Mixed Methods Research in Leadership Studies

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Summary

This paper addresses questions of relevance and rigour in leadership studies through an investigation of the challenges and opportunities posed by mixed method approaches. In Part One we outline the state of the field, highlighting the historical tendency for leadership research to be based on (quasi) positivist analyses of quantitative data, grounded in pragmatist assumptions on the nature and function(s) of leadership. Whilst the past two decades has seen a rapid expansion of qualitative studies informed by interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology, despite calls for more mixed methods and multi-level studies, rarely are attempts made to combine insights across approaches. In Part Two we present insights from a mixed methods study of academic leadership in UK universities. We explain the rationale behind the approach, the research process, the interpretation and dissemination of findings, and how our own experiences as academics both shaped and were shaped by this project. Finally, Part Three will draw out insights for the development and application of mixed methods research on leadership, with consideration of potential lessons and linkages for other fields of organisational scholarship.

Part One - Studying leadership

In his seminal book James Macgregor Burns (1978, p. 2) remarked that ‘leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth’. Since then, despite a huge growth in research activity, leadership remains an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Grint, 2005a) subject to competing definitions and interpretations.
Like much of the rest of management and organisation studies, research into leadership remains ‘characterized by realist ontologies, positivistic epistemologies, and nomothetic methodologies’ (Staber, 2006, p. 191), with a ‘scientific’ approach based upon quantitative methods and the identification of generalisable ‘truths’ prevailing within much of the field (Antonakis et al., 2004). Conger (1998), however, highlighting the complexity of leadership in terms of levels, dynamism and social construction suggested the need for a pluralistic approach that enables triangulation between different research methods and a range of disciplinary perspectives.

Over the past two decades the prevalence of qualitative research on leadership has substantially increased, supported by the availability of qualitative analysis software such as Nvivo; the emergence of journals such as *Leadership*; and theoretical developments on the relational (Uhl-Bien, 2006), discursive (Fairhurst, 2007) and socially-constructed (Grint, 2005b) nature of leadership. Despite this shift, however, as Bryman (2011) observes, researchers tend to employ either quantitative or qualitative approaches and mixed method studies remain rare.

There are parallels between the varied conceptions of the nature and purpose(s) of leadership and the research methodologies deployed. For example, if our interest is in the general effectiveness of leadership across a population then a quantitative study that enables comparison between individuals and groups would seem appropriate. If we are approach leadership as a cultural phenomenon then a context-oriented listening post or sustained ethnography is likely to be suitable. If we see leadership as a process, then we may turn to the narrative insights from interviews, or experimental constructs of group dynamics. Importantly, any method will privilege particular understandings of the process. Haslam et al. (2010) note that experimental work allows one to tap into (and hence tends to emphasise) the
dynamics of influence and followership, while interviews tend to push these dynamics into the narrative background. On the other hand, interviews and ethnographic methods can identify specific contextual influences that are excluded from experimental designs. Failure to use multiple methods therefore always leaves one with a partial (in both senses) understanding.

**Part Two - Using mixed methods to research academic leadership**

In this part of the paper we report the process and outcomes of a mixed methods study of leadership in UK higher education, conducted by a team of researchers from somewhat different subject disciplines and methodological commitments. One reason for selecting a mixed methods approach was the significant contextual change within the sector at that time, which produced a high degree of uncertainty, ambiguity and institutional variations in governance and management practice.

In this project we took a broad definition of leadership as an influence process that gives rise to *direction*, *alignment* and *commitment* in social groups (Drath et al., 2008). Such a definition was considered appropriate given the prevalence of distributed and emergent approaches to leadership in higher education and the preference for collegial and participative governance (Bolden et al., 2008, 2009). Our work was also informed by a social identity approach in which leadership is regarded as a process of identity management (Haslam et al., 2010).

The project addressed three main research questions: (1) How do staff within universities conceive of ‘academic leadership’? (2) What is the impact of these conceptions on leadership-related attitudes and behaviours? And (3) are there any contextual variations across the sector? In relation to each of these questions there was an attempt to capture both the lived experiences of academics in UK universities, as well as their aspirations and beliefs about the nature and purpose(s) of leadership in
this context. Our aim was to build up a complex and multi-faceted picture of how the leadership of academic work is conceived, and how it may be changing for different groups within the Academy.

The project comprised three data collection phases: (1) online survey, (2) listening posts, and (3) semi-structured interviews. Data were collected from over 350 academic staff in 24 British universities, split almost evenly between pre and post-1992 institutions and encompassing a wide range of subject disciplines.

Each phase revealed important and complementary findings. In synthesising insights from across data collection phases we identified a number of core themes/issues – in particular the tendency for respondents to differentiate between ‘academic leadership’ and ‘academic management’. Academics appeared to look for leadership in relation to values and identity, not in the allocation of tasks or the application of processes. From the point of view of ‘the led’, leadership was associated with ideas and influence that infuse both the real and abstract realms in which their academic work is conducted. It was identified in those situations where an academic (as researcher, teacher, practitioner, colleague, etc.) feels him/herself to be connected to a group or community (real or imagined) that brings a sense of meaning and purpose to his/her academic work.

To aid dissemination of findings we constructed two diagrams that have proved particularly effective at facilitating discussion in a development context and in opening up discussion with leaders and managers from other professional spheres.

**Part Three - Lessons and implications for mixed methods research on leadership**

The process and outcomes of the study outlined in Part Two produced some important insights that would not have been obtained through a single method approach. In particular it gave a far richer account of the context of leadership and the inter-
connection between different levels of analysis. In reporting the findings we found that mixed methods also enabled an engagement with different academic and practitioner audiences and facilitated cross-disciplinary dialogue that can be considered as a form of reflexive inquiry. By drawing on a range of methods we were able to develop a contextualized model that is validated from several perspectives.

In collaborating on this project the researchers were able to give a broad and rounded picture of academic leadership in UK universities. The analyses complemented and built upon previous theory and research in a way that demonstrated academic rigour, whilst also speaking to the lived experience of academic practitioners in way that was perceived as relevant. Whilst the findings do not purport to present a definitive model or framework for leadership in higher education they have been effective at prompting reflection, debate and a sensitivity to context. They have also offered important learning for us as academics – leading us to develop our own roles as academic leaders in ways that we had not anticipated.

References


