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## Leadership and charisma: A desire that cannot speak its name?

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### Abstract

Leadership has proved impossible to define, despite decades of research and a huge number of publications. This paper explores managers' accounts of leadership, and shows that they find it difficult to talk about the topic, offering brief definitions but very little narrative. That which was said/sayable provides insights into what was unsaid/unsayable. Queer theory facilitates exploration of that which is difficult to talk about, and applying it to the managers' talk allows articulation of their lay theory of leadership. This is that leaders evoke a homoerotic desire in followers such that followers are seduced into achieving organizational goals. The leader's body, however, is absent from the scene of seduction, so organizational heteronormativity remains unchallenged. The paper concludes by arguing that queer and critical leadership theorists together could turn leadership into a reverse discourse and a politics of pleasure at work.

### Keywords

Leadership, Followers, Queer theory, Critical leadership studies, Sexualities, Charisma, Heterotopias

### Introduction

A huge number of publications on leadership appear each year (Grint, 2005a),<sup>1</sup> yet despite this enormous volume of literature consensus on what leadership actually *is* has proved elusive. Definitions of both leadership and charisma (often said to be a fundamental characteristic of leadership) cannot be agreed (Bass, 1990; Bennis, 1989; Calás, 1993; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Grint, 2005a; Grint, 2005b; Robinson & Kerr, 2009; Stogdill, 1974; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). This paper's aim is not another attempt at providing definitions, but rather an exploration of why definition remains so difficult.

The majority of research into leadership is located in a positivist tradition in which only quantitative research methods are used (Bryman, 2004; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). A small but increasingly influential body of work in what can be called 'critical' leadership studies is now developing (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Barker, 2001; Calás 1993; Calás & Smircich, 1991; Collinson, 2005, 2006; Fairhurst, 2007; Ford 2006; 2010; Ford, Harding and Learmonth,

2008; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Grint, 2010; Hyde & Thomas, 2003; Learmonth 2005; Robinson & Kerr, 2009; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002; Western, 2008; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). This paper contributes to this emerging field through introducing queer theory (QT) as a means of interrogating what might be described as the contingent foundations of leadership, for it is in those contingent foundations that the cause of the difficulties of definition may be found. QT is particularly apposite for this task because it allows us to explore that which cannot be said; it facilitates exploration of what it is that is unsayable about leadership and prevents coherent definition.

QT's roots are in gender theory and gay and lesbian studies, but it is now widely applied in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Probyn, 1999), and is proving insightful in organization studies (OS). The first paper in OS that might be called 'queer' (although it does not use the term itself) is Brewis, Hampton & Linstead (1997), which aimed to destabilize concepts of gender in workplaces. Parker's (2002) influential article used QT to challenge management and theory, while Ward & Winstanley, (2003), Rumens (2008a; 2008b) and Rumens & Kerfoot (2009) explore the working lives of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) people, and Lee (2006; 2007) and Steyeart (2010) seek to develop broader theory about organizations from analyses of the lives of gay men. Furthermore, several papers use QT to develop understanding of various forms of workplace oppression, including Tyler & Cohen (2008) and Lee, Learmonth & Harding (2008). One of QT's strengths is the way in which it exposes how homogeneity of identity is coercively imposed through the elevation of norms, in this case that of heterosexuality, to which everyone must conform (Halle, 2004).

As yet, however, QT has had little exposure within leadership studies (for an exception, see Bowring, 2004). In this paper, we turn QT to the analysis of the difficulties in articulating what leadership is. We use the theory to analyse how leadership is talked about in organizations and what there is about leadership that is unsayable. In interviews exploring leadership development in UK-based organizations, we found an absence *in day-to-day talk within organizations* (as well as in academic theory) of any coherent definition of leadership. Furthermore, and crucially, few interviewees could provide even a cursory narrative about leadership. The small number of scant, rather thin descriptions that were given show what it is that is difficult to say about leadership: what prevents speech is an understanding of leadership that is almost impossible to articulate because it is predicated upon a desired eroticised relationship between leader and follower. This relationship, this erotics, is homoerotic and it is this, we suggest, that is the unsaid, or the unsayable, which prevents coherent definitions of leadership. Calás & Smircich (1991) showed the eroticism inherent within academic discussions of

leadership. This paper takes forward their arguments through suggesting that managers' own theory of leadership, a lay theory of leadership perhaps, has not only heterosexual but also homoerotic desire flowing through it. It is homoerotic desire, we will argue, that in important ways inhibits talk about leadership. The paper's conclusion introduces the possibility of drawing on the radical politics of QT to develop a politics of change in organizations.

We turn now to discussing queer theory, and follow this with a section on methodology that opens the way to the exploration of the single, overarching theme in the interview material.

### **Queer theory**

QT, as used in this paper, involves the pursuit of understanding of how normative identities, especially but not exclusively normative sexual identities, serve to construct, control and oppress subjects (Halle, 2004). The rationale for this definition emerges from our reading of QT's origins in poststructuralist, feminist and gender theories (Petersen 1998). Queer theory brings these modes of analysis together and, in developing them, provides a complex and nuanced lens through which to analyse organizations. In doing so, it takes theory to a new dimension (Budgeon & Roseneil, 2004; Doty, 1993; Seidman, 1997). In particular, QT demands identification of, and challenge to, norms, discourses and practices that serve to subjugate some to the benefit of others, rendering lives, or some parts of lives, unliveable (Butler, 2004). Importantly, it puts into question *any* activities regarded as 'normal', explores how what is 'normal' comes to be regarded as such, and how processes of normalization rely on rendering certain subjects, or certain identities, 'abnormal'. The starting point, following Derrida (1976), is a critique of those binaries that pervade modern Western culture, in which dominant positions are achieved through resting upon an 'other' who is relegated to a position outside the norms that regulate identity (Jagose, 1996; Petersen, 1998; Roseneil & Seymour, 1999). The suffering that accompanies being rendered abnormal can then be explored and a politics of change developed.

