

African Leadership: Surfacing New Understandings through Leadership Development

Richard Bolden (contact author)

Lecturer

Centre for Leadership Studies

Xfi Building

University of Exeter

Exeter EX4 4ST

UK

Tel: +44 (0)1392 262579

Email: Richard.Bolden@exeter.ac.uk

and

Philip Kirk

Principal Lecturer

Department of Organisational Studies

Bristol Business School

University of the West of England

Bristol

UK

Philip.Kirk@uwe.ac.uk

Published in the *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, April 2009

Vol. 9(1): 69–86

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an account of meanings and connotations of 'African leadership' emerging from research with a cohort of participants on a Pan-African leadership development program. We begin by reviewing current approaches to leadership, and how they have been applied to the study of leadership and management across cultures, before introducing the notion of the 'African renaissance' which calls for a reengagement with indigenous knowledge and practices. The findings from our study indicate a tension between accounts and representations of leadership and the potential for leadership development to act as a forum in which participants can work through these issues. In developing an Afro-centric perspective on leadership, we propose that development activities that promote relational, critical and constructionist perspectives on leadership, with an emphasis on dialogue and sharing experience, could be an important means for surfacing new insights and understandings. In particular, they offer a mechanism by which participants can enhance their sense of 'self in community', generate shared understandings, challenge repressive power relations, and develop culturally appropriate forms of leadership behavior. We conclude by proposing that further research is required on leadership in Africa that steps outside dominant methodological and empirical paradigms, and argue that such work holds great potential for generating insights not just relevant to leadership in Africa but to leadership studies in general.

KEYWORDS

Africa, identity, indigenous knowledge, leadership, sensemaking, social construction, ubuntu

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the case of a Pan-African leadership development program that served as a forum for the surfacing and exploration of new understandings of 'African leadership'. Through examination of this initiative, we seek to reveal how leadership development activities such as this can be seen, not only as a means for transferring existing knowledge, but as a space in which participants can explore, evaluate and experience alternative conceptions of leadership and, through this, contribute towards the development of more culturally sensitive and personally relevant perspectives for themselves and their communities. In so doing, we reveal insights for leadership research and theory pertinent not only to Africa but that may also have significant implications for leadership practice elsewhere.

Leadership: a contested concept

Despite the current level of interest in leadership it remains an elusive and contested concept on which general agreement is highly unlikely (Grint, 2005). Amongst the many perspectives on this topic four broad categories of theory can be identified, as described below.

1. *Essentialist* theories take a broadly objectivist perspective on leadership whereby it is presented in a rather unproblematic way as something done by 'leaders' to 'followers'. The trait and behavioral models dominant until the 1970s (e.g. Blake and Mouton, 1964; Stogdill, 1974) typify this approach, as do subsequent situational and contingency perspectives (e.g. Fiedler, 1967; Hersey and Blanchard, 1977) and, to a considerable extent, 'transformational' leadership (e.g. Bass, 1985). In each case, good leadership is represented as either residing in the personal qualities of the leader, the behaviors they enact and/or the functions they perform. Without doubt this remains the most prevalent approach to leadership in organizations and fuels research that aims to identify what constitutes an effective leader and what they do, in order to inform leader selection, appraisal and development.
2. *Relational* theories take a somewhat different stance, arguing that leadership resides not within leaders themselves but in their relationship with others. In a review of this literature Uhl-Bien (2006: 668) defines leadership as "a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (i.e. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced". From this perspective leadership is no longer regarded as an attribute of individuals but "is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group" (Gibb, 1954, cited in Gronn 2000: 324). It calls for recognition of the emergent nature of leadership processes and the distributed nature of expertise and influence (Bennet et al., 2003). Research and development within this paradigm aims to bring about a more inclusive approach to leadership that recognizes the contribution of a wide range of actors as well as contextual and systemic factors in shaping leadership practice (Bolden et al., 2008).
3. *Critical* theories take a more skeptical perspective on leadership by exposing the underlying dynamics of power and politics within organizations. Gemill and Oakley (1992), for example, describe leadership as "an alienating social myth" that is used to maintain status relationships and legitimise the unequal distribution of power and resources. From this perspective a search for the essence of leadership is misguided - whilst accounts of leadership may abound they are more likely to be the product of wider social and psychological processes than evidence of the existence of leadership

per se. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003: 359), for example, propose that “thinking about leadership needs to take seriously the possibility of the non-existence of leadership as a distinct phenomena”. The primary concern of research from this perspective is how workers can liberate themselves from discourses of control and dependency and how alternative narratives can be surfaced.

4. Finally, a *constructionist* perspective draws attention to the manner in which the notion of ‘leadership’ is utilized to construct shared meanings that enable people to make sense of their predicament (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006). In this view an ontological debate as to whether or not leadership exists is sterile – through invocation alone, narratives of leadership affect how social systems operate and, as a result, the lives of people within them. From this perspective, leadership is fundamentally regarded as a process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Pye, 2005) and leadership development as a means by which participants can reframe their understandings (Fairhurst, 2005; Foldy et al., 2008).

