Title:

A Proposed Grounded Theory Study of Church Leadership Influence Processes

Stephen G. Fogarty
Alphacrucis College, Sydney Australia

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Introduction

This paper considers Kempster and Parry’s (2011) suggestion that it is appropriate to apply a critical realist frame of reference to grounded theory research. It proposes a grounded theory methodology for a qualitative research study into the leadership influence processes within Christian churches. The intended study will build upon Fogarty’s (2013) quantitative study into the impact of senior pastor leadership behaviors on volunteer motivation in Australian Christian Churches (ACC).

Fogarty (2013) found that senior pastors’ transactional leadership behaviors predicted volunteers’ extrinsic motivation and that transformational leadership behaviors predicted intrinsic motivation. In addition, volunteers’ trust in and value congruence with senior pastors partially mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and intrinsic motivation. Volunteers perceived senior pastors as more typically exercising transformational rather than transactional leadership behaviors and themselves as more typically experiencing intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. Volunteers also perceived themselves as typically experiencing trust in and value congruence with senior pastors. These findings are consonant with National Church Life Survey (NCLS) results that indicate that ACC attendees rate their church leaders considerably higher than do all Australian church attendees on the practise of inspirational leadership (Australian Christian Churches 2013 Church Census Report).

Inspirational leadership is a category developed by NCLS to incorporate leader behaviors that inspire congregation members to commit to the vision and mission of the church. It consists of the three transformational behaviors of vision-casting, inspiring and encouraging follower involvement, and encouraging innovation. The NCLS data and Fogarty’s findings indicate that the exercise of leadership within ACC churches is likely characterised by greater demonstration of transformational leadership behaviors than across all Australian churches. The data also indicates that there is likely to be a correlation between the exercise of
transformational leadership behaviors and church growth and size (Australian Christian Churches 2013 Church Census Report).

Fogarty (2013) noted three potential weaknesses in his study: (1) the low rating of extrinsic motivation and the high rating of intrinsic motivation across subjects might indicate the existence of socially desirable responses by participants; (2) the high rating of senior pastors’ transformational behaviors and low rating of transactional behaviors might indicate the existence of an implicit theory of transformational leadership – a “halo” effect – among participants; and (3) the quantitative and cross-sectional design of the survey placed a limit on gaining explanatory insight into the obtained responses.

The proposed study seeks to implement the concluding advice of Fogarty that a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with participants is likely to provide a richer perspective on why volunteers in ACC churches continue in their roles and what leadership behaviors and relationships contribute to the enhancement of intrinsic motivation (Fogarty, 2013). It intends to investigate the nature of leadership as a social and relational influence process within ACC churches. This paper is a preliminary discussion of the application of grounded theory methodology and critical realist epistemology to the intended study.

**The Leadership Influence Process**

The proposed study employs Parry’s (1998) description of leadership as “a social and relational influence process” that occurs within a social system and which produces “transformation in the views, beliefs, attitudes and motivations” of participants (pp. 85-7). This description shifts the focus of investigation from leader to context and all participants and represents a different approach to that of Fogarty (2013) who described leadership as “the process of influencing others to work towards the accomplishment of worthwhile goals” (p. 5). Fogarty’s description borrows from Yukl’s (2013) definition of leadership as “the process
of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (p. 7). While all three definitions emphasise leadership as influence process, Parry’s description places less emphasis on the importance of the leader and more on the contribution of all participants within the particular context.

Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, and Johnson (2011) provided a categorization of leadership theories based on the two principles of the locus and mechanism of leadership. The locus of leadership addresses the question of “Where does leadership come from?” and is defined as “the source from which leadership arises” (p. 1166). The authors proposed the five loci of leader, followers, dyads, collectives, and context. Leader-focused theories view leadership as arising either totally or partially from the leader, whereas follower-focused theories identify follower characteristics which by themselves, and independent of the leader, facilitate the exercise of leadership. Dyadic theories focus on specific features of the leader–follower relationship while collective theories extend beyond the dyad to incorporate the interconnected relationships of people with teams and groups. Contextual theories incorporate “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior” (p. 1167) and take into account features such as organizational and societal culture and operating environment. The mechanism of leadership addresses the question of “How is leadership transmitted?” (p. 1166) and is defined as “the means by which leadership is enacted” (p.1167). It is the actual process through which the locus of leadership exercises influence. Hernandez et al. (2011) proposed the four mechanisms of traits, behaviors, cognition, and affect. Trait theories focus on “the stable and enduring qualities and patterns of individuals’ emotions, thoughts, and behaviors” (p. 1168) and include personal characteristics of leaders and followers. Behavioral theories concentrate on the “the types of behavior that make leadership possible” (p. 1168). Cognition theories incorporate “the
thoughts and sense-making processes” (p. 1168) of leaders and followers. Affect captures “the emotions and moods” (p. 1168) involved in the leader–follower relationship.

Within this categorization, Hernandez et al. (2011) portrayed transactional leadership theory as having the leader as the locus and behaviors as the mechanism of leadership. This means that the theory concentrates on the behaviors exhibited by the transactional leader and the impact of these behaviors on followers. Transactional leaders “clarify how followers’ needs will be fulfilled in exchange for completing their job requirements” (p. 1172). They address the two issues of followers’ needs and followers’ role fulfilment by enacting the behaviors of contingent reward and active and passive management by exception. Transactional leadership behaviors produce an exchange relationship between leader and followers as the leader clearly outlines tasks and the way they should be performed, and followers agree to complete the assignments in exchange for commensurate material or psychological compensation. After outlining tasks and rewards, the leader monitors the accomplishments of the followers.

In contrast, transformational leadership theory is portrayed as having the leader–follower dyad as the locus and behaviors, cognition, affect, and traits as the mechanisms of leadership. The theory focuses on both leaders and followers and broadens the conceptualization of the mechanism of influence between each beyond behaviors to also incorporate emotional and intellectual influences. Followers “have trust and respect for the leader” and “are motivated to go above and beyond what is normally expected of them” (Hernandez et al., 2011, p. 1172). They are willing to do this because the leader engages them by enacting the behaviors of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Transformational leadership behaviors are directed towards followers’ higher needs and motives as the leader inspires followers to go beyond expected levels of commitment and contribution. This inspirational process relies on the leader emphasizing task-related values and his or her strong commitment to a mission.
Fogarty (2013) employed transactional and transformational leadership theories and focused solely on the senior pastor as leader. The potential weaknesses that he identified in that study can be addressed in a qualitative study focusing on the two questions of Hernandez et al. (2011): “Where does leadership come from?” and “How is leadership transmitted?” Three study aims can be addressed while exploring these two questions.

The first aim is to seek to incorporate other loci of leadership in addition to the locus of the leader in transactional leadership and the locus of the leader-follower dyad in transformational leadership. The other potential loci, or sources from which leadership arises, identified by Hernandez et al. (2011) are context, followers, and collectives. While not seeking to devalue the importance of leader traits or behaviors nor the impact of leader-follower dyadic relationships, it is likely that leadership influence processes within church congregations are also determined by unique aspects of the followers who choose to serve as volunteers, and who influence others to do likewise, and by the interconnected relationships of people that constitute the congregations. The unique context of church congregations, produced by the combination of the voluntary nature of participant involvement and the theological belief system that provides common meaning, is also likely to act as a determinant of leadership influence processes. A qualitative study allows investigation of the leadership influence process across multiple loci of leadership.

A second aim is to investigate the affective mechanism of transformational leadership. Fogarty (2013) identified the inspirational nature of transformational leadership within church congregations and its positive prediction of intrinsic motivation in volunteers. Bass (1985) emphasised the emotional component of transformational leadership and described the transformational leader as having dreams and the ability to articulate those dreams through dramatic and persuasive words and actions. Within transformational leadership theory this emotional connection between leaders and followers is conceptualised as inspirational
motivation which is “the leader’s ability to provide followers with a clear vision of the organization’s future, the value of high standards of operation, and a sense of meaningfulness in their work” (Fogarty, 2013, p. 38) and which “arouses followers’ enthusiasm and sense of team spirit” (Riggio et al., 2004, p. 51). Fogarty noted that inspirational motivation “is a key component of Christian leadership which seeks to motivate followers to the cause of the gospel through the casting of vision, preaching, and symbolic action” (p. 38). The emotions and moods of leaders and followers influence their attitudes and behaviors and can transfer to other members of the collective and exert influence on context. Hernandez et al. (2011) suggested that “the affective mechanism of leadership remains largely underexplored” (p. 1176). A qualitative study has potential to shed light on the affective dimension of the leadership influence process.

