Hubris Syndrome: An emergent outcome of the complex social process of everyday interaction?

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In their 2009 paper, **Hubris syndrome: An acquired personality disorder**? *David Owen and Jonathan Davidson suggest that hubris arises from a medical condition associated with an individual's possession and ultimate abuse of power. As such, it manifests itself in the form of a characteristic set of behaviours (or symptoms) that can be used by the medical profession for diagnostic purposes.*

This paper aims to stimulate further critical study of this important topic. It speculates that, rather than reflecting a form of mental illness located in the individual, these same patterns of behaviour can be explained in terms of the complex social process of people interacting with each other in the normal course of everyday life.

Introduction

Owen and Davidson identify 14 symptoms of hubris syndrome, based on a study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 years (see Box 1). The argument here is based on the exercise of leadership within organizations. But the same dynamics of communicative interaction, power relating and identity formation apply in both arenas.

Hubris syndrome and the social nature of human 'being'

Hubris has been characterized as exaggerated pride, over-whelming self-confidence and contempt for others (Owen, 2006). It is often taken to indicate a loss of contact with 'reality' (as reflected in the lived experience of others) and an overestimation of one's own competence or cap-abilities. It is especially thought to come to the fore when the person exhibiting these characteristics is in a formal position of power.

Owen and Davidson use the term "syndrome" in the sense of a group of symptoms that collectively indicate or characterize a disease, psychological disorder, or other abnormal condition. They also clearly locate this *within those individuals* who provide the focus for their studies. Here I want to draw instead on an alternative

> **Box 1 - Symptoms of Hubris Syndrome**
>
> - *Using power as a means of self-glorification.*
> - *Taking actions likely to cast oneself in a good light.*
> - *Giving priority to concerns of personal image and presentation.*
> - *Displaying messianic zeal and exaltation.*
> - *Equating self with the organization*
> - *Using the "royal 'we'" in conversation.*
> - *Displaying excessive self-confidence.*
> - *Showing contempt for others.*
> - *Accepting accountability only to the 'higher court' of history or God.*
> - *Maintaining an unshakeable belief in being right.*
> - *Losing contact with reality.*
> - *Acting restlessly, recklessly and impulsively.*
> - *Placing moral rectitude ahead of cost, practicality, or outcome.*
> - *Displaying incompetence in relation to the 'nuts and bolts' of policy making.*
>
> Owen and Davidson (2009)

sense of the word; seeing it simply as a distinctive patterning of individual *and collective* behaviour that arises and becomes embedded over time. In particular, I will argue that this patterning emerges from the complex social process of people interacting with each other, as they seek to enact their various roles and 'go on together' in organizations and society at large. Furthermore, I will suggest that this patterning originates in, is sustained by, *and is a property of*, people *in relationship*.

This is not to say, of course, that certain personal charac-teristics, including psychological tendencies or psychiatric dis-orders, are insignificant in the patterning of these behaviours. And some individuals might indeed be more predisposed than others to show signs of illness in response to certain conditions of office.

But we are fundamentally *social beings*. As a result, 'who we are' and how we behave is largely shaped by the interactions that we have with other people – as, at the same time, 'who we are' and how we behave shapes those interactions (Lawler, 2008).

So the proposition here is that it is the contradiction between the complex social dynamics of real-life organizations and the currently dominant view of what leaders are *supposed* to do that creates ideal conditions for "hubris syndrome" to arise.

The underlying dynamics of organization

To appreciate this alternative explanation of how dysfunctional leadership behaviours might take hold, it is important first to understand how organizations work in practice. Summarized in the following paragraphs are seven dynamics of organizations that underpin the argument.

Organizations are *social* and *constructed* phenomena

To begin with, what we talk of as organizations are *social* phenomena. They comprise people *in relationship* with one another. They are also *constructed* phenomena (Gergen, 2010). That is, people get together and 'make things up' – making sense of what's going on and, through this *relational process*, deciding what things mean and how they will act. *Inter*dependence, *inter*action and *inter*pretation are therefore fundamental dynamics of all organizations (and wider society).

