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Being Leaders: Identity and Identity Work in Leadership

Amanda Sinclair

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INTRODUCTION

Identity has been a central concern of social theorising for several decades, making appearances in the work of sociologists (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1991), social psychologists (Gergen 1991) and cultural theorists, many of whom question psychological accounts of identity as an individual developmental accomplishment.

In this chapter I explore the ways in which ideas about identity have increasingly made their way into the study of leaders and leadership. Two broad and very different sets of understandings and prescriptions emerge from this work. On the one hand are more critical accounts of the production of leadership identities. This research examines the political and discursive processes by which manager and leader identities are manufactured, controlled and occasionally resisted (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Carroll and Levy, 2008; Collinson, 2003; Linstead 2006; Sveningsson and Larson, 2006; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Thomas et al., 2004; Ford et al., 2008; Keenoy et al., 2009; Caza and Jackson, Chapter 26, Collinson, Chapter 13 and Fairhurst, Chapter 36, this volume). Often building on the work of Foucault, there is an interest in where subjectivities and prescribed identities do not overlap and what happens in these identity spaces of tension and contradiction.

On the other hand is a substantial and growing popular literature which offers advice on how leaders can be more effective by adapting, presenting and performing themselves (their identities). Here the emphasis is often unapologetically about how to be ‘great’ – how to build, maintain and project an authentic, effective leadership persona (Goffee and Jones, 2005; George et al., 2007). In the latter genre, identity is usually assumed to be a unitary coherent construction produced by the individual, who is then exhorted on a treadmill of self-improvement (and, conveniently, leadership development and education) to either make the self watertight attractive or, alternatively, to reinvent to improve prospects for success and recognition. Such advice sits alongside and is fed by burgeoning forces encouraging the commoditization and marketing of the self: the leader as a brand. The vision or ideal is of a perfectible self-as-leader, including an appealing but ‘fictional belief in the self as an autonomous entity’ (Roberts, 2009).

The chapter examines these ways of thinking about identities and leadership, including some of the risks. Drawing on my experiences working with leaders, I argue the need to explore the construction of leadership identities in both a more critical and more mindful way. I also suggest that those of us who study and write about leadership should be explicit about our own identity work. ‘Taking the lead’ from a couple of examples (see Brewis, 2004; Hearn, 2004), I suggest that exploring the production of our own selves – as leaders of leadership scholarship – may be a foundational platform or gesture from which to make a reflexive contribution on leadership and identities.

IDENTITIES AND LEADERSHIP

The focus of this chapter is on identities in leadership and leadership identities. Defining leadership identities as experienced and projected selves or
IDENTITY

PERSONS

IDENTITIES

PRESSURES

PERSONAS

PERSPECTIVES

PRODUCTION

PROCESSES

PROJECT

PRESSURES TO PRODUCE A LEADERSHIP IDENTITY

By the late 1980s, in those Western societies which have predominantly shaped business and management thinking, leadership became an accepted moral good (Sinclair, 2007). People working in schools, in community organisations, not-for-profit sectors, in sports, in medicine and health, as well as incorporations and bureaucracies are all encouraged to ‘be’ or ‘become’ leaders (Alvesson, 2002; Ford and Harding, 2007; Gabriel, 2005).

The resulting identity pressures accrue via multiple popular and academic discourses of leadership (Fairhurst, 2007). A substantial body of social psychological research known as ‘social identity theory’, advises leaders on how to moderate and craft their own identities to match the identities of groups of followers, thereby eliciting higher levels of motivation (Hogg, 2003; Shamir et al., 1993). As described below, this and other research has informed a wave of popular advice on how to craft personas, lives and legacies to be an ‘authentic’ leader. From a leader’s point of view, this may involve authoring a biographical self-narrative or composing and telling a compelling story about oneself. As Ford et al., summarise ‘where leadership used to be a series of tasks or characteristics, it is now an identity (authors’ emphasis)’ (2008, p. 28).

At an institutional level, aspiring leaders are also subject to increasing levels of surveillance and discipline around producing the ‘right’ identity. Leaders are subject to image ‘makeovers’ and coached in presentation and communication styles. They must cultivate their personas to engender confidence among stakeholders and share markets. They must be judicious about how
and in what forums they lend their ‘presence’, yet avoid overexposure. Photographs of leaders proliferate in business magazines and there are now, in Australia at least, ‘beauty’ pageants for business leaders in which panels select top leaders in particular categories: for example ‘Young Entrepreneur’ or ‘Best Director’. Such events are choreographed and stage-managed to convey the requisite levels of gravitas with a calculated hint of ‘quirkiness’ or individuality.