Foundational to QT is the work of Michel Foucault (1979, 1986, 1992). Most notably, Eve Sedgwick (1991) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 1996, 2004) interweave Foucault's ideas with those of other major theorists so as to question the essentialist, given nature of grounding categorisations such as straight/gay; heterosexual/homosexual and, indeed, male/female. In challenging the ontologies of sex and gender they offer a means for challenging other ontologies (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1996; Sedgwick, 1991).

Butler's challenge to social constructionist theories of gender show that what is constructed is not so much identities but *regulatory fictions* which govern

identities, and which order and organize the 'taken-for-granted' through which identities emerge. Thus, there is no core or essential centre that produces an authentic identity; rather it is the very performance of identity which produces that identity itself. In Butler's words 'there is no gender behind the expressions of gender' (1990: 25), for gender is constructed through the very *doing* of gender according to the norms of how a person with the relevant genitalia should behave. In other words, we dress up as male or female, move our bodies in a masculine or feminine way, conform to expectations (norms) of what it is to be male or female, never question this doing and this achieving of masculinity and femininity, and thereby *perform ourselves* as men or women.

We have no choice in doing this because discourse always precedes and enables the 'I' (Butler, 1993). In other words we are born into cultures in which rules of gender and other identities already exist. If we are to exist as a person (that is, as an "I") we have to conform to those rules and norms. Refusal or inability to conform leaves only an unrecognizable "I", an "I" with no place and no identity, an "I" that is therefore strange, subordinate, inferior, "queer". This can be seen if we imagine what it would be like if someone with, say, female genitalia cultivates a masculine body (see Whittle, 2005) – we can write about such a person only by resorting to s/he, and in using that term we impose gender (albeit ambiguously) upon them.

A word, or a discourse, therefore *constitutes* the subject – it facilitates the formation of an identity. Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991), shows how the appearance of a new word in the lexicon, in her example that of 'homosexual', can govern identity. It is only in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the word appears, leading to a new form of 'world-mapping' by which everyone is categorised not only as male or female, but also as homo- or heterosexual. These categorisations turn practices into identities, in that words, Sedgwick (1991) suggests in arguments that complement Butler's, are performative – they bring ways of being into existence. And in heteronormative cultures these ways of being necessitate dominant (sexual) identities that require abjected others.

QT takes apart heteronormative cultures. Heteronormativity is:

the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It

consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations – often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions. Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice .... can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts forms of sex between men and women might *not* be heteronormative. Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality. (Berlant & Warner, 2003: 179/180).

Organizations are heteronormative in that everyone is required to conform to (narrowly defined) heterosexual norms, rendering ‘queer’ anyone who cannot or refuses to so conform. Further, they are places in which ‘straightness’ in the everyday practices of working lives is set in hardly-noticed cultures and practices that are themselves located within models of the heterosexual family (Ahmed, 2006). For example, to describe some organizations as paternalistic is to regard them as governed by father figures, and implicit in this is the concept of the mother and also, therefore, of the heterosexual relationship. Heteronormativity generates shame, and worse, in those it labels ‘deviants’ (Munt, 2008; Warner, 1993; 1999).

The queer challenges heteronormativity through its difference, its refusal to conform to dominant norms. The queer is ‘any individual/social aspect not in alignment with [heteronormative] norms, but especially the homosexual’ (Jones, 2004: end page). QT shows that norms such as heterosexuality are fragile and require continuing work if they are to be sustained (Dean, 2000; Thomas, 2008). Heterosexuality, for example, is not a biological given, with homosexuality a different biological form, but is a socially-mandated requirement needing work if it is to be maintained. The queer threatens the stability of that very fragile achievement. However, so dominant is heteronormativity in organizations that even managers who openly identify as gay may construct themselves as the other to gay men while at work (Lee, 2004; 2007). Homosexuality (including the homoerotic) is not acceptable in such a culture, and where it is present then repair work must be undertaken to restore the fabric of the culture (Brewis & Bowring, 2009).

Thus, the implications of using QT for the study of leadership are firstly that it challenges in a fundamental way conventional leadership theory. Where conventional theory would argue that it is the amazing qualities displayed by leaders which mark them out as leaders, a queer reading argues that it is the words ‘leader’ or ‘leadership’ which confer identity upon the (dominant) leader and the concomitant (subordinate) ‘follower’, with the acts undertaken by the leader emerging from this identity. But QT also offers a second, more subversive potential, for QT and politics are interwoven. Queer readings are

not meant to circulate solely within academic milieu, as just another interesting interpretation of the social. They aim rather to identify and illuminate forms of injustice, especially perhaps those that are only with difficulty articulated within language, so hidden are they within the taken-for-granted of the every-day social world. Crucially, this leads to political actions whose aim is removal of the forms of injustice so revealed. This is possible because QT firstly provides a language in which to articulate abjection, and secondly uses that language to incite and guide a politics which undermines the constructions which require that some people be rendered abject. QT ceases to be queer if it loses its political practice; it abdicates from its task of challenging and eliminating those controls, constructions and practices which reduce some people to the status of the abnormal, the abject, the odd, the 'queer'. It may queer theory itself, as Parker (2002) anticipates, i.e. it can be turned against theorising *per se*. Fundamentally, QT thus offers the potential for a new politics that challenges all forms of oppression in organizations. We now turn to the study itself.

### **The study**

Our empirical material comes from a study carried out in 2000 into the status of leadership development in the United Kingdom. It used a mixed methods approach involving a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. A stratified random sample of organizations that are members of the UK employers' networking organization which funded the study was chosen. The sample represented firms ranging from small and medium enterprises to large multinational concerns, and from across the public and private sectors. The survey was sent to 44 organizations, and 30 questionnaires were returned, a 68% response rate. Full details of this part of the study can be found in Alimo-Metcalfe et al (2000).