Outcomes emerge from the complex and dynamic interplay of the conversational interactions that make up everyday organizational life. It is important to recognize that this process of joint sensemaking and action taking cannot be controlled by individuals or groups – however powerful they might appear to be in formal terms. An obvious example of this was the July 2011 decision by the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch and the Board of News International summarily to close the News of the World newspaper, following public outrage at revelations of its journalistic practices (alleged telephone hacking, payments to police, etc). Murdoch and his Board had the formal power to command that to happen. But it is impossible for them – or anyone else - to predict what the longer-term implications of that decision might be for the Group's wider business interests, the newspaper and media industry as a whole, policing practices, future regulatory regimes, Government and Opposition fortunes, society at large, and so on.

'Global' outcomes emerge from local interactions

Secondly, all of the interactions in organizations – whether formal or informal, planned or ad hoc, structured or spontaneous - take place 'locally'. That is, they occur as one-to-one or small-group conversations between *particular* people, at *particular* times, and in *particular* places. At the same time, the immediate outputs of these local conversations have a much wider impact, as the themes that emerge in one conversation are taken up, embellished or challenged in others. Also, the organization's formal structures, systems, processes and so on retain the 'imprints' of past conversations; taking forward into new interactions those themes that have been given the formal stamp of legitimacy.

Crucially though, regardless of how precisely formulated the formal designs might be, these necessarily provide only a generalized statement of what those in charge believe is required. They therefore represent an idealized view of what is *meant* to happen. What *actually* happens is again played out in the 'messiness' of competing demands, diverse interests, uncertainty, ambiguity, and other 'real world' pressures that are particular to the specific *local* circumstances – at that time, in that place and with those people. It is through the widespread inter-weaving of diverse local interactions, therefore, that broader (or 'global') outputs and outcomes emerge – *including the ways in which leadership is played out within the organization*.

Impact of informal interactions and shadow-side themes

Thirdly, as indicated above, only some of these interactions take place openly, in formal arenas and through formal processes. Most take place informally, around the fringes of the formal interactions or in separate conversations altogether. The themes that emerge in these informal conversations, and the power relationships and ideologies that they reflect, impact significantly on the conduct and outputs of the formal processes, even though they are not expressed openly in formal settings. This means that, in practice, outcomes are often affected more by the complex political dynamics, ideological stances and identities of those involved – and the shadow themes around which they coalesce - than by the rational analysis and systematic decision-making of senior leaders that is implied by the established management discourse. A recent study by staff at Cass Business School into major corporate incidents (Atkins et al, 2011) also points to the power of shadow themes to alter the dynamics of interaction.

Taken-for-granted patterns of assumptions

Fourthly, these ongoing conversational interactions tend to be channelled, imperceptibly and without deliberate intent, down 'well-trodden pathways' of understanding, emotion and action. Such tendencies have themselves emerged as a result of the sensemaking-cum-action-taking that has gone before. The more that people make sense of things and behave in particular ways, the more likely they are to continue to do so in the same or similar ways going forward. This tendency to think and act in line with established patterns of thought and action becomes taken for granted; remaining out of people's immediate awareness. But it powerfully influences the ways in which they interact in particular relationships and specific contexts. As such, it inevitably affects the actions and outcomes that flow from those inter-actions.

Personal 'frames of reference' and authored identities

Fifthly, individuals perceive and interpret events and emerging issues through imaginary 'frames of

reference' (Rodgers, 2007). And, in interacting with the world, an individual is motivated to do so in ways that seek to maintain the overall integrity of their personal frame. This means that they try to define and shape the challenges that they face in ways that suit their own view of the world and the self-centred interests that this reflects.