Leaders are thus encouraged to work on creating an individual ‘brand’ that transcends their organisation and feeds the romantic (Meindl et al., 1985) or saviour (Gabriel, 1997) myths that often underpin contemporary appetites for leadership (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). Furthermore, it’s not just the track records or the mental acumen that is the focus of this image crafting – bodies that are upright and uncontaminated by vulnerabilities are also often employed in the selling of leadership selves (Sinclair 2005, 2009).

The many pressures described above impinge on leaders who feel compelled to manage their identities (Collinson, 2003; Linstead, 2006; Sveningsson and Larson, 2006; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Thomas et al., 2004). The leader is not outside the process but enmeshed in it and new leadership discourses, such as ‘just being yourself’ and ‘being authentic’, may heighten anxiety to demonstrably secure one’s identity as a leader. Despite such efforts, there often remains an inescapable predictability about these representations of leadership, creating what Guthey and Jackson (2005) describe as an ‘authenticity paradox’: pressure to manufacture an ‘authentic persona’, which, by its very process renders that authenticity impossible.

It is important to note that while leaders may have always been engaged in this process two trends in social surveillance may have magnified identity pressures. The first is proliferating media channels which increase scrutiny of and speculation about leaders’ lives. Even those who formerly have been able to work inconspicuously, such as bureaucrats or community leaders, now often find themselves feted as role models in magazines and websites. These pressures are part of a wider phenomenon termed the commoditization of the self, whereby the self, or physical parts of the self, are treated as market objects that may be bought and sold. Corporate leaders such as Richard Branson become brands: the individual leader is the product. Aspects of individual leader identity become issues of studious strategic deliberation: for example, whether a male CEO is clean shaven or allowed a five o’clock shadow.

The second trend is the measurement and management of leader performance, which is now a pervasive aspect of organisational life. Appraisal processes, feedback instruments and other techniques of selection and promotion mean that most leaders are regularly tested against and expected to have their identities conform to organisationally specified norms of success. Yet, recent evidence from the global financial crisis suggests that many CEOs escape being held to account for their financial performance at the helm of their companies. Perhaps while pressures to produce a convincing leadership identity are endemic, they rarely work in rational, evidence-driven ways.

**CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRODUCTION OF LEADERSHIP IDENTITIES**

As suggested above and despite some claims, identity work is revealed to be rarely a process of the leader simply crafting and projecting a self. Foucault’s work (1972, 1994) has drawn attention to the history and unfolding of ‘technologies of the self’: the ways in which individuals internalise controls and self-discipline to regulate selves. In their important contribution to identity theorising, Alvesson and Willmott build on the work of Foucault and Giddens to conceptualise at least three contributing influences to the production of identities: the narrative of self-identity; organisationally and societally mediated identity-regulation; and identity work, which includes the individual’s efforts to maintain a sense of self that has meaning, coherence and distinctiveness.

As Rose (1989, 1996) has warned, and Baritz (1960) foreshadowed several decades earlier, the methods and interests of the social sciences and psychology introduce to the production of personhood, or leadership in this case, new technologies of measurement (performance appraisal processes, 360-degree feedback instruments, selection tools, etc.), new definitions of normality, new intents and new webs of power.

Followers are important though often neglected participants in processes of leadership identity-making (Collinson, 2006; Gronn, 2002). Theorists coming from both psychoanalytic and social psychological perspectives point to the importance of followers, projections and fantasies in endowing the identity of leader on certain individuals (Denhardt, 1981; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984). Hogg et al. (2003) maintain that perceived leadership depends on the degree to which an individual leader is seen to embody or be ‘prototypical’ of the group’s identity.

Who is deemed an authentic leader and why is indelibly tied to a society’s myths and history which in the Australian case is interwoven with assumptions of masculinity, physical toughness and
self-reliance (Sinclair, 1994). An example are the recollections of former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd about his eviction from his childhood home after his father’s death. This segment of Rudd’s leadership was used in the 2006 election to establish his ‘battler’ credentials, and to show the roots of his claimed economic conservatism.