The survey was followed by in-depth, qualitative research designed to provide rich insights to inform the quantitative data. Six of the largest organizations from the 30 that returned the questionnaire were chosen for this stage of the study, a number that reduced the sample to a manageable size for an in-depth interview-based study while at the same time providing sufficient insights to allow theory generation. They were: two UK-based multi-national corporations (MNCs), which we here call Chemco and Healthco; an MNC with its headquarters in the US (Hightechco); an MNC with its headquarters in mainland Europe (Foodco); and two UK public sector organizations (a local authority, LA, and an agency of the armed forces, AF). Participants were selected by each organization, following a request to interview staff with knowledge and/or experience of leadership training programmes. With the exception of one woman, all interviewees were white men, aged between 30 and 50 years, characteristics that reflect the preponderance of white men in

senior jobs of this kind rather than an active exclusion of women or non-white people. Indeed, participants reflect the homosocial world of organizations (Hearn, 1992) where occupations remain divided largely along gendered lines (EOC, 2007). We collected no personal information about the participants beyond their job descriptions.

A total of 34 one-to-one interviews were carried out. In addition, one organization, AF, had arranged a focus group interview (with four trainee leaders) rather than the individual interviews originally intended. Participants were either senior managers responsible for leadership development or participants in leadership courses. The interviews used a semi-structured format, starting with questions about leadership development activities in the organization, and including questions regarding how leadership is defined in that organization. The interviews lasted 45-90 minutes, and ranged over a wide variety of topics, with participants encouraged to share stories about leadership and how leadership development contributed to their organizations. The interviews were all recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted as part of (what was intended to be at the time) a fairly conventional exploration of leadership development. At that time we had no plans to analyze the material from a QT perspective, a perspective which emerged as relevant some time after the study was completed.

Both the quantitative survey and the interview-based study revealed that everyone shared a difficulty in defining leadership, with a variety of contradictory descriptions used within and between them. For example, while several participants defined leadership as based on charisma, others said it had nothing to do with charisma; while some said it was based on organizational values, others thought it was related to individual characteristics (see Alimo-Metcalfe et al, 2000, for full details).

These findings replicate earlier studies (see above) and led us to ask *why* definition should be so difficult. If leadership resists definition, then what is it that eludes language? Two of us have been involved in running leadership development programmes ourselves (Ford and Harding, 2008, Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2010), and all of us share a longstanding interest in critical ideas about management and leadership. However, although we have previously explored the performativity of the term 'leadership' (Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008), the question remained unanswered. This elusiveness is what drew us to develop a method using queer theory. We therefore returned to the qualitative interview data from this earlier study and reanalysed it using a methodology that emerges out of queer theory



which we outline below, with the aim of exploring what it is about leadership that eludes any single uncontested definition.

Queer theory, since its inception, has sought to explore the rules that govern what is sayable, and what is therefore rendered unsayable or confined to the margins. Its use in analysis therefore involves a search for hints of what is not being said. The method begins by using traditional methods of analysing qualitative data: identifying the dominant themes in participants' accounts (Silverman, 2000; 2003). It then 'queers' these themes by asking what is odd or queer about them, that is, what norms are active, and what is not being said and cannot be said alongside that which is said.<sup>2</sup> This exercise involves 'diverse reading strategies and multiple interpretative stances' (Hall, 2003: 10) that aim to identify 'regimes of the normal' (Warner, 1991: xxvi) and so 'trouble' what is regarded as normal.

We firstly re-read all interview material to find instances of accounts of leaders/leadership. We sought these instances in order to examine lay theories of leadership, though many people became inarticulate in their attempts at description, often using the word 'competences', a then fashionable descriptor of what leadership involved, but never listing or describing the competences. Instead they changed the subject. A typical example is Jo (all names have been changed), a junior manager from Healthco identified as having 'high potential' who, when asked if anyone in Healthco embodied the characteristics of leadership, replied:

*There are certainly people who are seen that way. A few individuals that are about at the minute would be recognised from operator level up as being like that certainly...*

Asked to expand on this statement Jo instead described the performance appraisal policy. Interviewees from Hightechco were critical of their organization for its absence of leadership, but could not articulate what it was that was lacking. For example, its HR director, Ronnie, when asked 'Are there people within your company who are generally acknowledged as embodying the characteristics of effective leaders?' replied with one word: 'No', but could not expand on the 'No'. Only one interviewee, Chris, a senior HR manager at Foodco, was critical of the concept, saying

*... We seem to think you can call it something and then once you have called it something you can generalise it, then you can teach people about it. Bullshit. Quote me if you like ...*

We found narratives about leadership in only 11 interview transcripts (ten individual and the group interview of four people) involving 14 people out of the 38 participants. These were all short accounts, none of which showed much substance or gave any rich detail. Our first major finding therefore was the difficulty people experience in translating their ideas about leadership into words.

The narratives given came from: two managers responsible for designing or commissioning leadership training programmes, one each from Chemco and LA (here called Sam and Jay respectively); a further eight managers who had recently participated in such programmes (for example, Jack from LA, Viv from Foodco, Les from Chemco and five others who will be named in the text); four focus group participants from AF; and four managers, two each from Chemco (Pet and Alex) and Foodco (Chris and Pat) who had no experience of leadership development programmes but were able to outline ideas about what leadership entails. Charlie, the senior manager from AF had a clearly articulated description of leadership, but as this applied to the armed forces during times of combat it is so different from the general run of organizations that it has not been included in this analysis. That these managers were able to articulate *something* about a concept that leaves many others silent gave us empirical material that would permit the search for what is unsayable about leadership – for what haunts the margins of their descriptions.