This imaginary 'frame' is the product of an individual's personal history. It is 'constructed' – largely unconsciously - through their everyday interactions and the 'stories' that they 'co-author' with others about themselves, their roles and their relationships. So identities are formed in and through the social world. Individuals are recognized as such in terms of their relations with others. And identity is formed (and reformed) *between* rather than within persons, through the currency of their in-the-moment interactions. It does not exist in isolation from the specific relationships in which an individual is engaged from moment to moment. Or from the more generalized, socially constructed patterns of assumptions, beliefs and behaviours that reflect the broader communities to which they and others see themselves belonging.

The idea that an individual's personality and identity is a function of their interactions with others, and of the stories that they tell, rather than something that is inborn or inherent, can be a challenging notion - especially, perhaps, for those who have risen to great heights in their organizations and/or society. But this relational and narrative view of identity is an important plank in the argument put forward here, as to why hubris (if that is what it is) might be a natural – if unwelcome – outcome of the complex social process of organizational life.

The issue of power

The sixth dynamic of organizations to which I want to draw attention concerns the nature and exercise of power. The Owen-Davidson paper sees power as a resource that is possessed by individuals in varying degrees, usually determined by their hierarchical position. However, from a complex social process viewpoint, power – like identity - is a *property of relationships*. The power that can be called upon by any individual at a particular time depends wholly on the recognition of such power by others involved.

Over time, it also becomes embedded in the structures, policies, processes, ideology, language and other aspects of an organization that serve to define its formal rules, norms and modes of behaviour. All of these open the doors to involvement and influence for some people whilst closing them for others. Clearly, the power relations in most organizational settings privilege those in formal leadership positions. And the words and actions of leaders typically have a broader 'reach' than those of others in an organization. But formal power (i.e. authority) is *always* mediated by the specific circumstances that are at play in the day-to-day interactions that leaders have with their staff – *and, more importantly still, by the consequential conversations that staff have with each other.*

Tendency to polarize

The seventh and final dynamic that is central to the argument is the tendency for polarization to occur between different organizational groups and between the positions that they come to adopt on issues. As Stacey (2010a) notes, power differences establish groupings in which some people are 'included' and others are 'excluded'. These dynamics help to shape the identity of the 'in-group', such that members come to identify themselves ever more firmly with the collective and its ideology, interests and/or institutions. And, since identity is defined as much by difference as by sameness, there is a natural tendency for group members to magnify small differences that might exist between themselves and 'non-members' until these come to be seen as defining characteristics. These then become self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing, with contrary views marginalized, counter-arguments ignored and contradictory themes becoming undiscussable in the formal arenas of the organization.

The potential for hubris to emerge in relationship

So how might these underlying dynamics of organization account for the hubristic behaviours of some leaders, as set out in the Owen-Davidson paper? Do they offer a credible alternative explanation to the proposition that hubris is the result of a form of mental breakdown suffered by the man or woman at the top? To begin to answer this question, we next need to explore the gap that exists between the complex social dynamics of organizations, as summarized above, and the assumptions implicit in the conventional view of leadership.

How we have come to talk about and view leadership

The ways in which we conventionally talk about and practise leadership in western society is deeply embedded. Established 'wisdom' tends to view it primarily in formal, hierarchical terms; seeing it as an elite practice, situated at the top of the institution, rather than as an ordinary process performed by many people, both formally and informally. As discussed earlier, the more that a particular narrative is taken up in people's ongoing, local interactions, the more taken-for-granted it becomes and the more natural it seems to them to think and act in such a way. The fact that this fails to accord with people's everyday, practical experience of life in organizations makes it no less powerful in influencing their perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of what's going on and how they are *supposed* to respond.