Undoubtedly these categorizations are overly simplistic, with substantial areas of overlap (particularly between the latter three each of which takes a broadly interpretivist perspective), yet they highlight the significant challenges of defining leadership and, consequently, of highlighting cross-cultural differences.

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Leadership and Management

As a field of enquiry cross cultural and international management, like leadership studies, remains dominated by essentialist perspectives, “characterized by realist ontologies, positivistic epistemologies, and nomothetic methodologies” (Staber, 2006: 191). The work of Hofstede (1980a) and GLOBE (House et al., 2004) are prime examples of this approach, each of which reports empirical evidence comparing different societies against a range of cultural indices.

Hofstede proposed that “many of the differences in employee motivation, management styles, and organizational structures of companies throughout the world can be traced to differences in the collective mental programming of people in different national cultures” (Hofstede, 1980b, 42). His research used a predominantly quantitative approach to record the value orientations of participants from different countries across a number of dimensions (*power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism/collectivism* and *masculinity/femininity*), resulting in a country profile that could be used to determine appropriate management and leadership styles. Whilst the GLOBE researchers (and others) took issue with Hofstede’s sampling and analysis procedures (e.g. Sivakumar and Nakata, 2001; Javidan et al., 2006) their approach can be considered as comparable and, indeed, broadly utilized the same cultural dimensions, along with *long- versus short-term orientation* (Hofstede, 2001), *humane orientation* and *assertiveness* (House et al., 2004).

Whilst these studies constitute a substantial evidence basis for understanding cross-cultural leadership and management, through promoting a largely psychological approach, based upon the quantification of cultural values, they may inadvertently reinforce a rather functionalist approach that underestimates individual and contextual differences and imposes Western-frameworks of analysis (Graen, 2006; Scandura and Dorfman, 2004). The dimensionalization of national culture, however, is not the only or necessarily most productive approach to understanding cultural differences. As Tayeb (2001: 93) argues “by putting culture into neat, sometimes unconnected, little boxes we are in danger of losing sight

of the big picture”. The relatively static nature of such scales largely neglects the fluctuating, multi-layered and sometimes paradoxical nature of culture whereby, for example, individualistic nations such as the UK and Germany demonstrate collectivism under certain circumstances and collectivist cultures, such as China, demonstrate individualism under others. If, indeed, dimensions such as those identified by Hofstede et al. do exist then perhaps they should be considered as a dualism rather than a unitary scale (Lowe, 2001; Fang, 1998) - as with the co-existence of 'yin' and 'yang' in Chinese philosophy.

By reducing the study of leadership across cultures to comparison of cultural value indices we run a very real risk of oversimplifying cultural variations and neglecting other significant factors such as the influence of history, geography, demographics, religion, and individual differences. Even where relationships have been identified between cultural values and leadership preferences (e.g. Zagoršek, 2004; Ergeneli et al., 2007) the effect is invariably small and somewhat partial: insufficient to predict or explain likely leadership behaviors or outcomes.

Instead, perhaps, more attention could be given to illuminating the rich fabric of influences that shape leadership experiences in an endeavor to enhance *understanding* rather than explanation and/or prescription. A real risk within all cross-cultural work is of imposing Western perspectives that represent the ‘other’ as mysterious, threatening and/or deficient (Westwood, 2001; Jackson, 2004; Weir, 2005). As a fundamentally Anglo-Saxon concept that “helps Americans find significance in their search for the meaning of life” (Rost, 1991:7) the discourse of leadership is particularly problematic - especially if a ‘convergence’ thesis (Kerr et al., 1960) is applied that implies progression towards Western ways of thinking. Such an approach to leadership and management theory is not only pejorative it also inhibits more constructive theorizing and conceptual development (Jackson, 2004).

Leadership in Africa

The current paper is concerned particularly with leadership in sub-Saharan Africa and so will now turn its attention to this context. Empirical data on the nature of leadership in this region is fairly limited. The GLOBE study presents just one page on sub-Saharan Africa in its book of studies (Chhokar et al., 2007) and limited findings in its analysis of empirical data (House et al., 2004). Within this study, data were collected in Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa (Black sample), Zambia and Zimbabwe. Findings indicated high ratings against the ‘humane orientation’ value dimension and mid-range scores across all eight other scales. On leadership styles, a preference was shown for charismatic/value based, team orientated, participative and humane approaches although, perhaps with the exception of the last, this is no different from profiles across much of the rest of the World

Hofstede’s data on this region is divided into three areas: West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone), East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia) and South Africa (see www.geert-hofstede.com). Similar cultural value profiles are demonstrated for both the West and East African samples (although with a greater deviation from the mid-range for West Africa), with a relatively high score for ‘power distance’, low scores for ‘individualism’ and ‘long-term orientation’ and mid-range scores for ‘masculinity’ and ‘uncertainty avoidance’. South Africa demonstrates a rather different profile, with moderate ‘power distance’ and ‘uncertainty avoidance’ and high ‘individualism’ and ‘masculinity’ although it is possible that these findings are skewed by a mixed race sample (White and Black samples giving quite different profiles in the GLOBE study).

