Response to Joseph A. Raelin: "Refining the Ethics of Leadership-as-Practice: A Counter-Case Analysis"

Martyna Śliwa & Peter Case

We have been invited by Bastiaan Van Der Linden and Joe Raelin to write a response to Joe's critique of our paper "Leadership learning, power and practice in Laos: A leadership-as-practice perspective," published in *Management Learning*. The paper explores the experiences of one of us, Peter, as he interacted with others in the setting of a rural development project in Laos during the period 2011-16. We show, inter alia, how his actions were molded by others and their behavior. Peter was, indeed, entwined with the world of others, but this was not the kind of entwinement where others' values, interpretations and preferences could be taken for granted. On the contrary: Peter entered the Lao context of leadership as an outsider (*falang*) who needed to learn what these values, interpretations and preferences were, and was a stranger to those local to it. The circumstances in which Peter found himself provided us with a unique opportunity to showcase a particular situation of being entwined with others and engaging in leadership practice where there are few *a priori* shared understandings due to the absence of a common culture and language.

Peter was constantly engaged in conversation with the Laotian colleagues but, because of the lack of a shared language in the early stages of engagement, this was not a conventional conversation, i.e. one in which collective understanding is sought using words. The exchange between Peter and the Laotians was constructed differently, and we see it precisely as an example of what Joe, following Simpson, Buchan and Sillince (2018), refers to as "in-flow-ence." As our analysis – which stresses the importance of sociomateriality – demonstrates, Peter communicated using other means than words, for example, through a particular way of dressing or arranging the layout of the rooms in which meetings were held. Likewise, the responses he received from

others were not expressed through words. However, this does not mean that there was no communication coming from those he was involved in leadership practice with. They reciprocated through gestures, such as taking notes when Peter was speaking during meetings. The gestures also communicated to Peter that he was to be deferred to as someone with a status approaching that of a *phu nam* (a formal term for a senior leader possessing legitimate authority within the Lao People's Revolutionary Party - LPRP). This was a status that Peter aspired to in order to exercise a particular form of leadership influence that he considered would assist with meeting the instrumental ends of the rural development project in question (broadly, improving smallholder farmer livelihoods).

We see Peter's efforts as genuinely committed to L-A-P's ethical project of becoming "a moral agent toward the self." This is why we undertook a thorough, reflexive process in which both of us repeatedly challenged and reflected on Peter's motivations, actions and their outcomes. At the same time, we would be cautious about limiting the scope of L-A-P exclusively to situations where "the formation of community within which members through social critique may be able to resist oppression and other forms of inequitable social arrangements" is possible.

In the Laotian settings which were the subject of our analysis (i.e., formal meetings presided over by an array of *phu nam*), this would be impractical. Any perceived challenge to authority – as Peter discovered on several occasions through personal experience! – is invariably met by a forceful "put down" by an official or professional occupying a senior position. Senior members of the LPRP undergo periods of formal political training during which, inter alia, they are instructed in dialectics and how to manage *falang* (in this case international advisors). *Falang* are never to be permitted to exercise authority directly or independently in any setting (such decision-making agency is the exclusive privilege of LPRP members) and if they question or criticize Party decisions or policy – either in a public setting

or in one-to-one conversation – they are to be robustly challenged and the tables turned on them. Indeed, even more severe consequences would follow from persistent questioning of Lao authority on the part of a *falang*. One outcome of continually speaking out, for instance, could be expulsion and exclusion from the county. There have been instances where Westerners have made a conscious decision to speak out against the regime in full knowledge of the consequences.