This conventional view also tends to promote and sustain an image of senior leaders as all-conquering 'heroes'; vesting in them the almost mystical qualities of a far-seeing visionary. Most significantly, perhaps, leadership as viewed from this perspective is something that is within the gift of a few, exceptional *individuals* to provide. This narrative is reinforced by

practices such as high reward packages and the lauding of high-profile leaders in the business press. These combine to institutionalize position-based leadership as the ultimate sign of achievement, and further strengthen the belief that, so long as others do things better and get them right in line with a leader's intentions, such individuals have the ability to 'change the world'.

A self-sustaining myth

Given the inherent complexities of organizational life, it is rarely credible to suggest that the behaviour of one individual accounts for an organization's continuing success or failure – regardless of how gifted they might be or the level of formal authority that they might command. In some cases, of course, a particularly toxic (or even illegal) way of doing business might be seeded or sanctioned at the top. But even then, this requires the collusion of many more people for it to take hold.

Despite this, the idea that an organization's senior leaders are all-powerful, and that they can control outcomes in accordance with their will, remains firmly established. It provides the foundation for much of what managers, staff and commentators take for granted and 'know to be true' about the leadership of organizations – even though the flaws in this line of thinking have been exposed by a number of writers (including Gabriel, 1999; Grint, 1997; Rodgers, 2007; Rozenzweig, 2007; and Stacey 2010a). Rozenzweig for example, identifies a number of delusions that he sees as shaping much of current business thinking. And Gabriel sensibly suggests that managers – as normal human beings who are subject to the same dynamics as everyone else - deserve neither exorbitant praise for success nor total vilification for failure.

Paradoxically, perhaps, this notion of the all-powerful individual is further strengthened by the occasional resignation or dismissal of a senior leader following a corporate failure or other major incident that hits the headlines. Such cases preserve the myth that success or failure is largely down to the actions or omissions of the man or woman at the top.

Hubris-like behaviours emerging and being sustained in group interactions

Earlier, I put forward a relational view of identity. And this inevitably has implications for the identities that leaders might wish to assume. That is to say, an individual's identity cannot be authored independently of others' perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of them. It is a relational process rather than an individual pursuit. The 'story' that an individual tells about him- or herself can't stand alone but must refer to and draw on wider cultural narratives, as well as 'meshing' with the stories told by others with whom they interact. This means that any apparently hubristic patterns of behaviour displayed by a leader are inextricably inter-woven with the behaviours of others within *and beyond* the formal boundaries of the organization. No single individual, whatever their official position, can control the ways in which such

patterning emerges, develops or changes. It arises, in a self-organizing way, from the complex social dynamics of interaction described earlier.

And so, where material excesses of leadership exist and/or an air of superiority and invincibility becomes apparent, the proposition here is that this is an emergent property of the leader *in relationship with* generalized and specific others. "Specific others" are likely to include an inner core of close confidantes, whose own perceived identities are closely interwoven with those of the leader in question. As regards such a group, one of the behavioural characteristics that might emerge from the polarization dynamics set out above is "groupthink". In a paper exploring the phenomenon amongst policy makers, Janis (1971) identifies and explores eight "symptoms" of groupthink. In brief, these are:

- Sharing an illusion of invulnerability.
- Believing unquestioningly in the inherent morality of the group.
- Rationalizing any negative feedback, con-cerns or warnings that might arise.
- Applying direct pressure on group members to conform.
- Adopting stereotypical views of others who are not part of the in-group.
- Self-censoring by individuals of any doubts or misgivings that they might have.
- Falsely assuming unanimity within the group.
- The emergence of self-appointed "mind guards", who protect the leader and fellow members from adverse information and challenge.

A number of these 'symptoms' echo those in the Owen-Davidson paper; although, to reiterate, these are characteristic behaviours of a dysfunctional *group of people* rather than of a mentally disturbed *individual*.

Where the in-group in question resides at the top of the organization, and interactions within it are characterized by groupthink, the tendency grows for contrary voices throughout the organization to be minimized in the formal arenas of the organization. And this lack of overt challenge can further blind senior managers to any flaws that might exist in the route that they are following. As a result, many practices remain unchallenged or, worse still, come to be replicated further into the organization, as the 'normality' of the behaviour becomes accepted and those advocating a different path become increasingly marginalized.