Together these findings give a very crude indication of cultural preferences within these regions but offer little insight into how people come to conceive of, and take up, a leadership role, or the impacts of this on society. A richer account is given by Blunt and Jones (1997) yet, whilst these authors argue for a distinctively African approach, they paint a rather negative and generalized picture where leadership and management is influenced by highly centralized power structures, high degrees of uncertainty, an emphasis on control mechanisms rather than organizational performance, bureaucratic resistance to change, acute resource scarcity, individual concern for basic security, and the importance of extended family and kin networks. The resultant leadership style tends to be authoritarian/paternalistic, bureaucratic, centralized, conservative, change resistant and reluctant to deal with issues of performance (ibid: 19).

A rather similar image is conjured up by Harvey (2002) who likens the development of Human Resource Management (HRM) in Africa to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland - a rather bewildering pursuit that "holds many surprises for Western HRM, not only in the form of the alien nature of the 'rules, regulations and laws' of many African nations but also in the extent to which many African organizations/employees ignore or bend the rules" (ibid:1119). The concern of this enquiry, as many Western studies of leadership in Africa, is to "provide the basis for making 'informed' HRM decisions by Western managers in an African context" (ibid: 1119), thereby side-stepping the concern that the very notion of HRM is inherently Anglo-centric and may not translate meaningfully to other contexts (Tayeb, 2000).

Much existing empirical work on leadership in Africa, therefore, appears to be motivated through a desire to provide Western managers with a better understanding of how to do business in Africa, rather than to assist African managers, organizations and communities appreciate, develop and/or enhance their own approaches. One clear exception is the work of Jackson (2004) who, through collaborative research in a number of African nations, has demonstrated that African managers tend to be highly skilled in many aspects of management and leadership, in particular dealing with cultural diversity and multiple stakeholders and enacting 'humanistic' management practices. In outlining the differences between Western and African approaches to management he introduces the notion of 'locus of human value' which contrasts "an *instrumental* view of people in organizations which [perceives] people as a means to an end, and a *humanistic* view of people which sees people as having a value in their own right" (ibid: 26). For Jackson the 'instrumental-humanist' distinction maps closely to Western and African management styles, whilst avoiding many of the pitfalls of a 'developing-developed' world typology or the excessive simplicity of the 'individual-collective' model.

For Jackson (2004: 28-29), key values that shape leadership and management in sub-Saharan Africa include sharing, deference to rank, sanctity of commitment, regard for compromise and consensus, and good social and personal relations. Furthermore, he highlights the 'hybrid' nature of management and leadership practice in Africa – shaped through a complex and multi-layered social, cultural and historical context:

"Africa's history, even before the slave trade, is one of cross-cultural interaction and often antagonistic dynamics (...), normally within systems of power relations (...). Modern organizations in Africa still contain these diverse cultural elements: ideas and practices as well as people. Not only is an understanding of these dynamics necessary, but also a reconciling, integrating and synergizing of disparities contained

within dynamics are essential to management and organization development efforts in Africa.” (Jackson, 2004: 3)

Hybridity in this context is not regarded as aping Western practices or attempting a return to idealized notions of ‘traditional’ leadership but, rather offers a means for adaptation and change. As Westwood (2001: 274-275) remarks when citing the work of Bhabha (1995) “hybridity has a positive element since the colonized is partly appropriating the colonizer. In mimicry there is no direct correspondence, no perfect reproduction, the hybrid is, just that, it remains different... [and as such], it slips away, attains its autonomy and comes back to confront and challenge the dominant party.”

Within Africa itself recent years have seen a call for an “African Renaissance”, whereby Africans are urged to liberate themselves from colonial and post-colonial thinking and to re-engage with an African value system (Mulemfo, 2000; Ntibagirirwa, 2003). These ideas have found resonance across the continent and have subsequently been applied to business and community leadership (e.g. Mbigi, 2000; 2005), with educational reform a fundamental pillar (Obiakor, 2005).

For some, this shift to a more Afro-centric view of leadership requires the rejection of many aspects of “Western culture with its narrow, arrogant, empty, materialistic values of hamburger and cocaine” (Mbigi, 2005: v) and a reconnection with African “indigenous knowledge” with its emphasis on solidarity and interdependence. Such an aspiration, however, is interesting in the light of the hybridity argument and raises serious questions as to (a) how this Afro-centric knowledge can be (re)discovered, (b) how it can be captured and conveyed and, (c) the extent to which it will resonate with the lived experience of modern Africans across and beyond the continent.