Peter in our case made the equally conscious decision *not to challenge authority in formal settings* so as to avoid censure and the damage this would wreak on the project he bore responsibility and accountability for. It should be stressed, however, that in other settings, such as, working directly with farming communities and, indeed, lower ranking government officials, Peter did employ *inclusive organization development and participatory methods* which, we suspect, would satisfy the criteria of community engagement and "procedural justice" that Joe advocates in his critique. In short, involvement in a complex set of rural development change interventions requires careful judgment and adaptability on the part of international advisors. They need to develop an acute sensitivity to the cultural context and choose the moments for agentic intervention wisely and ethically. When Joe concludes that, "[i]n deconstructing the case we find that the protagonist has seemingly forsaken procedural justice in favor of distributive justice," we suggest his judgment might be rather hasty. It also carries an essentialist tone. Joe implies that Peter is, as it were, occupying a fixed (un)ethical position procedurally rather than responding to emergent conditions. Some moments – for example, seeking higher level authority to act – might best be responded to with unquestioning compliance with local procedures; others offer opportunities collectively to question and inquire in ways that, nonetheless, *respect the local sociomaterial order and conventions*.

Great care, self-reflexivity and awareness are required, for example, if one is to avoid imposing Western assumptions about how others can be liberated from oppression onto people

to whom the Western democratic tradition might seem alien. A lack of sensitivity and unwillingness to adapt to cultural circumstances could lead, albeit unintentionally, to an exercise in colonizing as opposed to liberating minds under the guise of L-A-P. In our paper, we adopted L-A-P as an analytical lens through which to consider leadership as an unfolding practice, the outcome of which is shaped by a range of interconnected human and non-human aspects.

It appears that some of the things we say in the paper have been misinterpreted by Joe, so it is important to correct any misunderstandings that have arisen. For example, we do not argue in the paper that "a L-A-P lens can be used to help managers gain individual influence and thus assume leadership within a controlled directive setting." Rather than helping managers gain individual influence, our paper is concerned with learning and reflexivity, and with using an empirical study to understand and theorize the role of individual agency and the place of power in the L-A-P approach. It is aimed primarily at the community of scholars rather than managers, and it speaks to this community by responding to calls in the academic literature for empirical studies and for addressing issues of agency and power from the L-A-P perspective. Conceptually, the paper contributes to extant literature by "(1) including individual self-consciousness, reflexivity and deliberation (Raelin, 2016a) as important to the understanding of leadership learning within the L-A-P approach and (2) offering an understanding of how, within the relational configuration of leadership, individual attempts to exercise power contribute to producing "leadership effect" (Kempster and Parry, 2019) through influencing the direction of leadership emergence and unfolding" (Case and Śliwa, 2020: 539). The understanding of power underpinning the paper is consistent with Foucault's view that power is a productive force and that its effects are not necessarily negative or repressive but can be positive for the society.

Further, it seems that our explanation – based on Spoelstra and ten Bos' (2011) work – of the "Hitler problem" in leadership studies has also been misinterpreted. What we mean by reference to the "Hitler problem" is not that "questionably ethical means, such as manipulation, can lead to socially justifiable and ethical ends." To clarify, what we challenge is the tendency of leadership studies "to picture leadership as something good and beautiful" (Spoelstra and ten Bos, 2011: 189) and to dismiss descriptions of more problematic situations as being due to a lack of leadership. We would not like this tendency to be pursued within L-A-P and therefore in the paper, we allowed ourselves – and invited other scholars – to become open to a situation where an individual is part of an emerging leadership practice. At the same time, that agentic individual should be able to recognize that "participants are not given equal scope to exercise power within the emerging, hybrid agency orienting the flow of leadership, and that one task of leadership learning at an individual level is to develop reflexive knowledge about one's own and others' contribution to the unfolding of leadership process" (Case and Śliwa, 2020: 537). Our analysis is rooted in the acknowledgement that ontologically, reality consists of an ever-changing flow of interconnected elements; yet, sociomaterially-mediated individual consciousness exists and produces a sense of "I" which – regardless of all the suffering this causes – also makes self-awareness and reflexivity possible. Of course, we agree that "since humans [and non-humans] are entwined with one another, there are always interactions that have ethical significance." Here, we see the contribution of our paper as showing how this ontological entwinement translates into reflexive learning about one's own position within it, and how this informs the emergence of a person's understanding of their ethical responsibilities in a given context.