As noted above, only small portions of these 11 transcripts contained descriptions of leadership, with interviewees talking mostly about other aspects of their work or the organizations they worked in. We isolated these descriptions and subjected them to repeated readings in order to identify any major themes within them. Our rereading suggested that only metaphors and direct references to ‘seeing’ and ‘looking’ were prominent in these narratives. There was thus only one overarching theme in our empirical material, that of ‘looking’ which, when placed alongside the difficulty of describing leadership, suggests that leadership is something that can be seen but is not (or perhaps cannot) be spoken about. We now discuss this reading and then use what has been said to explore what is unsaid.

### **The said/the sayable**

Participants were asked to state how their organizations identified those who were to be developed for leadership positions. The following statement shows that those deemed to have the potential for leadership are identified and separated, like wheat from chaff, from those lacking the necessary qualities. Asked about training policies and practices in the organization, Sam, a HR director from Chemco replied that the majority of junior managers took part

in 'off the shelf' courses, but certain 'bright young things' were treated differently. They were deemed to need:

*... a little bit of something special and also a little bit of a pat on the back ... through senior management discussions [we] select a group of people and maybe out of a population of several hundred choose twenty. Bright young people to go on an event which would open their eyes much more to broader issues in the organization ...*

Foodco similarly tried to identify and categorise managers at this early stage of their careers. As their training manager Pat put it:

*... You can spot some of these trends even at graduate level. We bring graduates in .... and at a very early stage .....we seek to decide which ones are going to be the higher [potential] ... and when we are not sure will call them high-grade potential. And those people we would watch very carefully ...*

We see here visual metaphors being used to describe (potential) leaders. Not only are their *eyes opened*, but those whose eyes are opened are 'bright'. Leaders can be *seen*, so they stand out from the crowd, though they have to be *watched* very carefully. Jay, the LA commissioner, articulated what he thought would be the experience of someone visiting an organization famous for its leadership. They would:

*... simply wander around like on another planet going 'shit', you know, 'this is far out'. But it is like 'yes so is Tibet' – 'and your point is' – 'well it is just really different'. ... There is something about the quality of the light and what those people are doing over there. ... What's this thing about the quality of the light in the place why does it seem brighter? – what is it? – are you nearer the sun on this bit of the planet? – what is it about?...*

So metaphors of the visual, of looking, of being seen, and the light which facilitates seeing recur when people envisage leadership. But what is it that marks young managers out as 'high potentials', as having the stuff of leadership? What is it that makes them 'bright'? The identifying markers are not articulated and indeed the characteristics seem elusive, but the recurring notion throughout the interviews is that leadership is *visible*, it can be seen, it is 'bright', and those with it emanate it from near the start of their careers. For example, Sam from Chemco observed that at the courses attended by the 'bright young people' in his company:

*... The presence would be seen of senior finance people, heads of department or towards executive level. And possibly executives from across the business to*

*really make them feel loved and wanted and wow that's something to go on. .... But for those who go on it very much 'opened my eyes and gave me a sense of confidence, strong sense of attachment to the organization ...*

Note the phrases here that refer again to seeing and being seen: 'the presence would be seen' and 'opened my eyes'. This manager is espousing the belief that nothing more than the opportunity to *look upon* the senior managers, to see them there in front of them, is needed to motivate the company's future leaders. Implicit here is an assumption that leaders possess something that cannot be described in words but is knowable when seen. Indeed, Sam went on to further develop his thought:

*... our Chief Executive Officer is seen to be a very good leader, he is very inspiring. Anybody that sort of has a presentation from him says 'wow, I really bought that'. And a number of Senior Managers when they come into contact with people are seen to be 'wow'. However, unfortunately there is still a large group of senior management that talks the talk but doesn't translate into practice ...*

The chief executive *is seen* to be a very good leader, and others who possess this inarticulable leadership 'thing' are 'seen' to be 'wow'. Those who can talk about leadership ('talks the talk') but do not possess this indefinable, but highly visible, something are not regarded as good leaders. This is expressed most precisely by Jack from LA:

*... I know from the .... course I have got some of the concepts in with mine now, and I can look at people perhaps in that way now and sort of think 'that person has and that person hasn't...'*

Jack believes that merely the act of looking at people allows him to divide them into those who have and those who haven't got whatever it is that good leaders can be seen to possess.

'The leader', these accounts suggest, is believed by managers to be someone who radiates something which can be seen when in contact with others. Indeed, relating to other people, meeting them (and not being locked away in the office), appears to be one of the fundamental distinctions, in mainstream texts, between management and leadership. Where management is about the achievement of tasks, leadership involves interpersonal relationships involving the persons responsible for ensuring aims and objectives are met (leaders) and those responsible for undertaking the tasks that will achieve those aims and objectives (followers). This often discussed distinction between management and leadership, originating in the work of Zaleznik

(1977) and Kotter (1990), is not therefore merely between tasks undertaken but between types of interpersonal relationships experienced. Our reading of the empirical material suggests that managers understand leadership to be the ability to have an impact upon people through the power of something they emanate which can be apprehended by others.

This lay theory of leadership suggests that in organizational practice the distinction between managers and leaders is understood to be that managers lack that certain irresistible something, a *je ne sais quoi*, emanated by leaders whose very presence motivates others. The manager may give out tasks but her/his physical presence is not motivational. This replicates academic theory, in which it is the embodied presence of a leader that is deemed to have an impact on the follower because of an elusive something labelled 'charisma' (Bennis, 1989; Bass, 1990; Goethals, Sorenson & Burns, 2004; House et al, 2004, Stogdill, 1974, van Maurik, 2001). Indeed, charisma was mentioned by a number of interviewees, although sometimes it was felt to be evident only in other organizations. Pat from Foodco said:

*... It is a lot about in another sort of intangible really like charisma kind of thing. You hear stories ... about Asda and Alan Layton's approach and before him Archie Norman wandering around the floor, sitting down with somebody saying 'what are you doing? How are you getting on? What are your issues?' ....And Asda have it and seem to do it well, you know the Richard Branson stuff, that charisma that makes you want to fall in behind somebody ...*