With these questions in mind, we will now move to the empirical part of this paper where we attempt to present how, through the process of leadership development, it may be possible to surface such insights in a manner that is both contextually sensitive whilst also fostering a sense of engagement with a wider process of change.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The empirical research for this paper was conducted within the context of the first cohort of ‘InterAction’, a major leadership development initiative funded by the British Council and delivered to 300 participants across 19 sub-Saharan countries. The program was heavily informed by the principles of ‘appreciative inquiry’ (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) and ‘systems theory’ (Senge, 1990) and had as its focus transformational change at a personal, community, national and sub-continent level. It was founded on relational and constructionist perspectives on leadership, with an emphasis on challenging embedded assumptions, growing collective capacity and developing a sense of shared African and community identity. Program literature described it as “a high profile British Council initiative that will support emerging African leaders as they face up to the challenges of the 21st century. It is aimed at supporting those dynamic individuals who are innovating, searching for alternatives and challenging accepted relationships and ways of doing things” (British Council, 2005: 10-11).

The program was delivered by a network of African facilitators led by a small UK-based consultancy organization with extensive African experience, and founded on a framework of principles and values developed from consultation within Africa and across partner

organizations. Recruitment of participants and the coordination of events were dealt with by British Council offices within the participating African nations. The program itself comprised a series of elements including an in-country application and selection process, in-country launch, pan-African event (three three-day conferences each attended by 100 participants from across all the countries), and the in-country program (comprising three modules totaling 10 days over a period of 6-9 months). A key feature of the in-country program was a “community engagement” where groups of 4-5 participants spent a number of days visiting local community groups to see how they could share and disseminate the ideas raised during the program. This engagement activity occurred during and after Module 2, with preparation in Module 1 and follow-up (including a visit and feedback from community members) in Module 3. The program concluded with one-to-one feedback and the preparation of personal and group action plans.

RESEARCH METHOD

Following a period of consultation with the British Council and delivery agents the authors and one additional colleague were recruited to explore the impact of the first cohort of this program. As an independent research partner, our intention was to gain insights into the mechanisms and processes by which this initiative built upon and challenged traditional conceptions of leadership in Africa and facilitated engagement with beneficial social change. A guiding principle of the research was to ‘give voice’ (Renard and Eastwood, 2003) to the participants’ changing understandings of leadership and the implications for their own leadership practice.

The research took an action inquiry approach that sought to invite participants to act as co-inquirers into the meanings they were attaching to the notion of leadership and how they enacted these meanings, as leaders, to bring about change within their communities. It was founded upon a set of guiding principles that were consistent with the overall ethos of the program but still enabled an independent and critical engagement with the data.

The study was designed to draw on a range of data that would enable an inductive understanding of the manner in which the InterAction program facilitated new ways of thinking about leadership. The main elements of this process are outlined briefly below:

1. *Stakeholder conversations and documentary analysis*: the study began with detailed conversations with members of the delivery team and sponsoring organization to gain an understanding of the program rationale and approach. This was supported through analysis of documentary evidence including participant and facilitator handbooks, the program website and promotional materials.
2. *Participant observation*: the researchers attended a number of aspects of the program, including a Pan African Event in Kenya and in-country modules (1&3) in Uganda and Ghana respectively, as well as a program design workshop in the UK. Throughout these activities the researchers engaged as active participants whilst making clear their distinct research role. Detailed field notes were compiled to record observations and shared and discussed with other members of the research team on a regular basis.
3. *Small group interviews*: during the modules in Uganda and Ghana researchers took the opportunity of conducting small-group interviews (two at each, with 6-8 participants) to explore issues of leadership, identity and program impact amongst participants. These were recorded and later transcribed. Informal one-to-one conversations were also held with participants whenever possible.

4. *Online questionnaire*: mid-way through the program a short qualitative web-based survey was circulated to the whole cohort of 300 participants inviting their views on leadership and examples of program impact. 72 responses were received, the demographic profile of which was broadly representative of the overall cohort, with 60% of respondents male and 40% female; the majority (49%) aged in their 30's, with 24% in their 20's and 27% 40 or over; and responses from 16 countries, with the highest response from Nigeria (21 responses) and lowest in Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe (1 response each). Job roles and occupations varied widely, from students to community workers, bankers, lawyers, healthcare professionals, project managers and engineers. The data was manually coded (as indicated in the results) and used as a rich source of quotes.
5. *Follow-up interviews*: 1-2 months following completion of the program a series of one-to-one face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants in Tanzania (15 interviews) and Zambia (12 interviews). Interviewees were selected to offer a cross-section of participants and each interview was recorded and transcribed.
6. *Community visits*: a key element of the program (during Module 2) was the 'community engagements' where participants engaged with local communities to share their learning and insights. To judge the impact of these engagements for the communities themselves a series of follow-up visits were organized by members of the research team: 3 in Tanzania and 3 in Zambia, supplemented by feedback conversations with 4 communities in Ghana. In each case detailed field notes were taken and interviews conducted with key members of the communities.

