Leadership privilege: Generating rigorous and relevant research into the process of Collusive Closure
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We are investigating the phenomenon of collusive closure. This particular investigation is with regard to the introduction (or induction) of people into leadership positions. These positions need not be formal organisational positions that are structured within a hierarchy. Perhaps more importantly, we then suggest ways in which collusive closure can be researched such that rigour and relevance can be maximised, whilst understanding this phenomenon.

The phenomenon of collusive closure
Some years ago, Khurana and Pisorski (2004) tendered the concept of ‘collusive closure’ to explain structural inequality in managerial labour markets whereby senior positions are restricted to certain groups. Drawing from the work of Khurana (1998) they explain collusive closure as follows: ‘under certain cultural conditions, closure may arise through a series of self-reproducing social constructions that restrict access to a position to those who conform to certain socially defined criteria (Khurana and Pisorski, 2004: 169). Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) have found support for this notion by researching the slow progress of women to the Chief Executive positions of management in large organizations. Using a Bourdieuan (2001) approach to the social phenomenon under investigation, they found that ‘habitus’ ‘cultural field’ and ‘symbolic capital’ were the social processes that explained the collusive closure that appears still to be in practice. Under certain cultural conditions, women appear to be excluded from CEO positions by certain self-reproducing social constructions; and not by formal managerial constructions.

In this paper, we extend this concept to leadership as a process and not just to the appointment of people to formal leadership positions. Khurana and Pisorski’s (2004) explanation is by no means a new argument. The well-worn notion of the ‘old boy’s club’ is predicated upon the reproduction of social inequality to achieve labour market advantage (McDonald, 2011). Indeed, anecdotal evidence from the Netherlands is that socially constructed aphorisms are emerging as a result of affirmative action for female executive appointments. Those aphorisms refer to an ‘old girls’ club [or network]’.

Criteria for selection
As Khurana and Pisorski (2004) contend, collusive closure occurs for reasons of social legitimacy rather than deliberate discrimination or for group solidarity. Closure is a process where people are socially matched to jobs via position matching, performance attribution and status matching. The position is ‘closed’ (or
unavailable) to people who might be seen as unacceptable; and the position is ‘closed’ after the appointment of the acceptable person is made. Perhaps central to this understanding is the notion that such job advantages are unearned rather than deserved. The result is a self-reinforcing socialisation process that limits job opportunities to people who meet the limited and pre-defined criteria with limited opportunity to deviate from this norm, despite such jobs being unmerited. To remediate this there are two courses of action: the market efficiently counteracts management agency or when the market is not efficient, intervention is required by boards and stakeholders to correct management behaviour.

Collusion may appear to be at odds with the socially constructed nature of leadership inherent in the definition. For agreed-upon socially defined criteria to emerge there must be consistency across actors whereas the social constructionist approaches emphasis idiosyncratic views of leadership and complex, contested negotiations between leadership actors (see Fairhurst and Grant, 2010 for a review). However, an examination of how actors co-construct reality to reproduce collusive behaviour and subsequent closure is compatible with this viewpoint. For this, we draw from Gallon’s (1999) analysis of actor-network theory (ANT) and who states ‘if agents can calculate their decisions, it is because they are entangled in a web of relations and connections; they do not have to open up to the world because they contain their world’ (Gallon, 1999: 185). While ANT has parallels with social constructionist views and collusive closure such as actors participating in a network of ontologies (Gallon, 1999), we are concerned with individual relationships between human actors and not generalised societies and natures which are a central feature of ANT (Latour, 1996). To this extent, collusive closure has more in common with notions of the in-group, rather than with notions of cultural fit; the latter being about the acceptable person’s fit with the norms and expectations of the broader organisational community. The former is about social desirability for the principal decision-maker and that person’s close group of people.

The concept of collusive closure has been referred to by a number of scholars to explain inequality in leadership positions. For example, it has been used to explain why women are often excluded in the executive search process (Tiernari, Merilainen, Holgersson and Bendl, 2013) and why they occupy a minority of board positions (Gamba and Goldstein, 2009). It has also been used to examine the relationship between post-secondary education and career achievement (Ott, 2013) as well as racial inequality in the service industry (Rubin and Moller, 2013). While it is a promising concept it is under-developed, which might explain why it has not yet received more attention.