In the same way, Alex regretted that Chemco's senior managers did not embody such charisma:

*... to what extent are those qualities modelled by our most senior board people? I am not convinced and indeed many people are not convinced yet that they are modelled ...*

Charisma has long been identified in academic theory as an attribute of 'the Great Man' who has informed leadership theories since the 1920s (Calás 1993; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Grint, 2005b). Although the Great Man appeared to have died by the 1980s, deemed irrelevant to the 'post-heroic' models of leadership that have developed since then (Bradford & Cohen, 1984; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997), commentators have noted how his presence continues to underpin theories of leadership (Baradacco, 2001; Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004). The very few examples of 'Great Men' (Churchill, Gandhi, Mandela, Hitler, Napoleon, etc.) continue to be referred to over and over again in books on the subject (Grint 2005a). The Great Man was, and is, believed to have an

irresistible charisma (Jackson & Parry, 2007; Western, 2008). It is charisma which makes onlookers go 'wow'.

This, therefore, is what is sayable about leadership by managers articulating their understanding of the concept. The dominance of the theme of the visual in the interview material is because beliefs about, or theories of, leadership circulating between managers revolve around the charismatic 'Great Man' who emanates a certain alluring but indefinable something. This 'charisma' disarms followers so that they line up alongside the Great Man, sharing his 'vision'. Indeed, the leader's task is to ensure followers share this 'vision'. For example, Viv from Foodco, who a month before the interview had attended a 'blinding' leadership development course, could now describe leadership as concerned with:

*... appealing to people's hearts and souls rather than to their minds and their wallets kind of thing. And the way to people's hearts and souls is a difficult one, but things like a clear shared vision of where the company and the department that you lead is going in support of the company. And a lot more emotional humanistic kind of approach with your team. I don't know?*

Les, a senior manager from Chemco, had a similar understanding of leadership following the course in which he had participated:

*... I guess, to me, leadership is having a vision for where you are going, being able to articulate that vision back into practical steps that are going to take you there. And being able to manage, support and develop people so that they actually go with you ...*

Similarly, Chris from LA, although he thought leadership was 'bullshit,' when pushed nevertheless defined it as helping:

*clarify setting their direction, [and] help individuals understand their connection with what they do to the top ...*

No-one attempted to define vision, but everyone who used the term emphasized it had to be shared with staff, so that leader and follower could analogously gaze into the future and see the same thing. There is no questioning of how this is done, or indeed if it is achievable at all.

We searched through the narratives to find out more about this indefinable 'charisma' that overwhelms followers, but with the exception of a few hints the narratives were silent. However, these few allusions facilitate insights into what is unsaid and/or unsayable.

### **The unsaid/the unsayable**

Managers, these hints suggest, believe leaders can overwhelm followers because they can *penetrate the follower*. Pat said the leader can

*'get [ ... in]to people's hearts and souls'*

while Les observed that the leader will

*'take people's hearts and minds and you go into battle together'*

because leadership

*'has to be in the soul. .... You have really got to get under the skin of your people'* (Charlie).

This is all that is said, but these few references suggest that an erotic discourse circulates within ideas about leadership. It is *erotic* because the only way to approximate the merger desired in these statements is through the ecstasy of the sexual act (Dollimore, 1991). Managers are imagining a scene of seduction where the follower's mind, heart and soul are entered by the leader. Here we have an erotic fantasy of 'polarities of omnipotence and utter powerlessness' (Sedgwick, 1985: 67) - so overcome is the follower presumed to be by the leader's charisma that s/he loses all power of resistance to this penetration.

It should perhaps not be surprising that sex informs lay theories of leadership. Foucault (1979; 1986; 1992) has notably shown that sex<sup>3</sup> is everywhere, and organizations are not exempt, despite a long-held presumption (or pretence) that things are, or should be, otherwise (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000). But, as Hearn & Parkin (see also Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Burrell, 1984; Pringle, 1988; Roper, 1996) have suggested, sexuality and work:

are related to each other because we all know and experience them as related, if we are honest. The ways we talk, walk, flirt, touch and so on, as women or as men, may all be instances of being sexual at work, and at the same time be means to (*sic*) displaying different sexual identities that are at least partly work-based and organizationally-determined (1987: 13/14).

Gherardi's (1995:58) study observed these displays of organizational sexualities in action, through 'heterosexual attraction, according to the canons of courtship and flirtation, homosexual attraction in single-sex groups, and the pleasure of sado-masochism'. Organizations, Gherardi argues, provide an

'extra-territorial arena for the expression of sexuality' (1995: 58), one which stands on the borderline between the private and the public. Gherardi's thesis is that three features of organizational sexualities make them inherently ambiguous and contradictory: they are driven by pleasure as they enable people attracted to one another to meet in a safe place; they support the interdependence of relationships fostered through work to relieve the boredom and invigorate organizational life; and they also have a disciplinary function as a means of organizational control and policing.

Nevertheless, in most management discourse, as in our interview material, obvious and overt expressions of sex still generally reside at its margins. It can be seen in certain colloquialisms which suggest, as Burrell has argued, 'that sexual satisfaction is inimical to good, effective administration ... such as 'it's bugged', 'what a cock-up', 'it's fucked' and so on' (1992: 72). Another way in which sex is present by its absence in organizational life may be evident in what Roper argued is 'the erotic subtext of all-male intimacies' (1996: 213) – intimacies which may *appear* to be non-sexual. For Roper, this erotic subtext was evoked, for example, by a manager he interviewed who described his relationship with an older male colleague as being one 'where 'high levels of energy' flowed from the 'chemistry being right'' (1994: 79).

