which can then have an impact on both individual’s bodies and consciousness. Individuals thus come to live in their bodies structured by their social position in the world”(p.283)

“A phenomenology framework privileges the sentient nature of the body in this in situ context...How someone moves through a space, the noises they hear, the temperatures they feel, the clothes they wear, and the people they see all become constituting and important elements of analysis.”(p.283)

“An individual always moves through the world mediating physicality, structure, meaning, and individual experience in a larger collective body (Csordas, 1990, 1994; Wilson, 1988). Embodiment is thus both an “intersection of actors and actions” and a “process of consciousness enacted, felt, and made real in the body” (Lassiter, 2002: 140). As embodiment is experienced simultaneously on an individual level and is “negotiated in a larger community-centered dialogue” (Lassiter, 2002: 140), the boundaries between the individual and collective merge and the processual, relational, and situational nature of leadership is revealed.”(p.284)



**Küpers, W. (2011).** “Dancing on the limen - Embodied and Creative Inter-Places as Thresholds of Be(com)ing: Phenomenological Perspectives on Liminality and Transitional Spaces in Organisation and Leadership” *Tamara - Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry Special Issue on Liminality*. 9 (3-4):45-59

“Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the embodied subject helps us to investigate the relationship and negotiation of the material, the individual and social in relation to the given and production of space” (2011;47)

“Spacing and timing constitute the internal and external horizontal ground of moving, comprehending and communicating in the world of organizing. Importantly these processes implicate the whole sensorium of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. While sensual bodily experience co-constitutes transitional spaces, the existence (of) and movement through transitional spaces influences and impacts in turn on the body. Embodied transitional processes enable the person or groups concerned to reconcile and integrate dynamically the inner and outer world, to work through the tensions in the here and now, between the past, present and future”(2011:49)



**Beyes, T. & Steyaert, C. (2012)** "Spacing organization: Non-representational theory and performing organizational space." *Organization* 19(1): 45-61

Spacing is thus not understood in the sense of dissociation, of forcing distanced positions onto space, but of generative and overflowing movements that produce space.

To ground the concept of spacing we draw upon non-representational theorizing. Here 'the focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, pre-cognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions.'"(Lorimer, 2005: 84)"



**Lefebvre, H. (1991)** *The production of space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Malden, MA: Blackwell

“If space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production. The object of interest must be expected to shift from things in space to the actual production of space, but this formulation itself calls for much additional explanation. Both partial products located in space – that is things – and discourse on space can henceforth do no more than supply clues to and testimony about this productive process – a process which subsumes signifying processes without being reducible to them” (1991:36-37)

“That the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be interconnected, so that the subject, the individual member of a given social group may move from one to another without confusion – so much is a logical necessity. Whether they constitute a coherent whole is another matter. They probably only do so in favourable circumstances, when a common language, a consensus and a code can be established”(1991:40)

## Searching for liminal spaces? Researching leadership anxiety through photography



**Karp, T. (2013)** "Studying subtle acts of leadership" *Leadership* 9(1): 3-22

"The leaders did their everyday mundane work – things that some researchers would label management, and then suddenly a situation emerged – a situation where they felt they needed to take leadership, because they thought it was expected of them. The process dynamics changed, some kind of situational variables or resources were tilted in favour of or against the leader, and leadership was in some instances taken, sometimes lost... Some researchers refer to such experiences as *threshold situations*... In these situations, it was not the significance of the leadership act in itself, but the fact that it was done by somebody perceived as a formal or informal leader that gave it a symbolic, emotional and/or inspirational value beyond its everyday significance"



**Turner, V.W.** (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine.

“The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. As such their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (1969: 95)

“Existing for that brief few moments  
In ambiguous limbo,  
Moving and still  
Safe and dangerous  
Joyous and anxious, for a future  
Unfulfilled and uncertain”

(excerpt from ‘A liminal practice’, a personal poem in the author’s notebook 25/07/12)

## The limits of visual auto-ethnography



**Scarles, C.(2010)** “Where words fail, visuals ignite: opportunities for visual auto-ethnography in tourism research”. *Annals of Tourism Research* 37(4): 905-926

“Visual auto-ethnography exists as a fusion of visual elicitation and auto-ethnographic encounter: an opportunity for accessing and mobilising deeper, nuanced insights into the embodied performances, practices and processes...(It) recognises that we need to link our statements about what we study with statements about ourselves, for in reality, neither stands alone...Researchers become active agents: themselves engaging in a series of active doings as they experience the research environment first hand...Space therefore emerges to reflect upon the interacting nature of bodies as the researcher too becomes the subject of research.” (2010: 909)

“In merging subjective horizons, visual auto-ethnography offers pathways to realising the situatedness of the self, alongside others that encourages self-reflexivity and critical agency. It moves beyond representation and realist agenda that decontextualizes subjects and searches for singular truths, and realises opportunities for multiple selves that transform the authorial ‘I’ with the existential ‘we’.”



**Watson, C. (2009)** "Picturing Validity: Auto-ethnography and the Representation of the Self?" *Qualitative Inquiry* 15(3): 526-544

"Auto-ethnography transgresses the bounds of post-positivist social science, in the process becoming literally invalid.

The triumph of the post-positivist idea of validity is its cover of universality, its disingenuous naturalness, the ideological mask which convinces us of its essential truth. Kristeva (1980) refers to the epistemic location of a text as its ideologeme... The ideologeme of the valid research text is its materialization as "the world out there", truthfully represented in the capture and display of the object of research... We may attempt to construct transparent texts, wring out the genotext, iron out the semantic vibrations, but like any text, the research text is subject to the vicissitudes of différance. (Derrida, 1982)"

**Barthes, R. (1989)** *The Rustle of Language*. Hill & Wang: New York

"the *I* of the discourse can no longer be the site where the previously stored up person is innocently restored" (Barthes, 1989, p.17)

### **Where to from here? Discussion**

Consideration of themes, and research methods for ideas on how to take this forward

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