A third aim is to investigate Fogarty’s (2013) concern that an implicit theory of transformational leadership held commonly by congregational volunteers might have inflated ratings of senior pastors’ transformational leadership behaviors. He noted that the possibility that transformational leadership is the implicit leadership theory for senior pastors among congregational members is consistent with previous findings that church volunteers prefer clergy to exercise transformational leadership behaviors (Bae, 2001; Druskat, 1994; Callahan, 1996; Choi, 2006; Onnen, 1987; Rowold, 2008) and with Christian understandings of leadership as being charismatic and virtuous (Barrett, 1971; Fee, 1987; Morris, 1980). Hernandez et al. (2011) categorised implicit leadership theory as locating “the locus of leadership within the followers and the mechanism of leadership within cognition” (p. 1172). Implicit leadership theories “are developed through socialization and past experiences, and represent cognitive schemas specifying traits and behaviors that followers expect of leaders” (Fogarty, 2013, p. 84). A qualitative study provides the opportunity to explore the thoughts
and sense-making processes of congregational volunteers and thus to investigate the existence and nature of implicit theories of leadership.

Hernandez et al. (2011) suggested that investigation of the five loci and four mechanisms of leadership will provide the opportunity to formulate “a more comprehensive leadership system” (p. 1166) which would facilitate integration of the existing diverse theoretical perspectives. A qualitative approach facilitates investigation of all five loci and four mechanisms and can contribute towards a more comprehensive and integrative view of the leadership influence process. It would be designed with the general orientation of answering the two questions: “Where does leadership come from?” and “How is leadership transmitted?”

**Grounded Theory Methodology**

Grounded theory methodology aims to generate new theory from data rather than to test existing theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). It seeks to explain the phenomenon being studied through the generation of theory. A grounded theory “is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents” (Parry, 1998, p. 89). Therefore, “generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses” (Glaser & Strauss, 2008, p. 3). The theory generated identifies a basic social process “to explain the social phenomenon under investigation” (Parry, 1998, p. 91). It should enable prediction and explanation of behavior and be usable in practical application as well as contribute to theoretical advance (Glaser & Strauss, 2008).

Applied to the study of leadership, grounded theory methodology seeks to derive a social theory of leadership influence that is drawn from the experiences of participants in a particular context (Kempster & Parry, 2011). A grounded theory approach entails “detailed investigation of the process of social influence process” that constitutes leadership (Parry,
1998, p.90). The phenomenon of leadership is complex and contextual and involves social, processual and relational dynamics (Kempster & Parry, 2011). This complexity and context specificity is evident in church congregations where participant involvement is faith-based and voluntary. Such involvement is likely to be motivated by “the need for personal growth and the desire to derive satisfaction in serving a cause” (Thiagarajan, 2004, p.47).

Congregational leaders have the task of connecting the motivation of volunteers to the church’s ideals and activities. The exercise of leadership in this context involves “building relationships in order to strengthen the organization” (Dobbs, 2004, p.16) and inspiring participants to “commitment to a vision or cause” and enabling them to “reach their highest potential” (Riggio et al., 2004, p.48).