Pattern-reinforcing behaviour

According to conventional 'wisdom', a leader is expected to articulate a vision that inspires organizational members to perform at their best. The formal strategy, structure, systems and processes are then supposed to be aligned to this vision and integrated with each other; enabling actions to proceed seamlessly and in a mutually supportive way to deliver the sought-after results. The underlying themes are ones of predictability and control. And

these expectations place quite a formidable burden on senior leaders.

Self-delusion

Some senior leaders will inevitably succumb to the pressures of trying to deliver on such unrealistic expectations, in the face of the complex realities of everyday organizational life. The dissonance and stress that they feel as a result of the perceived gap between what's supposed to be happening and their everyday experience of organizational reality (i.e. their inability to control outcomes despite their best endeavours) might account for much of the dysfunctional behaviour identified by Owen and Davidson. And this dynamic, bolstered by the polarizing tendency of groupthink, can lead them to try to compensate by taking previously successful behaviours to excess (O'Neill, 1993; Miller, 1991; Rodgers, 2007).

Wider collusion

Importantly, such behaviour as this can only be sustained with the co-operation or collusion of members of the organization at large (Sinclair, 2007). Here too, though, it's important to note that these collusive patterns of behaviour are not simply a function of the relationships between independently minded individuals and the leader; they are organized by (and at the same time organize) the shadow-side conversations that people have with colleagues, rivals and others throughout the organization. And, as might be predicted from the earlier discussion, if a shadow theme emerges which suggests that a leader or leadership group is closed to candid feedback on their performance, people are unlikely to confront 'unhelpful' behaviours, however debilitating these might become.

Mind the gap

The above discussion points to the existence of a wide gap between the currently dominant view of organizational leadership - as supposedly practised by those in formal leadership positions - and the complex social dynamics of organizational life, as set out in this paper. Most significantly, perhaps, whilst leaders might be formally 'in charge', they are not – indeed cannot be – *in control* of the outcomes that emerge from the complex interplay of the myriad local interactions that constitute everyday organizational life.

This is not a matter of incompetence. Far from it. But it might be portrayed as such, were it not to be covered over by the superficial gloss of management speak and formal process rituals that maintain the illusion of rationality, predictability and control. Or if there was no post-hoc rationalization of actual outcomes that savvy political behaviour demands. Unfortunately, this veneer of goal-maximising objectivity reinforces the fantasy that leadership is a rational, scientific endeavour practised by the few, rather than a complex social process enacted by the many. Power relationships might ordinarily be weighted in their favour – and often significantly so. But what they think,

say and do, and how this plays out in terms of outcomes, is ultimately determined by everyone else's thoughts, words and actions that comprise the complex social process of everyday interaction.

So what can be done?

The messy reality of organizational life means that there are no simple, if-you-do-this-you'll-get-that formulae (Rodgers, 2010). So the search for a guaranteed way of avoiding hubris in organizations, at all times and in all circumstances, is unlikely to prove fruitful. *Indeed, it is this very craving for universally applicable prescriptions, predictability and control – and the unquestioning belief that such conditions are within the gift of leaders to provide – which makes the emergence of hubris ever more likely.*

Shifting the patterns

Becoming aware of these dynamics, and recognizing the inadequacy of the current conception of leadership is therefore an important first step in shifting the conversations about such behaviours towards something more useful. So what patterns of talk and action might become evident, if the currently dominant conception of leadership practice was to be supplanted by one which more closely reflected the complex social reality of organizational life? Below are seven brief statements that attempt to answer that question:

1. **From elite practice to emergent property**.