This rich and diverse body of data called for a variety of analysis methods. The primary mechanism however was an inductive approach whereby the researchers immersed themselves in the observations and narrative accounts in order to draw out key themes and issues. Thematic analysis of the survey and interview data was used to support and/or challenge preliminary interpretations. Throughout the analysis process we remained mindful that thoughts about leadership drawn from personal experience seldom come preformed but rather that they emerge from and through conversations, in the telling of stories, and hence regarded the data collection process as one of active social construction (Czarniawska, 2003).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

As indicated above a diverse array of research findings were gathered for this study. In this section of the paper we present the main issues relating to the emerging understandings of leadership in Africa that were surfaced through the leadership development and associated research process. These findings are outlined under two headings: (1) connotations and (2) meanings of African leadership. In each case we noticed multiple and often competing conceptions, constructed through learning and experience, layered one upon the other.

Connotations of African Leadership

As indicated in the introduction, given the vastness of the continent and the immense national, tribal, ethnic and religious diversity it could be argued that the term "African Leadership" may be too broad in its ontological status to say anything much about "leadership", let alone any sense of a distinctively "African" leadership. Despite this we did find that, for the participants engaged in this program, the term evoked some strong reactions.

For about half of respondents to the question "Does the term 'African Leadership' have any distinctive characteristics for you?" in the online survey the concept of "African leadership" provoked a predominantly positive reaction. 30% of respondents cited a sense of pride about

what Africa is, what Africans have done, and what they can do as leaders; whilst a further 17% reported a shifting sense whereby a leadership previously associated with negative images was giving way to a more inspiring and optimistic future as the following quote indicates.

“Africa is part of the world, and the new wind of leadership that is democratic encourages participation and guarantees the rights and freedoms of its citizenry has become the order of the day. The days where African leadership was a replete of abuse of power are fast giving way to a more participatory process where every citizen has a stake in how the state is governed.” (Male, Development Worker, Ghana, age 25-29)

For another 30% of respondents the term “African Leadership” remained associated with predominantly negative connotations. For these people, the concept was closely associated with political and corporate leadership in the form of power-hungry and corrupt leaders who had used their positions for personal gain. For them, the acknowledgement of past problems was important but did not necessarily preclude a more positive future.

The remainder of respondents (25%) were either relatively neutral, seeing leadership in Africa as no different from elsewhere, or just different by nature of its context. As one person succinctly put it:

“Leadership is generic; it only has to be applied in context.” (Male, Lecturer, Ghana, age 40-44)

In just one case was the question itself considered inappropriate and “African leadership” perceived as holding discriminatory undertones.

“This term makes me wonder why we are trying to classify leadership in the context of Africa. Why do we not talk of European, America, Chinese leadership? Why African Leadership? What are the assumptions that inform this question? This is what we should interrogate. We should not talk of African leadership but Leadership in Africa. For me the term African Leadership connotes some form of racial/continental discrimination. Africa is a land of great leaders that compare at par with any in any part of the world, so for me they are just leaders.” (Female, Project Director, Nigeria, age 40-44)

Whatever the perspective, however, one thing that emerges is that the notion of “African Leadership” is frequently emotive - it may cause people to be rightly wary of the exercise of leadership that is autocratic, self-serving and disconnected from the communities it serves, but it also carries the promise of a more positive future, where leadership is inclusive and drives beneficial social change. For most respondents there is a tension between past experiences and future aspirations yet the “African” nature of leadership is inspirational in that it connects them to a shared sense of identity and collective endeavor as the following quote indicates:

“Since our gathering in Abuja my perception about Africa has shifted. I am more concerned about African cultures and the place it holds in world political landscape. So African leadership does mean for me creating opportunities for its people chances

to improve their lives and defending African interests at any place and time.” (Male, Communication Officer, Ethiopia, age 35-39)

From an ontological perspective this is an interesting observation in that whether or not there is such a thing as “African leadership” the concept itself is clearly powerful in eliciting a response and in bringing certain aspects of identity to the fore. A more geographically located statement like “leadership in Africa” is certainly more neutral but may be less effective in mobilizing collective action. The implications of these observations are considered later in this paper.

Meanings of African Leadership

When going beyond the immediate connotations of “African leadership” to consider how it is understood by participants and how this program may help facilitate the emergence of a more congruent and integrated perspective two principle themes emerge from our analysis and interpretation of the data: (a) working with the tensions of multiple leadership images, and (b) constructing new identities as leaders.

(a) Working with the tensions of multiple leadership images

As anticipated, we found that multiple concepts and experiences of leadership were frequently held by the same individual(s) and co-existed with varying degrees of comfort. These competing accounts appeared to be shaped from a variety of sources and influenced a person’s willingness and capacity to take up a leadership role. In particular, traditional views of age and gender, informed by cultural and religious norms, could be seen as barriers to an active engagement in leadership as indicated in the following quote.