**Outcomes from Collusive Closure**

To address this concern, we focus on two aspects of collusive closure that Khurana and Pisorski (2004) neglect. First, we reconsider their second proposition about who initiates closure and the subsequent benefit. While the authors contend that it is not always initiated by those who seek to benefit, for their
argument to hold true we submit that closure must also be initiated by those who do not seek to benefit directly. In effect therefore, benefit is neither a criterion for selection and nor is it an outcome of collusive closure. Other criteria must be I place for the decision to be made. How and why such persons engage in closure was not given attention by Khurana and Pisorski (2004) and an analysis of this theme is one of the contributions of this paper.

**Antecedent conditions.** We have said that collusive closure will not always be initiated by those who seek to benefit from it. Indeed, we suggest that collusion might actually be perpetrated by the ‘losers’ from the closure as much as by the ‘winners’. For example the victim/martyr complex (Abrahamson et al., 1978; Kets de Vries, 2012), most usually attributed to women, is possibly a derivative of the habitus from which women have developed. It might well mean that women unwittingly collude in the closure that excludes them from CEO positions. Perhaps the ‘controlees’ are just as much ‘control freaks’ as are the ‘controllers’. The notion of the ‘control freak’ is a populist term that incorporates notions of Type A personality, dependency disorder and borderline sociopathy. This issue is significantly different to more traditional discussions of collusive behavior that reflect an intentional re-structuring of power relations. Indeed, collusive closure is commonly used to explain market sharing agreements that benefit all parties in order to avoid competition (Belleflame and Bloch, 2004). It is too easy to say that the antecedent conditions of collusive closure revolve around personality and gender. They might just as likely revolve around need and attitude, which are of course independent of personality and gender.

As a corollary, another issue is Khurana and Pisorski’s ‘certain cultural conditions’ under which collusive closure occurs. This is a key component of the definition but is as yet largely unexplored. Outside of noting the additional influence of social and psychological forces on perceptions of leader performance there is no discussion of the aforementioned cultural conditions. We suggest that it is these ‘certain cultural conditions’ which is the issue that is badly in need of research.

**Further outcomes.** Given the lack of information thus far we can attempt to deduce some implications. As Khurana and Pisorski argue, when the market fails to allocate people efficiently and does usurp managerial agency, boards of directors and shareholders must intervene. This outcome implies that social control mechanisms are key to subverting collusive closure. This thought is supported by Sørensen (2006) who argues that equal opportunity in labour markets hinges on social and economic equality, particularly family welfare policies. To wit, leadership is closed when there exist few mechanisms for social control such as board oversight, shareholder activism and social policy supporting equal opportunity. A deeper examination of the various tools of social control will also be a feature of this paper presentation.
Deviating from the arguments of Khurana and Pisorski (2004), in this paper we argue that social reproduction that gives rise to collusive closure in leadership does not have to benefit anyone directly. However, in all cases it indirectly reinforces one’s desired social position; if not for the purposes for position matching or performance attribution, then certainly to reproduce status. This last point is crucial and gives an explanation as to why individuals participate in the reproduction process even if they did not initiate it. This also allows for a more thorough examination of the original concept of collusive behaviour in markets whereby agents collude to avoid competition. Here, we argue that when an agent fits the socially defined criteria they will participate in reproducing the socially defined criteria of leadership even if they do not initiate the process.

**Rigorous research**

We conclude with some suggestions about how the phenomenon of collusive closure might be researched, and in particular the ‘certain cultural conditions’ under which it might occur.

We suggest a research question that might be pertinent to this research, and which might help to fulfil the criteria of rigor and the relevance of the findings. A research question might be

> How does the phenomenon of collusive closure operate in order to allocate people to leadership positions?

Rowland and Parry (2009) used quantitative data and qualitative analysis to uncover the social process of consensual commitment. They found the importance of the distinction between transactional and relational leadership behaviour in organizational decision-making teams in order to achieve either closure or inclusion. However, we suggest that the intensely social and constructionist, *vis-à-vis* rational and structural nature of collusive closure, might favour a more dramaturgical (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Burke, 1975) methodology. To be specific, movies might be the research *method*, *vis-à-vis* research data or research outcome, with which collusive closure is investigated. The research process was suggested by Edwards and Sutherland (2014). We now attempt to operationalise the notion of the ‘Movie as Method’, when conducting leadership research. Kempster and Parry (2011) advocated a greater level of critical realism in qualitative research. We suggest that this methodology will achieve that goal. As one example, we believe that ‘Erin Brokovich’ is one production that brings to life plausibly the collusive closure by which women and other disempowered groups, are disenfranchised unintentionally from decision-making processes. In this drama, the central character is also able to overcome the apparent collusive closure. This drama is also looked upon by many critics as a type of quasi-documentary of events that actually occurred. Therefore, researchers might gather data about an organisational example of apparent collusive closure and test those emerging social processes against the processes that appear to occur in Erin Brokovich. Other dramas that might be used to analyse data might include mafia movies like The Godfather,
historiographic quasi-documentaries like *Gandhi*, or the case of *Wall Street*. This critical realist approach to what might or might be grounded theory will help to validate Kempster and Parry’s (2011) calls for greater rigour and relevance in the examination of this important leadership matter. Let us now prognose how the research might unfold.