We are honored that Joe Raelin, a scholar who has made a highly significant and influential contribution to the field of leadership studies and whose work has inspired ours, has chosen our paper for such close and careful critique. We recognize that he disagrees with

aspects of what we say in the paper. The question this poses is: what should we do about this disagreement? As Joe himself ponders: "shouldn't the authors of the case be warranted in choosing to analyze whatever practices are going on and to whom they are of benefit? In other words, are not any practices which disrupt the flow of meaning in an inter-subjective transaction acceptable in L-A-P?" One way of answering this is through saying that L-A-P is a project that is immersed in traditional Western rationality and can (or, in a stronger ideological and normative form, *should*) exclusively be applied in contexts where "action learning teams" and "consensualizing" can be engaged with; where it is germane to "bring out … internal conversation with others," "negotiate a shared understanding with others about the meaning of the practice as we engage in it," and where "mutual understanding based on disputed claims" can adequately explain what is happening. If the scope and remit of L-A-P is thus construed, then the way we use the approach in our paper would need to be evaluated as a piece in which we "have taken some liberties with L-A-P conceptual reasoning resulting in a variation from critical perspectives that are associated with practice theory."

Unfortunately, though, this answer could be taken to mean that we have to restrict ourselves to a very limited understanding of what constitutes collaboration, communication, dialogue, entwinement and, indeed, both leadership and practice. It might also imply rigidifying the "regime of truth" within L-A-P, delineating the limits of what is allowed within L-A-P's conceptual reasoning and what needs to be judged as "taking liberties". As an alternative, we invite greater openness with regard to shaping the L-A-P discourse, and to deciding how we define and use L-A-P and its concomitant terminology. A more open and inclusive stance towards the "grid of intelligibility" within L-A-P will allow us further to develop the L-A-P perspective and to demonstrate its potential for understanding the myriad ways in which people and non-human aspects of a practice are entwined and contribute to the emergence of the "leadership effect." Such a broader view of L-A-P will also open up new

avenues for understanding how learning happens in leadership and in what forms individuals receive feedback from others engaged in the practice. It would also broaden our appreciation of means by which we can collaborate and participate even under conditions where the formation of "sensitively facilitated" action learning teams which "provide learners with a safe environment" cannot obtain in practice. As such, opening up our thinking about what can be seen as an "acceptable" way of using L-A-P would make this perspective on leadership applicable to analyzing the realities of the majority of organizational members in the contemporary world, be it Western or non-Western.

It is up to other scholars to decide, through their research, how they wish to answer the question that we pose for proponents and adopters of L-A-P. We are grateful to the Editors of *BPEJ* for allowing us space to engage in conversation with Joe about these issues. In entering into this conversation, however, we are well aware of Foucault's reminder that the workings of power come to define what counts as acceptable knowledge, scientific theory, and ultimately truth. We do not wish to usurp power to define what is an acceptable way of using L-A-P concepts in relation to leadership knowledge, learning, power and agency. At the same time, we are reflexive about the fact that by expressing our ideas in this dialogue, we are being complicit in shaping the direction in which the L-A-P perspective unfolds. In this spirit, we thank you, Joe, for this opportunity to collaborate and to contribute to the emergence of new ideas within the L-A-P tradition.

References

Kempster, S. and Parry, K. 2019. After leaders: A world of leading and leadership… with no leaders. In B. Carroll, J. Firth, and S. Wilson (eds.) *After Leadership*. New York: Routledge, 64–80.

Raelin, J.A. 2016a. (ed.) *Leadership-As-Practice. Theory and Application*. New York: Routledge.

Simpson, B., Buchan, L. and Sillince, J. 2018. The performativity of leadership talk. *Leadership*, 14(6): 644-661.

Spoelstra, S. and ten Bos, R. 2011. Leadership. In: M. Painter-Morland and R. ten Bos (eds.) *Business Ethics and Continental Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 181-198.