“I live in a society where masculinity has a negative influence on leadership. The household leadership is a typical example. As a daughter of a polygamous family, my father always made decisions for the family without the input of any of his wives. It is believed that, a man has to be weak to allow his wife/wives to make decisions, even in situations where our father had little or no knowledge of the situation. Such an inferiority complex among our mothers had made it difficult for them to make meaningful contributions even in vital community activities. I think this has been a major challenge especially when I look back and see how our lives could have been much better if only our mother/s had been part of the decision making process of our rearing. Education has not changed that philosophy that much. As a woman, I am sure that the more educated I become, the more likely I am to be placed in a leadership position, and the less likely I am to get a husband, because men frown at the notion of women having too much leverage in decision making. Thus the need to acquire subtle education just modest enough to have a job, with a deep caution of not been more educated than your potential husband. Hence we are caught within this edge. I am sure that, liberation for women in Africa, is not only unlimited access to education, but removing the stigma, so that education becomes empowering not only for a job and elevation in the formal society, but at the same time in our personal lives.” (Female, Receptionist, Sierra Leone, age 25-29)

For the individuals involved in our study, understanding leadership and their role as leaders has involved forging a path through these competing influences to find an authentic and meaningful leadership voice. This is not an individual pursuit but one that is acted out within the community and which only makes sense within that context. It requires working through

the tension between personal and social values and finding ways of challenging outdated perceptions from one’s own position within the system.

Through life experience as well as the leadership program participants have come to an emerging clarity about the nature of leadership. Interestingly, this seems to have come more often out of a process of rejecting or challenging previous negative experiences rather than embracing new or imported concepts. Life experience has, at different stages, added new layers of meaning about leadership, whilst leadership development has largely been about unlearning, working out which of these images are helpful and which should be discarded. The learning process was rather like peeling away layers of the onion - frequently revealed through participants’ expressions of what leadership is ‘not’. In this way it seems that the emerging view of leadership is grounded in the realities of their experiences, whilst offering a more positive, inclusive and generative perspective. Table 1 provides a synopsis of this shift as captured through our interview and survey data in response the question “since applying to join the InterAction Program has your understanding of the term ‘leadership’ changed in any way?”

FROM Leadership is.....	TO Leadership is.....
Intimidating and inaccessible Beyond my capability	Desirable and achievable Possible within the capacities I have and what I have learnt on this program
Exclusive (for men, elders, the select few)	Inclusive (for women, young people, everyone)
Distant/aloof For senior people in politics & organizations	In touch with local concerns For everyone in all communities
About being the best For personal gain	About being engaged For the benefit of the community
About heroic/charismatic individuals Exercising personal power	About groups of people working together Mobilizing action within the community
Influencing from a position of hierarchical authority About dictating	Influencing from wherever you are in the system About connecting
About maintaining order and control	About embracing chaos and uncertainty to let new things emerge
Individualistic Based on who and what you know (elitism)	Collective and interconnected Based on who and what you are (authenticity)
About making decisions and setting rules About the problems we currently face	About stimulating a dialogue About creating a more positive future

Table 1 – Changing perceptions and meanings of leadership

Without doubt this change in perspective is partly informed by the image of leadership espoused through the InterAction program but it is expressed in terms of engaging with deeply held personal and cultural values and a clear sense of ones place in community as the following quotes indicate:

“Christianity has made considerable impact on my life. This program has helped reinforce things I always believed but probably couldn’t articulate well enough to pass on to others.” (Female, Manager, Nigeria, age 35-39)

“I have come to realize that leadership is not only a call to serve but a call to nature, humanity for that matter - that as human beings we all need to get involved and make the lives of our fellow human beings more tolerable if not better.” (Male, Youth Activist, Kenya, age 20-24)

“There is a lot more to African Leadership than the general term "leadership". Africans lead with passion not with only actions, Africans are born leaders we are not influenced by education or books that we read, no it is from within ourselves education is just adding on what we have, we have great stories on leadership, above all we have one thing no one can take away from us that is the spirit of "ubuntu" humility and forgiveness.” (Female, manager, South Africa, age 30-34)

(b) Constructing new identities as leaders

Establishing new working meanings about the notion of leadership has enabled the participants in this study to (re)construct their identities as leaders and to find ways of mobilizing this into action.

“Leadership I have come to realize and understand has nothing to do with the office you occupy. Leadership essentially has to do with your ability to influence, inspire and motivate others. Whatever level of influence you exercise is leadership in action. Leadership is therefore creating an environment for yourself and others to take the lead. As a leader I am beginning to work in such a way that my behavior aligns with my principles. I am constantly reminding myself of the fact that I need not be at the forefront, but if by my behavior and actions I'm able to influence and enable others to be their best then to me that is leadership. It means obvious and whole hearted commitment to helping followers.” (Female, Lawyer, Nigeria, age 30-34)

Within these reconstructed views of leadership a number of common themes can be identified, including:

- (1) *Anyone can be a leader*: e.g. “I previously thought of leadership as political, e.g. the President. Now I see everyone is a leader, mother, father, etc. even if they don't necessarily know it ... you can do it at any level” (Female, Customer Sales Manager, Zambia, age 40-44).
- (2) *Leadership begins with self awareness*: e.g. “So I came to see first you can be a leader anywhere and everyone can be a leader because everyone has some areas of competence. And second once you understand yourself and know you have certain capacities of leadership and you can't have all of them, you can walk anywhere, you can lead anywhere, anytime, it's just a question of getting to know what kind of tools you can use at what time: you need to understand yourself” (Male, Political Science Student and Community worker, Tanzania, age 25-29)
- (3) *Leadership is relational*: e.g. “I have noticed that you can never think you are settled as a leader. You have to go back to listen to the community, to analyze, to ask them what they want you to do for them, not what you want to do for them” (Female, Artist and Assistant University Lecturer, Tanzania, age 25-29).

- (4) *Leadership is for the service of the community*: e.g. “I can see that my own role is to make positive changes in my community with the purpose to contribute for the positive changes in all my country.” (Female, Administration Manager, Mozambique, age 30-34)

For these participants the recognition of their capacity for leadership, no matter where they are in the social system, is both empowering but also a serious commitment. Once they have internalized these beliefs, leadership becomes a moral obligation, a duty enacted for the benefit of their community.

DISCUSSION

Though the findings outlined above we have indicated how the concept of “African leadership” holds multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings and connotations and how engagement in a leadership development process can facilitate a realignment of these. In this section of the paper we will consider the implications of these insights for understanding and researching leadership in sub-Saharan Africa.

Implications for Understanding Leadership in Africa

As indicated in the introduction to this paper, Africa is witnessing a resurgence of interest in leadership rooted in indigenous values yet much of the empirical research in this context has been conducted by Western researchers, through Western paradigms, for consumption by Western audiences. Whilst we, the authors, can not claim to buck this trend, through a more inductive appreciation of what Africans themselves say about leadership we believe that a richer and more contextually sensitive account is possible.

The findings presented in this paper clearly support the notion that Africans aspire for leadership founded on humanistic principles, and a desire for more inclusive and participative forms of leadership that value individual differences, authenticity and serving the community. Beyond that, however, lie a number tensions that may inhibit the ability and willingness of people to take up a leadership role. Undoubtedly similar tensions are experienced by aspiring leaders in other contexts (Collinson, 2005) yet the nature of these tensions and how they are resolved is likely to differ between contexts and cultures.

Within the African context, experience of dysfunctional and corrupt political and business leadership both during and post colonization clearly influences the way people think about leadership and their desire to be seen as a ‘leader’. The influence of differing religious beliefs and associated practices is also a significant factor and varies widely across and between countries. Gender and age relations are also important, as are family and community relationships. In the accounts surfaced through this research there was evidence of a sense of change and a tension between past experiences and future aspirations for leadership. In this context the InterAction leadership program offered a forum in which participants could work through these competing accounts to create a more integrated sense of meaning and identity.

Participants appeared to be looking to embrace a view of leadership that enabled a balance to be struck between concepts, practices and experience. Thus for example, in considering their own role as ‘leader’, participants felt a need to relate this to the communities in which they acted. In endeavoring to capture this notion as researchers we found ourselves drawn to relational theories of identity (e.g. Gergen, 1999) and the notion of “self in community”. This representation of the self as only discernable in relation to the social worlds in which we operate appears quite distinct from traditional Western representations of individuality (the

“Cartesian split”) yet nor is it “an oppressive collectivism or communalism” (Louw, 2002:10). The African notion most closely associated with this (and mentioned a number of times during our research) is “ubuntu” - a highly humanistic concept of interdependence that “dictates that, if we [are] to be human, we need to recognize the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens” (ibid: 8). It offers a powerful frame for sensemaking capable of holding the paradox of individual and community in dynamic and interdependent tension.

The concept of ubuntu also offers a means for integrating spiritual beliefs whilst acknowledging a diversity of religious practices. Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s “theology of ubuntu” (Battle, 1997) is a particularly good example of this and has been put to powerful effect in the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa.

Thus, whilst we agree with Dorfman et al.’s (2006: 242) conclusion that “effective leadership processes must reflect the culture in which they are found” our findings point towards a more dynamic engagement than that indicated within more traditional cross-cultural management and leadership literature. Not only do appropriate models and ways of thinking need to be developed and presented but, ideally they should be couched within culturally relevant language and concepts. Clearly such understandings are highly context specific in ways that might inhibit critical engagement with alternative perspectives derived from other contexts yet, via a program such as InterAction, it has been demonstrated that through collective and emergent dialogue new models and examples may surface.

Implications for Leadership Theory, Research and Development

The findings from this study support a non-essentialist perspective on leadership. Attempting to isolate key leadership attributes in such a context, with a high perceived level of interdependence and respect for diversity, seems unrealistic and unlikely to inspire the kind of leadership sought by the Africans who participated in our enquiry. Instead, this research points towards the utility of applying alternative theoretical lenses such as the relational, critical and constructionist approaches outlined in the introduction.