Roper's observation takes us back to our interview material, because here we have men talking about relationships between male leaders and followers, so the eroticism that informs this lay managerial theory is, in many ways, *homoerotic*. Other writers have identified male/male erotic desire in the homosocial organizational world. Sinclair, for example, (1998) provides a direct link between leadership, male/male desire and sex. Drawing on Jungian archetypes, she proposes (1998: 30) an understanding of leadership in which the 'collective and often unconscious purposes that leadership serves, helps to explain the tendency to homogeneity and [what Kanter, 1977 calls] "homosexual reproduction" among leaders'. More recently, Sinclair has shown empirically how sexual power is used in the leadership training room: female teachers of leadership are rendered powerless in comparison to male presenters whose power is located within seductive interactions:

Gender prefigures the way in which seductive performances by men and women teachers play out. Our interest in gendered seduction should not obscure from view the fact that leadership development is often a seductive exchange between men – just as charged and sexualized as any heterosexual seduction (2009: 281).

What Sinclair hints at in her more recent work, and can be seen also in Bruni (2006),<sup>4</sup> is that in the homosocial workplace desire between men may be



refracted through a female. The accounts in our material, however, are given by men talking about men, albeit that the allusions to penetration suggest a heterosexual imaginary at work, one which cannot conceive of the erotic as involving anything other than penetrative sex (Berlant and Warner, 2000). Our interview material therefore contributes to explorations of sex within organizations as it shows how sex informs understanding of organizational concepts. However, to understand better the brief allusions that suggest this erotic subtext we must explore why it is that just as quickly as the erotic scene appears in our interview material it disappears. Studies of organizations and sex/sexualities show that in some ways this is perhaps to be expected – sex resides at the margins. But when we turned to analysing the unsaid or the unsayable within these hints, these possibilities, we found that that which was present throughout these managers' narratives but also always absent is the body of the leader.

The material presence of the leader is implied as the source from which his charm emanates. This is what *is* said. What is *not* said is anything about this body that must be present as the site at which desire is invoked. This is surprising, given the clear understanding that it is being in the physical proximity of, and thus being able to look at, the leader, which is presumed to disarm followers. Apart from the brief references to hearts, minds, souls and skin, all in relation to the bodies of followers, there is in all the interviews only one reference to leaders' bodies, given by Nicky, one of the participants in the group interview. As a member of the armed forces, leadership training throws Nicky into extreme physical environments:

*... I can remember the first exercise or whatever when I was .... internally grappling with the idea of 'crikey I am going to be Commander soon, I really don't want it'. And I would much rather be sort of just a 'bod' somewhere not really doing much. Now I know when I go on exercise I don't like being the person doing nothing, I like to be in command because that's how you deal with being cold, hungry and wet. Because your mind is taken off that, and you are so much more interested in having your skills of leadership and getting things right, that all of a sudden that 24 hours when you are in command just goes so quickly. And when you are the 'bod' doing nothing, it is just so boring and then every five minutes you are going 'crikey my feet hurt' or 'it's wet' ...*

The body remains unspoken in all other interviews: this officer, working in demanding physical conditions, has to mention that which is unsayable elsewhere. In doing so, does he not reveal the reasons for the absence of the body of the leader: that is, the leader has to transcend her/his body? The opposite of the leader in this quote is the 'bod', a slang term for 'body'

(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/BOD>, accessed 6<sup>th</sup> January 2010). The opposite of leader, it seems, is a body. Could it be that leadership replicates with followers that which de Beauvoir (1949/1973) argued existed between men and women: the party regarded as the inferior takes responsibility for the disavowed embodiment of the other? This may be the case, but these speakers are all men, and QT offers a somewhat different trajectory. Sedgwick's (1985: 133) analysis of 'the modern, homophobic cloven terrain of male homosocial desire' is particularly apposite because she explores male/male intimacies in the modern period.

Her focus is upon homosexuality as a form of control not only over homosexual but also heterosexual men. The boundary between the two (if there is such a boundary) is always an 'invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line' (p. 89) – what distinguishes 'the' homosexual from 'the' heterosexual is fluid, porous and constantly transgressed. Importantly for current purposes, the power to wield the distinction gives 'a structuring definitional leverage over the whole range of male bonds that shape the social constitution' (p.86). What Sedgwick's analysis allows us to propose therefore is that the lay managerial theory outlined above is a theory of how control over followers can be achieved through homoeroticism: that is, the charismatic leader should awaken desire in the follower such that the follower will willingly do the leader's bidding. The leader here is 'top' to the follower's 'bottom' (Hocquenghem, 1978). However, no sexual act is envisaged in this theory, for the seductive allure of the leader, in the managerial imagination, is something that will arouse a desire which will never be acted upon, because the leader's body that should evoke this desire disappears from the scene. The leader, therefore, remains untouched by the scandal that accompanied homosexuality throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, although in some places now somewhat ameliorated, continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Managers' theory of leadership is therefore of the leader's desire: a desire to be desired. Once desire is aroused then, the thesis holds, the follower will be in thrall to the leader and the libidinal energy of that obsession will be transferred not towards consummation but towards the achievement of the organization's goals.

In other words, the understanding of leadership espoused in this lay theory of leadership entails the leader as a penetrative but disembodied perpetrator, whose charisma is part of the control mechanisms within organizations. The leader is deemed to be charismatic in virtue of the effect he has on his followers, that is, he arouses in them an erotic desire that makes them work harder. But the leader remains disembodied, and so not only is the desire that

is imagined to be evoked not consummated, the leader remains untainted by any homophobic aspersions that could be cast against him. Organizational heteronormativity, so painfully and precariously upheld, will not crumble; the libidinal energies are not turned towards hedonistic pleasures but to production.