The proposed study seeks to identify the leadership influence process within church congregations. As a researcher I do not approach this reality as a “tabula rasa” (Glaser & Strauss, 2008, p. 3), having previously conducted research on transactional and transformational leadership within church congregations (Fogarty, 2013). The advantage of this theoretical background is an orientation to the field of study. The potential disadvantage is that of imposing existing knowledge and theory to the study process and outcomes. This issue of the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher is a component of the grounded theory development process (Parry, 1998). Theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher’s insight into both themself and the area that they are researching (Birk & Mills, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 2008). It is necessary to have “some understanding of the theoretical area before commencing grounded theory generation” as long as this prior understanding does not “force the development of some theory that does not emerge from the data” (Parry, 1998, pp. 93-4). A discovered, grounded theory “will tend to combine mostly concepts and hypotheses that have emerged from the data with some existing ones that are clearly useful” (Glaser & Strauss, 2008, p. 46).
The unit of analysis in the study will be the local church congregation. In large churches, containing multiple congregations, an awareness of leadership influence processes across the broader church framework will be necessary. The study will be longitudinal and will primarily use participant interview data. Interviewees will also be asked to complete the quantitative survey employed by Fogarty (2013). This will provide the opportunity for triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data. The goal of data collection will be to capture rich detail of participant perspectives (Charmaz, 2006). The data will be transcripts of interviews, survey questionnaires, and field notes and memos. This data will possibly be supplemented with organizational literature and publications. Pastors of larger churches often write books and publish sermons which are potential data sources.

Open ended interview questions will be oriented toward Hernandez et al.’s (2011) loci and mechanisms of leadership: “Where does leadership come from?” and “How is leadership transmitted?” The goal will be to derive a social theory of leadership influence within church congregations that is drawn from the experience of participants. Hernandez et al. (2011) identified five loci of leadership: leader, followers, dyads, collectives, and context. An initial question seeking to address the leadership influence process across multiple loci of leadership might be “Who has had the most influence in inspiring and maintaining your motivation to volunteer for the church?”, followed by “How have they had that influence?” Fogarty (2013) identified the affective nature of transformational leadership within church congregations and its positive prediction of intrinsic motivation in volunteers. Therefore, an initial question might be “Are there people within the church congregation who arouse your enthusiasm and commitment to its vision and mission?”, followed by “How do they enthuse you?” Parry (1998) observed that “intervening and supplementary questions might relate to expanding and giving details on incidents, processes, and the impact of particular people” (p. 94). Fogarty (2013) identified the possibility that transformational leadership is the implicit leadership
theory for senior pastors among congregational members. Therefore, supplementary questions seeking to identify implicit definitions of leadership would be incorporated into interviews. For example, a question might be “Who do you think is an obvious leader within the congregation?”, followed by “What qualities make that person an obvious leader?”

Grounded theory method involves coding and categorization of initial data followed by concurrent data collection and analysis and conceptualization as categories are refined. This constant comparative analysis is central to grounded theory as theory is inductively built from data and continues “until a grounded theory is fully integrated” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 11). The researcher analyses collected data and derives concepts and theoretical ideas which then lead to further more purposeful data collection and on to further theoretical work. This iterative process involves “theoretical sampling” which is “the process of identifying and pursuing clues that arise during analysis” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 69). Theoretical sampling is the result of the inductive nature of theory generation as the researcher decides what data to collect next and where to find them. The process of generating higher levels of theoretical abstraction is called “theoretical coding” and results in “the identification of a basic social process and the generation of an explanatory theory” (Parry, 1998, p. 90). In generating a grounded theory of leadership within church congregations the move from empirical data to theoretical abstraction is likely to utilise metaphors and concepts drawn from Christian theology such as the notion of trinitarian unity as an analogy for decentralised and egalitarian exercise of authority or the example of Christ as being paradigmatic for self-sacrificial exercise of leadership. Such metaphors are likely to be implicit within Christian understandings of leadership and will contribute to an explanatory substantive theory.
Critical Realist Epistemology

Kempster and Parry (2011) argue that critical realism provides an appropriate frame of reference for conducting grounded theory research because both share an emphasis on local contextualised understanding and explanation. Critical realism, or “post-positivism” (Kempster & Parry, 2011, p. 109), occupies a middle ground between Positivism and Constructivism. Positivism emphasises objectivity, generalizability and replication of research, and assumes an unbiased and passive researcher who collects data without participating in its creation. The knowledge derived “is based on careful observation and measurement of the objective reality that exists “out there” in the world” (Creswell, 2003, p. 7). Kempster and Parry point out that the study of leadership influence processes challenges a positivist approach because leadership functions at a “deep” causal level where the influence process is not easily observed. Constructivism rejects the assumption of the neutral and value-free observer, and sees the researcher as being subjectively involved in the construction and interpretation of data. A constructivist approach starts with the assumption that “social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed” and understands that “the researcher’s position, privileges, perspectives, and interactions” are an inherent part of the research reality.” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13).

