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Making Monsters: Modelling the abject in leadership education

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Abstract

In this paper, we develop knowledge about the potential of liminal spaces to open up possibilities for learning, by exploring ways to encounter and articulate the monstrous in leadership. After exploring the implications of theoretical understandings of the monstrous for leadership education and practice, we show how encouraging students to mould their own ‘leadership monsters’ helps them articulate the challenges associated with learning about leadership, becoming a leader, and dealing with leadership’s ‘shadow side’. Modelling monsters is shown to be useful to those looking to develop their understanding of leadership theory and practice, and to researchers seeking innovative, alternative techniques to examine the chaotic art, experience, and embodiment of leadership.

Monsters are disruptive representations, which due to their appearance, size, morality or behaviour, are not easily categorised within the bounds of social convention. They defy enlightenment projects seeking to define, categorise and manage reality. For this reason, Thanem writes (2007), monsters inhabit the
‘peri
eripheral borderlands... cold, dark and lonely places far away from the
tonal places far away from the enlighten
ten core’.

Yet monsters are objects of fascination as well as anxiety and horror, because, as Shildrick (2001) argues, they represent the uncanny: that which is familiar, but has been repressed, and might return at any moment (Freud 1955:247). The deformity of monsters reminds us of the abject within, the rejected parts of ourselves (Kristeva 1982, Rizq 2013), including our own embodied vulnerability and imperfections. This is significant for those wishing to understand the monstrousness in leadership, which is varying
classified as an embodied accomplishment (Sinclair 2005), an effect of hybridized, human and non-human actants (Hawkins, forthcoming, Fairhurst 2007), a cyborgian identity (Muhr, 2011, Alvesson and Spicer, 2011) with a dark, dangerous ‘shadow side’ (de Vries and Balazs 2011), and a site of never-ending identity work in which the self, or the practice, is never fully realised (Svenningsson and Larsson 2008).

Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999) show how the process of organizing ensures that everything is ‘kept in place’, thus establishing a boundary between that which is retained inside the organization, and the displacing ‘outside’ of that which is considered ‘other’. They argue that the displaced outside is populated by three types of monsters, whose implications for leadership we articulate here.

The Distorted mirror: Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999) argue that in this version of the monstrous, the abject is represented by distorted embodiments of human subjects or ‘aliens with pointy ears.’ In relation to leadership, this
monster might represent those leaders whose bodies or actions differ from those of the ‘stereotypical leader’.

**Subversion:** subversive monsters articulate a crack in the natural order of things. They represent alternative possibilities: subversive monsters of leadership might problematize common-sense leadership performances and aim to overturn everyday understandings of what ‘counts’ as leadership.

**Undecideability:** Monsters representing the undecideability of leadership highlight the disruptive potential in leadership: expressing the fluidity and multiplicity of meanings within leadership theory and practice. It has been recognised that encounters with doubt and uncertainty are common to both learning about, and practising leadership (Hawkins and Edwards, forthcoming), yet much of leadership focuses on the attempt to frame and ‘manage’ meanings in an attempt to develop unity and a shared goal (Smircich and Morgan 1982). If leadership involves the ‘management of meaning’, the monster of undecideability points both to the precariousness of this process in which meanings can never be completely managed, and the constant, never-quite-fully-banished threat of the return of chaos.

The transformative potential of the monstrous can be understood by applying the anthropological and pedagogic literature on liminality, to bring its possibilities for learning and development more sharply into focus.

*Grappling the Liminal Monster*
The story of ‘The Three Billy Goats Gruff’ articulates the role of the liminal monster as it appears in folklore, fairy tales and many tribal rituals. Forms of this story exist all over northern Europe, but the Norwegian version goes something like this:

Once upon a time, there were three billy (young male) goats, and their name was ‘Gruff’. They lived together quite happily in a field until one day, they noticed a bridge, leading to a bigger field with lusher, greener grass. The three billy goats Gruff decided, one by one, to cross the bridge and gorge themselves in the new field. Unfortunately for them, they encountered a troll living under the bridge. As each goat makes its way, ‘trip-trapping’ over the bridge, the troll hears their footsteps, blocks their way and threatens to eat them up if they take one step further across the bridge. The first two goats run away from the troll, each pleading with him that a bigger, fatter goat will soon come along and provide a still tastier meal. When the third goat arrives, he lowers his horns and charges, tossing the troll over the bridge. The three goats ‘trip-trap’ over the bridge and fatten themselves happily on the rich grass in this new field.

This story contains all the key elements of liminal passage, which van Gennep 2011) characterises as:

1) *Separation*, symbolic or physical, from known social conventions and familiar surroundings. This is represented in the fairy tale by the goats leaving the old, familiar field.
2) The *Limen* or Threshold – a cultural realm with few of the attributes of the previous or coming states. Bridges like the one in the story of the billy goats Gruff are common folkloric symbols for liminal passage.

3) *Reincorporation* into society following a transformation into a new, usually higher status, identity – just as the three little goats enter a new field, with tastier grass.

As the three billy goats Gruff discover, sites of liminal passage are places of danger and uncertainty, associated with that which is undefinable or outside the symbolic order (Douglas 1966). Turner (1987:14) argues that during liminal passage, monsters ‘*startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships and features of their environment that they have hitherto taken for granted*’. Therefore facing liminal monsters involves grappling with uncertainty, or encountering that which pollutes, challenges, displaces or subverts social or symbolic orders (Douglas 1966, Turner 1987). Overcoming the monster is a sign that the liminal threshold has been crossed and a transformation has occurred at the level of self: the liminal subject can once again join the bounds of convention, albeit in a different ‘field’ or with a slightly altered identity.