The *relational* view of leadership relates well to the collectivist and humanist values expressed in this study and may provide a welcome alternative to more ‘heroic’ and individualistic accounts. What’s more, however, is that research within Africa may well offer important theoretical contributions to such perspectives. The notion of ubuntu, for example, offers a powerful frame of reference and a way of talking about the interdependence of social actors that bridges the ‘individual’ and the ‘collective’. Desmond Tutu has referred to ubuntu as “part of the gift that Africa will give the world” (cited in Mulemfo, 2000: 57) and Western audiences are beginning to pick up on the concept (for example Bill Clinton advocated its use in his address to the UK Labour Party Conference (BBC News, 2006)). In sharing knowledge and insights from such perspectives, however, it is important that Africans play a significant role in sharing and researching such concepts so that they do not simply become appropriated by the West for their own ends. A relational approach to leadership development would focus on establishing networks and relationships, the opportunity to experience and reflect on different roles, and the development of ‘social capital’ (Day, 2000). By expanding the relationships and span of identity of participants programs such as InterAction can arguably enhance their capacity and desire to engage in leadership across a wider number of communities.

The *critical* lens offers a means for challenging dominant narratives of leadership both imposed on Africa from outside and assumed and propagated within. Through drawing

attention to how power relations are established and maintained, and giving voice to disempowered groups, it may be possible to begin a shift towards emancipation and equality. Paulo Freire, through his work with minority groups in Brazil demonstrated the role of education in entrapping or liberating people from oppression (Freire, 1969). A similar perspective could be taken to leadership development activities in regions such as Africa. Whilst it might be argued that dominant models of management education, such as the MBA, promulgate Western perspectives (Blunt and Jones, 1997) more emergent and informal processes based upon dialogue might enhance the building of community and social capital and encourage people to “act in ways that make for justice and human flourishing” (Smith, 2002). A critical approach to leadership education would be wary of presenting prepackaged ‘expertise’ and would seek to stimulate productive and inclusive dialogue across a broad cross-section of people as was the case with InterAction.

Finally, the *constructionist* lens builds on from this notion to offer a means for creating a new and more positive future. Whilst leadership in Africa has clearly been subject to many abuses and challenges these need not dictate the shape of things to come. A constructionist lens offers the hope of a better future by offering a mechanism for change. From this perspective, leadership is fundamentally about sensemaking and the role of leaders is to assist people in developing a shared and constructive sense of meaning and purpose. As Drath (2001) argues “leadership is not something out there in the world that we come to know because it impresses itself on our minds, it is something we create with our minds by agreeing with other people that these thoughts, words, and actions - and not some others - will be known as leadership”. This does not make leadership whatever we’d like it to be but “it suggests that leadership is essentially interwoven with acts of persuasion... [and] that we [should] concentrate not just on what leaders do and what the situation is, but on the formative issues that lie behind these phenomena” (Grint, 1997: 9). A constructionist approach to development is not concerned with the transfer of knowledge about leadership but rather with the generation of new knowledge that enables people to more effectively shape and take up their roles as leaders.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this article we highlighted the ontological and methodological challenges of identifying or locating a particularly ‘African’ view of leadership. Our findings would support the notion that leadership in Africa bears many similarities to that in other regions of the World but also that cultural and contextual factors have a significant part to play in its construction and enactment. We conclude that an essentialist approach to isolating the key features of “African leadership” is misguided and argue, instead, for greater attention to the rhetorical and sensemaking functions of the leadership discourse in shaping identities and mobilizing action.

The findings from our research support calls against the blanket implementation of universalistic models of leadership and leadership development, as well as approaches that break culture down into a series of discrete dimensions. Instead, we call for the facilitation of a more constructionist approach to the surfacing of Afro-centric knowledge about leadership and management. Within this process we see an important role to be played by leadership development in facilitating dialogue and enabling people to work through competing experiences and interpretations of leadership in order to create a more integrated sense of meaning and identity.

From our research we identify a strong desire for inclusive and participative leadership founded on humanistic and collectivist principles and consider the potential for indigenous concepts such as ‘ubuntu’ in reframing distinctions such as ‘individual-collective’ to a sense of ‘self in community’. We propose that more work is required on such notions, particularly from African researchers using African paradigms, and that through such dialogue we may be able to develop theories and approaches that are not only relevant in an African context but that may contribute in a significant way to leadership theory and development in other parts of the World.

To conclude, we would like to echo Barker’s (1997) argument that at the heart of leadership is an engagement with the ethical values of the community in which leadership is situated. From this perspective, leadership can be regarded as “a process of change where the ethics of individuals are integrated into the mores of a community” (ibid: 352). Leadership development is integrally related to community development and offers a means for the surfacing and negotiation of social values and purpose – it is not just a means for developing leaders but also for developing the societies in which they operate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the British Council and Questions of Difference in this enquiry and the contribution of Dr Donna Ladkin in framing our research approach.

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