   Leadership would be recognized as an emergent property of people in relationship, not as an elite practice confined to those at the top of organizations (and of wider society). That is, it would be understood as a complex social process enacted by many people in the normal course of their everyday interactions; rather than as a rational, scientific endeavour practised by a few gifted and formally appointed individuals.

2. **From individual dynamism to interactional dynamics**.

   The approaches to selecting, developing and recognizing the contributions of formal leaders would shift considerably. The focus would be on the complex dynamics of interaction and the implications of these for leadership practice (i.e. on organizational dynamics), rather than on the current preoccupation with the traits, styles, competencies and so on of individuals who occupy formal leadership positions (i.e. on the so-called 'best practice' attributes of individual actors).

3. **From controlling to contributing**.

   Those in formal leadership positions would accept that they were not in control of organizational outcomes. As powerful participants in the ongoing process of social interaction, they would of course be contributing to those dynamics and outcomes in important and influential ways – whether

intentionally or not. But they would not be *in control* of them.

4. **From diagnosis to dialogue**.

The currently dominant view on leadership, based on a rational-scientific model of organizational dynamics, assumes that strategic and operational challenges can be dealt with by expert diagnosis. In contrast, a complex social process perspective would see it as inappropriate to look at organizations through a scientific lens. Instead, it would recognize that knowledge in a social process is co-created through the everyday conversations and interactions that take place locally – between *specific people*, at *specific times* and in *specific circumstances*. Ongoing dialogue, focusing on joint sensemaking-cum-action-taking, and seeking to tap into people's collective wisdom, would therefore be seen as the essence of strategic and operational leadership.

5. **From standing out to standing in**.

Today's conception of organizational leadership assumes that this is provided by *individuals* who 'stand out' from the crowd in terms of their intellectual capacity, charisma, vision, courage, risk appetite, and so on. It is seen as being exercised by standing apart from the minutiae of the action to see and address the "big picture" from a position of objectivity. Instead, from a complex social process viewpoint, a central element of the formal leadership role would be one of 'standing in' – that is, *actively participating* in the conversations around important emerging issues (Stacey, 2010b). This means paying attention to what's going on in the day-to-day conversations and interactions *that comprise the organization*; seeking to shift the patterns and content of interactions in organizationally bene-ficial ways.

6. **From certainty to curiosity**.

The search for, and expectancy of, certainty and predictability would be replaced by the valuing and practice of curiosity. That is, there would be a preference for leading through questions, rather than a presumption that the leader's role is to provide all of the answers; a capacity to embrace uncertainty and to accept a position of 'not knowing'; a focus on noticing and exploring underlying patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving; and an ability to articulate these in ways that resonate with staff.

7. **From colluding to confronting**

Realizing the above shifts in thinking and practice would bring with it an increasing tendency for people (and particularly leaders) to confront - rather than collude with - the basic myths that sustain current management orthodoxy. Meta-phorically, people would be much more wiling to 'tell the emperor that he (or she) was not wearing any clothes' – and the 'emperor' would be keen to listen!

The above statements reflect radically different assumptions about how organizations work from those that currently inform mainstream prescriptions on leadership practice. But these accord much more closely with the experienced realities of organizational life – *including what leaders and others do in practice*. According to the argument set out here, it is the current mismatch between the dominant leadership narrative and these complex social dynamics of organizations that primarily accounts for the emer-gence of hubristic patterns of behaviour. And, most importantly here, it is this same misconception of the leadership role that results in these socially generated phenomena being attributed to deficiencies in the competence, ethics and/or mental state of individual leaders.

Can such a shift be achieved?

Many powerful interests are served by maintaining the current fantasies surrounding leaders and leadership. And this makes it all the more difficult to achieve a shift in the way in which the role is framed and put into practice. However, if a sufficiently powerful coalition of support were to grow up informally around themes such as those set out above, these might emerge from the shadows and enter the mainstream. If not, the tendency would remain for current patterns of behaviour to recur – including those which generate dysfunctional effects described as hubris syndrome.

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