### **Summary: Managers' theory of leadership**

This is where our analysis of interview data using QT has led us: sex is everywhere in organizations and it infuses managers' understanding of leadership. What is unsayable about leadership, what prevents its definition, is a lay theory that the leader's charisma arises from an irresistible sexual attractiveness which evokes a homoerotic desire whose libidinal energies can be diverted towards the achievement of organizational goals. Managers' understanding of leadership presumes that followers will be so overcome by an erotic desire to be possessed by the leader that they will forget their own objectives and fall in with the leader's 'vision'. They will, in theory, see only what the leader wants them to see and they will thus, in theory, become controllable. This is a theory which informs managers' understanding of leadership, a theory that ostensibly has no supporting 'proof' that, in the day-to-day world of organizational practices, followers desire the persons charged with the task of being their leaders. But does the theory articulate something that is otherwise unsayable, that is, the sex that is everywhere in organizations is not homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual, but is a polymorphous desire of bodies for bodies? Queer theorists have long argued that it is societal constructs which require that sex be categorised and controlled, and we suggest that it is these constructs which insist that the leader's body be removed from the potential scene of seduction at the same time as it is presumed to be willing the follower to succumb to its attractions. Within a heterosexual matrix, the immanent, seductive presence of the leader threatens the always fragile heterosexual matrix; his transcendent, controlling absence takes away that threat, but leadership taps into a knowledge of the polymorphous pleasures that could be available were sexualities not rigidly controlled, as we explore further below.

This, then, is the 'passion' (as one of our participants put it) envisioned in leadership. Desire, seduction and passion: our data lead us back to Calás and Smircich's influential discussion of how 'the myth of leadership and its associated romantic appeal ... creates the most vital sexuality in the organizational literature' (1991: 567). Indeed, we fully concur with them that if leadership works, then it does so not by 'suppressing desire ... [but] because it embodies desire, while covering its traces with the sign of truth' (1991: 568). But almost two decades after their paper was published we can recognise more readily that the seduction between leader and follower may, and often

will, be homoerotic. Our speakers are all men: as male speaking subjects they presume that leaders, possessing that *je ne sais quoi*, will have a disarming impact upon followers regardless of their gender.

Where Calás and Smircich (1991) found seduction informing influential published texts about leadership, our own analysis shows seduction also informs managers' lay accounts.<sup>5</sup> Where Calás and Smircich (1991) wrote of heterosexual seduction, our analysis is informed by homoerotic seduction. Our interviewees were all men, save for one woman who did not define leadership in any way. Many leaders and followers will be female. Were women to talk about leadership in similar ways, then by extension the leader/follower relationship comes to be understood as involving male/male, male/female, female/female, and indeed any potential forms of erotic desire. The person casting a desiring gaze upon the leader (who may be male or female) may be a man who in looking would be seduced into desiring another man, or a woman desiring another woman, or it may be opposite sex desire. We could say that in managers' unacknowledged, unsayable, working assumptions about leadership, both homoerotic and heterosexual desires are brought into play, but to say this would be to freeze desire within dominant cultural constraints. Hocquenghem (1978) saw desire as neither homosexual nor heterosexual but as a poly-vocal flux – bodies are attracted to bodies – however 'civilisation' demands suppression of the play of desire. We suggest therefore that talk about leadership includes a non-vocalised (perhaps non-vocalisable) but nevertheless present recognition of organizations as places where a poly-vocal flux of sexual desires circulate, where bodies desire bodies regardless of gender or sexuality.

We are indeed perhaps schooled in such ways of desiring bodies: consider that for the last 30 years magazines and other publications have educated readers in the scopophilic pleasures of looking at members of the same sex. Nixon (1996) shows how men's magazines since the 1980s have invited their readers to gaze openly at highly masculine and openly sensual male bodies. In so doing they have signified a loosening of the binary opposition between gay- and straight-identified men, allowing the display of an ambivalent masculine sexual identity. Lewis & Rolley (1997) meanwhile show that from an early age women are schooled, primarily through 'the matriarchal subculture' of fashion magazines, into an active and desirous consumption of the female body. Today's organizational subjects are thus already trained, even if they do not recognise it, in enjoying a sexualised looking at members of the same sex.

Foucault's project, as Halperin (2004: 44/45) summarises, was to explore sexuality as 'an element in a larger political-discursive technology; ..... as an

instrumental effect; ..... as a social and political device'. His project was to explore not what sexuality is or does, but 'how it works in discursive and institutional practice'. Sex and sexualities, in this reading, become a 'social and political device' to further the interests of the organization, but they could be something else entirely.

That is what our paper has led us to conclude. Our own reflexive account of how writing this paper has worked upon us, its authors, will perhaps explain this conclusion further. We found writing a reflexive account in a paper such as this very difficult to construct, and we initially railed against reviewers' requirement that we provide one. Through our discussions we came to recognise that we were eventually struck by the recognition that words had literally failed us: but why? What we can articulate, over and over, is our dreams of changing organizations so that they become places of pleasure rather than domination. We have had longstanding concerns about the ways in which leadership theory denigrates those it calls 'followers', and our own research has shown the anxieties and confusion aroused in managers who are told they must be leaders (Ford et al, 2008). We therefore recognise that we are not objective when we explore leadership: we start from a position that is critical of the entire concept as it has developed in organization studies. This is why QT holds such an appeal for us, because QT is both theory and political practice.

Nevertheless we *do* work in organizations: if our reading of these interview materials speaks some form of truth, then we too must experience polymorphous desires of bodies for bodies, and we too must suppress these desires so as to sustain those fragile sexual and gendered identities that allow each of us to be an 'I'. We have therefore turned the ideas in this paper back upon ourselves so as to explore some of the mechanisms by which we, ourselves, construct our sexual identities. This took us back to where we started: to 'looking'.

Imagine the scene: one of the authors is walking through the grounds of the university and an attractive body walks past. The author's immediate visceral response to the look of the other person is 'wow', a response followed almost immediately by a suppression of the sexual pleasure evoked in looking at that body, because the body is the 'wrong' sex. If suppression has not been quick enough, and we found ourselves aware of our response, we put it down as a mistake: the desirable body was so similar to a man's/woman's (the fault lay in them, or in our short-sightedness, or in the poor light). For the authors constructed as heterosexual, the desired body was the same sex as theirs so conscious knowledge of attraction was either speedily repressed or denied;

for those constructed as homosexual the desire for an opposite sex body was treated similarly.