A growing body of scholarship is characterising the learning experience as a site of liminal passage (Meyer and Land 2005, Yip and Raelin 2012). The experience of learning about leadership is a liminal one for undergraduate students, because it represents a space in which they become separated from common-sense understandings about what leadership ‘is’ and how to accomplish it, and encounter uncertainty and chaos in the multiplicity of new leadership theories.
and concepts of what it means to study leadership. For this reason, we suggest (see also Hawkins and Edwards forthcoming) that they might well be exposed to liminal monsters as they struggle through a process in which disorder and the abject return, before discovering new ways of understanding the world which have a transformative impact on their sense of self.

Encouraging students to confront their liminal monsters requires educators to facilitate discussion around the challenges students face in learning how to become a leadership scholar, and in how to articulate diversity and tension amongst the theories they encounter. In what follows we bring the method of clay modelling to bear on processes of development that occur during undergraduate learning experiences.

Modelling Monsters: Moulding the self through learning in liminality.

Until recently, visual creative methods have not been associated with scholarly rigour, and as Wall et al (2012) discuss, have tended to be neglected in the field of education. However, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006) suggest that the process of creating an artefact or model recognises that learning is a whole-body process, which does not isolate mind from body. Recognising the aesthetic quality of leadership (Ladkin 2008, Bathurst et al 2010), Sutherland (2012) explores the value of visual methods for leadership development. He suggests that techniques such as drawing and map-making enable opportunities to engage in aesthetic reflexivity, developing ‘felt, embodied, emotional experiences of self and leadership as well as providing concepts and discourse for future practice’ (ibid: 39). As Schyns et al (2012)
point out, visual methods such as drawing can enable people to access and question their taken-for-granted ways of looking at leadership and followership, by examining the implicit assumptions embedded in their work.

Visual methods can therefore provide opportunities for students to explore the limits and possibilities of leadership in relation to the monstrous, and the challenges they face as they grapple with liminal monsters of doubt, uncertainty and flux during the learning process. Following Wicks and Rippin’s (2010) argument that arts-based inquiry methods can help people articulate the embodied, situated experiences of leadership, which are not easily expressed in words, we developed a workshop in which students created their own ‘leadership monsters’ in modelling clay.

Clay modelling or sculpture is an open-ended, iterative process. It has no clear end or defined outcome. As such it offers opportunities for students who are experiencing the chaos of liminality to explore an infinite number of possible avenues for understanding both self and leadership. The process of shaping and moulding the clay takes time, which itself offers an opportunity for critical reflection as learners make connections between understanding and aesthetic (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006). Modelling monsters offers students a way to grapple with the transformative potential of their liminal spaces, opening up possibilities for (re)moulding self and understanding in relation to leadership. The open-ended, three-dimensional practice of clay sculpture, through which students explore shape, embodiment and difference, resulted in a number of ‘monsters’ relating to the self, learning and leadership.
Some students chose to create monsters representing the challenge of learning about leadership. These monsters had features like a clock for a face (representing exam pressure), a spiky tail which could whip around and catch them unawares (articulating the hidden assumptions within leadership theories), or were depicted hidden in a maze (representing the confusion and uncertainty of multiple theories). Others produced monsters that articulated the negative aspects of leadership itself, such as hierarchical power relations (a huge monster dwarfing a tiny human figure).

Sculpture and modelling methods presents educators with opportunities to explore with student participants the (socio)material, embodied and self-forming aspects of leadership which are difficult to access solely through talking. The clay monsters are representations of the interstices between theory, practice, emotion and embodiment. They represent a means by which students can express, and educators can become aware of, the kinds of monsters encountered by students in the learning process. Relatedly, the modelling method functions as an opportunity for researchers, practitioners and learners of leadership to explore the role of the monstrous in leadership – representations of chaos and the unknown, leadership's dirty or shadow side, and the material, embodied character of leadership. If ‘monsters live on the edge’ (Thanem 2006), modelling leadership monsters can serve to materialise and make sense of some of leadership's ‘edgier’ elements: the uncertain, the non-verbal, the amoral, the risky and the grotesque. Furthermore, the unusual method of developing scholarly understanding about the experiences of
leadership studies undergraduates through the creation of clay monsters, is perhaps at the edge of, or pushing at the boundaries of what is traditionally seen as ‘rigourous’ leadership studies research – albeit in a way which complements the embodied, material, sculpted nature of doing, studying and researching leadership.

Conclusion

As Thanem (2006) argues, the monstrous represents chaos, dirt, mess, and the disruption of boundaries. These are characteristics of that which is abject in both practising leadership and learning about it, in which we seek to define, to control, to categorise and frame meaning, but where chaos and confusion always threaten to return. The liminal passage experienced by students as they learn about leadership means that they are likely to encounter monsters, but it is these monsters which embody the opportunities for transformation of self and understanding by unsettling previously held convictions about what leadership is and how to study it. They represent that which has been exiled from the self (Star 1990, Rizq 2013) in a bid to secure meanings about the process of learning as well as the practice of leadership.

Modelling the monstrous in leadership offers students and practitioners of leadership a way to explore that which is excluded from everyday understanding about what counts as leadership and what leaders look or sound like. In addition, it offers ways to grapple with the constant sense of uncertainty and doubt which characterises the experiences of those who study and practice leadership. Exploring monsters enables students, practitioners and researchers
to examine the boundaries of leadership. By attempting to engage with the messier side of leadership, which cannot be fully defined or controlled through language, there is potential in monster-construction for a transformative learning experience in which students can unsettle previously held assumptions and develop a more rounded, embodied awareness of the processes of displacement and inclusion by which knowledge of both self and leadership are formed.

References


