The life of measures in leadership studies
Nick Butler, Helen Delaney and Sverre Spoelstra

The development of psychometric instruments is a multi-million dollar global industry spanning multiple institutions including academia. Perhaps the most well known example of a successful psychometric measure is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is completed by approximately 3.5 million people every year (Harper, 2008). Such instruments are commonly used to measure psychological traits and cognitive abilities in organizations for purposes of assessment, training and development. A proportion of these instruments are constructed by academics in order to both advance scientific knowledge and develop tools for practical use.

The scientific reliability and validity of psychometric measures have been subject to extensive testing and critique (Gardner and Matinko, 1996; Lowe et al, 1996). However, these instruments also provide a window on the complex relationship between academic research and commercial application. While much has been written on the merits of quantitative personality indicators, relatively few studies have sought to open up the ‘black box’ of psychometric instruments (Latour, 1999). This paper will examine the ways in which the development and use of psychometric instrument impacts on the social, institutional and economic relations of a research community – in this case, leadership studies.

Psychometric instruments in leadership studies are often created with the intention of being both scientifically rigorous and commercially relevant. This dual purpose, though seemingly straightforward and unproblematic for many scholars, raises a number of questions: What are the politics of producing a successful leadership measure and how do these dynamics shape the social relations of the field? What are the politics of commercializing a scientific measure and how does this process impact on the standards of science?

This paper takes a critical look at the way popular measures function in leadership studies. In particular, the paper scrutinizes the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (or ALQ). The ALQ was created by Bruce Avolio and other colleagues in order to test their popular theory of authentic leadership. Distributed by the same publishing company as the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (that measures transformational leadership), the ALQ is simultaneously trying to build its profile in both practitioner and academic contexts. The paper shows how the ALQ (and similar measures) operates in two domains that are traditionally seen as threats to the integrity of scholarly work: religion and commerce. The combined impact of a (pseudo)religious belief in a leadership construct and the commercial interest in a measure reveal a hidden life of what is on paper no more than an instrument for scientific inquiry.

Taking its cue from qualitative and interpretivist research, particularly in the sociology of scientific practice, this paper contributes to an understanding of ‘science in action’, highlighting the links and tensions between academic knowledge production and leadership assessment and development. This will serve to facilitate critical reflection on leadership scholarship in terms of its
conditions of production and practical application, which has considerable implications for how research is pursued in the university-based business school and its wider impact on organizational life.