Widening the leadership mythology: in the search for Simorgh

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Abstract

This short paper explores the use of storytelling through the folklore of Simorgh in order to facilitate students' learning on critical perspectives of leadership. Through examining, imagining, and (re)interpreting the myths of Simorgh, we argue that storytelling could be particularly useful to invoke student discussion on the meanings of leadership and enhance their understanding on critical perspectives of leadership.

Figure 1: Simorgh, the legendary bird
(Source: www.pinterest.com)

Simorgh, a legendary bird in Persian folktale with magical powers, takes the center stage in ‘the conference of the birds’, a long poetry book written by a mystic poet, Farid ud-Din Attar, in 12th century.

The story recounts the longing of a group of birds to find a king, as they have no leader. Thus, they hold a conference to discuss the matter after which they decide to start a journey to find Simorgh, who lives behind the far-away mountains. Each of the birds represent a human fault which prevents man from attaining enlightenment. When the group of thirty birds finally reach the dwelling place of Simough, all they find is a lake in which they see their own reflection.

It is argued that much of the mainstream organizational and management literature tends to be overly rational and linear (Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist, 2013; Schipper, 2009), therefore the complex and multi-layered organizational realities are not always embraced in these studies. Narrative approaches to the study of organizations, among other alternative approaches, such as psychoanalytic, process and practice perspectives, are increasingly employed to help understand the ambiguous and socially constructed nature of organizational realities (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000). The power of storytelling in advancing leadership studies has been noted (Boje, 1995; Morgan and Dennehy, 1997). Stories are also routinely en-

acted by managers and practitioners in order to achieve organizational goals and construct leadership (Boal and Schultz, 2007; James and Grisham, 2006; Morgan and Dennehy, 1997). Furthermore, storytelling, poetry, and metaphors have often been utilized in management and leadership development as an effective learning device, such as coaching (de Haan, Sills, and Robinson, 2010) and Higher Education (Alterio and McDrury, 2003).

Narratives and stories are not just encouraging participants' critical reflection and imagination, but can also facilitate sensemaking and learning (Schedlitzki, Jarvis, and MacInnes, 2015). For example, arts-based methods could enable participants to apprehend the essence of a complex concept (Schedlitzki et al., 2015; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). Also, the use of storytelling and re-storying could invoke in-depth discussion of the socially constructed nature of organization and leadership (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schedlitzki et al., 2015), which is crucial in understanding the critical aspects of leadership.

We therefore argue that storytelling could be

particularly useful to explore and exemplify the meanings associated with critical leadership studies. While ‘conference of birds’ is widely discussed in philosophy and religion studies, we are reading it as a story on leadership. Simorgh in this story is a legendary bird, about whom, a group of birds have heard of, and in her they saw a great leader. Simorgh possesses many traits and qualities of a great leader: wisdom (in fact she is the wisest of all), a healing power, and an ability to foresee the future. Judging by standards laid in mainstream leadership theories, Simorgh could be described as a visionary and charismatic leader, under her leadership the birds in the story seek to improve their rank among other animals.

Yet, main steam leadership theories can be criticized for being leader-centric (Jackson and Parry, 2011). Many critical theorists have argued that mainstream studies portray leaders as proactive agents and followers as those who passively respond (i.e. Gronn, 2002). They suggest this often results in a tendency to “romanticize” individual leaders as heroes (Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich, 1985). Nevertheless, lead-

ership has been examined from a communicative and sensemaking perspective suggesting that leadership is a meaning-centered, relational, and neither leader-centric nor follower-centric construct (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014). More importantly, it has been noted that storytelling could be the overlooked process in which the meanings of leadership were constructed (Auvinen et al., 2013). As storytelling and re-storying have been regarded as imaginative and effective sensemaking processes (Schedlitzki et al., 2015), the story of Simorgh could be used to appreciate the fluid and constructed meanings of leadership.

From Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) perspective, Simorgh could be an over-powering leader who could end up disempowering other birds. Thus, birds' quest in search of a leader might prove futile. CLS has been aiming to demystify 'leadership' by questioning whether leadership is an overwhelmingly positive and necessary thing (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Such studies seek to shed light on the dark side of leadership, highlighting issues, such as depersonalization and domination (i.e. Marcuse

and De Bres, 2008), the propagation of conformity and blind commitment (de Vries and Miller, 1985), and disempowerment of followers (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). These ‘anti-leadership’ researchers approach ‘the very idea of leadership as anathema’ (Gronn, 2002: 427). Yet others have even gone further by questioning the very existence of leadership as an observable phenomenon (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) and questioned the usefulness of leadership as a scientific construct (Kerr and Jermier, 1978; Pfeffer, 1977).

In this paper, we concur with CLS’s call for a less blind faith in epic stories of individual leaders (i.e. Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Meindl et al., 1985; Pfeffer, 1977), however, unlike ‘Anti-leadership’ perspective (Sutherland, Land, and Böhm, 2014), we do not advocate banishing mythological view of heroic leaders. Instead, building on a narrative approach to leadership, we argue that the understandings of the critical leadership studies could be embodied and enhanced through storytelling and narrative approaches. Similarly to Schedlitzki, Jarvis and MacInnes (2015), we argue that working with

storytelling, 'where participants experiment with different plotlines and possible endings' (p. 2), could help develop a deeper understanding of the socially constructed and ambiguous nature of leadership (Boje, 2008; Gabriel, 2000).

While previous studies has mostly used Greek Mythology (Hatch, Kostera, and Kozminski, 2009; Schedlitzki et al., 2015), our use of Simorgh, a Persian mystic story, provides an alternative medium for exploring the meaning of leadership. Given the novelty and freshness of this story for our participants (Final year undergraduate students in the UK), engaging with it can help disrupt established patterns of thinking and provoke participants' critical self-reflection.

Keywords

Storytelling, leadership, critical leadership studies, Simorgh

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