We might use the movie *Erin Brokovich* as the method. Our data might be a case study wherein one man is accepted into a managerial decision-making position within an organisation; and a women has admission to that position closed to her. The data would be the two story-lies. Each story-line might occupy two pages in order to record the apparent facts of the case from their perspective and from the perspective of the key person who seems to be making the closure decision. The methodology tells us that a woman who has the identity of a lower socio-economic non-professional and who is attributed with capabilities that are not highly valued by the decision-makers, will find it difficult to gain selection and therefore will then be closed out from the decision-making process. The methodology might also tell us that the habitus of a women with Erin Brokovich’s background is likely to generate an identity that does not genuinely aspire to the position in question and might therefore consider herself to be excludable from the decision. This habitus might come from the role models given to her by her parents and by the messages conveyed to her by peers and by the macro-discourses that she has received, before and during school in particular.

In support of the assertions of Khurana and Pisorski (2004), we might conclude that the woman in the case has not earned closure and that this person does not deserve closure. Also in support of Khurana and Pisorski we might conclude that accepted people are part of the socialization process into their role, and that the woman has been ‘socialized out’ of the role and the situation. Also in support of Khurana and Pisorski, we might find that the social legitimacy of the attributed identity of the woman might well be *bona fide* explanations of her closure. However, we might well find that in contrast with the assertions of Khurana and Pisorski, there is benefit to be decision-maker(s) by closing this potion to the woman in question. In effect, we see in the movie that there is evidence of discrimination and evidence of unethical behaviour. The discrimination and the unethical behaviour might not be intended, but they are still in evidence. The facts of the case do mirror the analysis provided by Erin Brokovich sufficiently closely that there is a valid reason to conclude that the decision is made in order to benefit the decision-maker, and thus to conclude that the decision-maker has acted unethically and/or in a discriminatory manner. The Erin Brokovich analysis suggests that often there is sufficient information for decision-makers and ‘collusive closers’ to understand and recognise the unethical nature of their decision-making; at best to have an empathy for the unfairness of the process. The data from the story-lines of the case under analysis might also suggest that the characters in the story-lines should be able to acknowledge the unethical nature of their decision-making.
Therefore, perhaps one conclusion from the research might be that the theoretical nature of collusive closure has a more specifically unethical dimension to it that Khurana and Pisorski originally proposed. We might also propose that the outcomes of collusive closure are implicitly beneficial for decision-makers, even if not explicitly beneficial. A third conclusion might be that membership (inclusion, acceptance) into the leadership position might be affirmation of the in-group status of the person who is accepted. There is a considerable literature on in-groups that could be cited herein for support. Concomitant with this conclusion would be the determination that closure is affirmation of the implicit out-group status of the closed person. A fourth conclusion might be to suggest that collusive closure represents a fortifying of Bourdieu’s (2001) notion of the ‘habitus’ of the person. The role and influence of habitus is reinforced with collusive closure, whether the ‘closed’ person is aware of this or not. A fifth and final conclusion might be that collusive closure represents a reinforcement of status. The status of both the appointee and of the decision-maker is reinforced through collusive closure.

Relevance of findings (for practice)
We see the practical implications being three-fold. These implications have in common the notion of making explicit that which previously was implicit, and which people possibly therefore were unaware of. The first implication is for the person in the most senior leadership position; the person who oversees the whole process. That person must make the process more explicit and must engage in a dialogue with the decision-makers about the cultural conditions that are antecedents of the final decision.

The second implication is for the decision-makers. We expect that they will have to follow the lead of the more senior person in making the process more explicit. In addition, they need specifically to answer questions about the benefit that will accrue to them with the decision, and even more importantly to critically assess the ethical status and integrity of that decision. A third implication is for the candidate who might be the ‘victim’ of collusive closure. That person must critically assess their identity and the perceptions that they are creating within the minds of the decision-makers. As Bourdieu (2001) has suggested, a critical appreciation is necessary of the habitus from which the candidate has developed. Also necessary is an appreciation of the ‘game’ that is being played, and of the ‘currency’ that is valued by the decision-makers in the collusive closure decision.

References


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