This scene brings us to a possible research endeavour: having recognised the mechanisms of repression, authors immersed in reading Butler's work could set out to find out what would happen if they inhibited the swift raising of barriers against desire of the 'wrongly' sexed body. Could such an experiment result in enjoyment of a desirous looking at bodies regardless of their sex? Would new, polymorphous scopophilic experiences emerge? Our reflexive account has therefore led us to ways in which we may understand more of the polymorphous pleasures of being embodied in the workplace, if universities became sites for the conduct of autoethnographic 'experiments' that would help further our understanding of organizational sexualities.

### **Conclusion: Towards heterotopic organizations?**

So what can be done with the knowledge that leadership theory seeks to use erotic desire to achieve greater output from staff, but also that at the same time it may hint at other possibilities?

Halperin argues that with QT's absorption into the mainstream of the academy comes its institutionalization and its canonization; it becomes just another way of thinking, one without a radical edge, without a drive to transform. He argues the need for a revivification of QT, a reinvention of its 'capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not yet been thought' (2003: 343). Our paper is written in this spirit. We want it to make a contribution toward the sort of revivification Halperin seeks. To that end, we argue the advantages of moving queer politics from the lecture hall or journal page to the office and shop floor. To what end? Rather than workplaces being sites of domination, subordination, boredom and alienation, they should become places of pleasure as well as production, of fulfillment alongside employment, of enjoying our lives whilst earning a living. One way of doing this is through reversing the discourse of leadership, turning 'leadership' back upon mainstream organizational theory and developing ways of encouraging leadership to provide an alternative politics for working lives (Learmonth, 2009; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007).

What we are advocating here follows Steyeart (2010). For Steyeart, QT implies that '[l]ife and work, practical living conditions and aesthetic forms, personal concerns and political contexts are not separated but become interwoven and intertwined in transitional space' (2010: 62). In what Steyeart calls *heterotopic* organizations, difference would be celebrated, work would be redesigned so that its focus would be joy in production rather than the mean-spiritedness of profit-making; and hierarchies would be abolished (Harding,

2003; Reedy & Learmonth, 2009). Such ideas share affinities with authors who have called for the re-eroticization of organizations (for a review see Brewis & Grey, 1994), which could be usefully informed by a return to Hocquenghem's work. Such a re-eroticization would rebel against any 'Organization of Pleasure' (Burrell, 1992: 68) which sought to organize pleasure for the purpose of controlling it and putting it to the organization's use, but would insist that pleasure should, at the least, not be suppressed. Butler (1997: 121) writes that 'The line that demarcates the speakable from the unspeakable instates the current boundaries of the social'. We have shown that the line which separates the speakable from the unspeakable in leadership theory is an erotic one. Pushing this line in a new direction has possibilities of changing the social world of organizations.

QT, as noted above, is a political endeavour. Business school academics who align themselves with what is known, albeit loosely, as critical management studies, seek ways to bring about radical changes in organizations. Their aim is a political one, of turning work from something that controls and subordinates people into something that becomes a thing of joy. With the loss of faith in a Marxist revolution, the types of changes sought, and ways of achieving those changes, are vague and unclear. QT, we have suggested here, provides a direction: towards heterotopic organizations. Further, QT's capacity for providing a language through which the previously unspeakable can be articulated, allows management scholars to break through the dumb impasse in which current ways of working are regarded as 'normal'. QT therefore offers a way of articulating the taken-for-granted abjection of many working lives, and so offers new ways in which to speak about organizations and therefore open them to change.

At the same time, is there not the opportunity for the insights from critical scholars working in business schools to inform QT's political agenda? In our understanding of how organizations *work*, can we not contribute to a practical politics of queer, one that turns its attention to ways in which the heterosexual organizational matrix continues to render many staff as 'other' on the grounds of their sex, sexuality and gender identity?

We conclude this paper therefore with a call for the creation of collaborative spaces where queer and leadership scholars and others can work to develop heterotopic organizations. We need to ignore disciplinary divides and get together to learn from each other and plan how to eradicate the norms that render anyone vulnerable or abject. Management scholars need to go to conferences, seminars and other meetings that explore sex, sexualities and genders, where we can listen, learn, debate, discuss and develop plans of action. And if more queer theorists would come to Academy of Management

conferences in the US, and to EGOS and CMS conferences in Europe, and the British Academy of Management conference in the UK, then perhaps they (we?) would shake up our ideas, while we could offer different ways of thinking about the practicalities of bringing about meaningful change.

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### **Notes**

1. This literature is so huge (Grint, 2000) that an attempt at summary would be futile. See Ford et al (2008) for a relevant summary and critique.
2. These sorts of analytical approaches trouble conventional ways of thinking about validity or trustworthiness. This is because conventional thinking generally assumes that validity claims are based on what is in a text – as opposed to what is not in a text. In as much as we would want to use the rhetoric of validity or trustworthiness for our work, we are attracted to notions such as Lather’s transgressive validity, which, she argues, ‘undermines stability, subverts and unsettles from within’ (1993:680).
3. Throughout this paper, ‘sex’ refers to the physical act of sex in all its manifestations, from attraction to flirting to consummation. Sexuality, on the other hand, refers to the object of sexual choice and, notably, how that preference is productive of identity.
4. We are re-reading Bruni’s (2006) work to make this claim. He explores how the vignettes that inform his analysis demonstrate heterosexual desire, but a reading informed by queer theory would suggest that the overtly sexualised language used by males encountering Bruni as he accompanied female staff could have been signalling their desire for Bruni, the male, refracted through the female (Nixon, 1996; Sedgwick, 1985).
5. Though we recognize that ‘lay accounts’ can never be disassociated from academic theories completely, because each informs the other.



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