Critical realism shares the constructivist assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, but not that this necessarily leads to the acceptance of multiple realities (Kempster & Parry, 2011). Critical realists assume that there is an objective reality that exists outside of human interpretation, and which we perceive imperfectly (Birks & Mills, 2011). The researcher acknowledges the impact of personal subjectivity on the production of knowledge and theory, but also understands reality as actual and concrete and able to be experienced and intelligently comprehended. Knowledge of the world is gained through experience and observation combined with reflective interpretation and theorising, and can be shared with
other people. In engaging with participants in grounded theory study the researcher will be impacted by the interaction, but with care and self-awareness can still “generate credible descriptions and sense-making of peoples’ actions and words that can be seen to be applicable” (Kempster & Parry, 2011, p. 106).

Critical realism emphasises that leadership influence processes may not be capable of being observed through events, “but rather are interpreted and explored through an understanding of the interplay between agency and structure” (Kempster & Parry, 2011, p. 110). Structures, “a nexus of embedded meanings, practices and relationships” (p. 111) within the community are likely to causally affect the action of agents seeking to exercise leadership influence. The social context of leadership within church congregations is created through the interaction of theological and related structures and their interpretation and application by agents. These underlying structures are likely to include embedded practices and meanings of leadership. Are structures of meaning within a church congregation likely to be related to understandings of the divine nature and divine-human interaction as portrayed in biblical texts? Are such structures likely to influence the actions and interactions of both leaders and followers? Is this likely to produce a unique leadership influence process? It is likely that the answers to all three questions are “yes”. Different church traditions and congregations emphasize different aspects of scripture and different portrayals of divinity, humanity, and appropriate leadership influence. Authoritarian leadership cultures within church congregations are likely to be influenced by notions of divine authority endowed upon anointed individuals and of faith expressed as unquestioning obedience as appropriate behavior for followers. Egalitarian leadership cultures within church congregations are likely to be influenced by notions of the servanthood of Christ and the relationality of trinitarian unity to be expressed in servant leadership and followership. Critical realism reinforces the validity of connecting deep causal structures such as concepts of the divine nature and the nature of divine-human interaction
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with the observable behaviors of primary agents in positions of influence within church congregations.

The critical realist proposition that “an understanding and explanation of reality is fundamentally socially constructed” (Kempster & Parry, 2011, p. 111) indicates that a theory of leadership influence be developed at the level of the individual congregational. Every church congregation has a unique and complex nexus of influences which impact the practice and processes of leadership. A grounded theory of church leadership influence processes “must place primacy on resonating with the reality of the substantive context” (p. 110). Critical realism addresses the issue of internal validity using the criteria of practical adequacy and plausibility. Practical adequacy and plausibility are based on the pragmatic principle that “a theory grasps enough of reality to allow us to do things with it” (Kempster & Parry, 2011, p. 112). They will be tested by eliciting feedback from participants that the theory does indeed make sense and provide explanation of the leadership influence process within the congregation. The test of the adequacy of the grounded theory will be that it provides a “plausible explanation of reality” (p. 112) that resonates with their lived experiences.

Church congregations are contexts that do share similarities and common properties. Christian churches share common language and symbols that contain embedded common assumptions, beliefs, and practices. The proposed study will, therefore, be replicated within different congregations to identify similarity and possible generalizability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the goal of the proposed study is to investigate the nature of leadership as a social and relational influence process within Australian Christian Churches congregations using grounded theory methodology and critical realism epistemology. In doing so, it will address the three aims of: (1) seeking to incorporate the five loci of leadership identified by
Hernandez et al. (2011) within the influence process; (2) investigating the affective mechanism of leadership influence; and (3) exploring the possible existence of an implicit theory of church leadership shared by participants. It is hoped that the emergent grounded theory will contribute towards a more comprehensive and integrative view of leadership influence processes within church congregations.
References


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