Furthermore, available leadership spaces and societal readiness to endow leadership capital are already deeply inscribed by gendered and cultural assumptions (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Women leaders in traditionally male-dominated environments experience particular pressures to produce non-threatening leadership selves, to camouflage aspects of their gender, their children and sexualities (Sinclair, 1995; Thomas and Davies 2005; Thomas et al., 2004). Male leaders also experience pressure to conform to often narrowly prescribed understandings of how they should look and who they should be (Connell 2000). Particular types of leadership selves are thus being demanded and produced in the search for authenticity and they are, in deep and self-disciplining ways, agents for maintaining the cultural status quo. This is despite frequent claims for leaders to be agents of ‘transformation’ or to ‘just be yourself’.

Collinson has noted that ‘there is an irreducible ambiguity’ at the heart of identity construction, where individuals are held in tension between their own attachment to notions of self and their vulnerability to others’ opinions of them (Collinson 2006, p. 182). Attempts to clarify or discover a ‘true’ leader identity thus ‘reinforce, rather than resolve the very ambiguity and insecurity identity strategies are designed to overcome’ (ibid.).

Some forms of leadership development often have an interest in exploiting this anxiety and hold out the illusion of leadership perfectible through self-discovery (Carden and Callahan, 2007; Carroll and Levy, 2008). Leadership development can therefore become an opportunity for intense identity socialisation.

A focus on fixing individual identities also mirrors and feeds the individualising and narcissism already enshrined in economic doctrine. The view here is that the market will work best in the ‘war for talent’ by paying the most to the most talented elite of leaders to perfect themselves.

It may be useful to also pause and identify some of the assumptions often made in the business literature. Perhaps pre-eminent is the assumption that leaders should invest time in improving themselves and rendering their leadership more inspiring or influential because, in that way, they can direct followers’ behaviours, values and actions toward those that the leader (and perhaps their organisation) understand to be valuable.

The influential work of Daniel Goleman provides a good example. In a book (Goleman, 2006) and article in Harvard Business Review (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008) the value of ‘social intelligence’ to leaders is advocated. Examples are given where people at work respond better to leaders with social intelligence and he admiringly cites a study showing that ‘top performing’ leaders elicited laughter from their subordinates three times as often, on average, as mid-performing leaders. Whereas, on the one hand, it seems like a demonstrably good thing to value social skills in leaders, this example is one of many in the leadership literature where organisational purposes remain obscured or are benignly aligned with the interests of leadership. The process of self-perfecting in order to be a more efficient agent of organisational purposes is not necessarily nor always towards which leadership should be aiming.

Critical theorists have also highlighted the oppression that lurks painfully in our ways of being ourselves. We experience a particular self as the only one, getting attached to and fiercely defending that way of being. As Brewis describes ‘(w)e commit ourselves to a particular version of self, giving us a platform from which to think and act, and we simultaneously begin to reject anything that does not conform to that self’ (2004, p. 29). For Foucault, identity becomes an obsession: people think they have to “uncover” their “own identity” and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence’ (1994, p. 166). Yet Foucault also shows the ways we relate to a dynamic self are open to change. Greater freedom lies not in the business of discovering the self, nor necessarily discovering new truths of the self, but in commitment to a practice of choosing how to relate to the selves we are producing.

Similarly, in her book entitled Giving an Account of Oneself, Butler (2005) argues that we can never fully know ourselves. She says ‘the forms of rationality by which we make ourselves intelligible, by which we know ourselves and offer ourselves to others, are established historically and at a price (2005, p. 121). According to Butler, we need to pay attention and try to understand ‘the truth regimes’ – those authored by us and located in societies – which function to tell us who we are. At the same time, we also need to grasp that our efforts to know ourselves and present ourselves as whole are inherently flawed. According to Butler, it is in this understanding of the limits in knowing self that is the basis of a form of morality with others.

**DOING IDENTITY WORK WITH LEADERS**

I’ve argued above that identity pressures are endemic in leadership and that leaders are either
unwittingly or reflectively engaged in responding, colluding and resisting. In this section I describe some of the work I have been doing with MBA and other students, with executives on programmes and in coaching situations exploring identities. I often label this as ‘identity work’ and the ideas and processes we draw on are informed by the critical perspectives outlined above. My intent in this work is not to help people discover themselves or re-connect to true selves, or even bring their ‘whole’ selves to their work, though sometimes there are valuable insights that come from such impulses. My observation is that leaders are often enslaved by identity processes and giving people new ways of understanding identities helps them reflect on, selectively resist and re-direct energies and identifications. This identity work with others has unfolded alongside my own efforts to be different in leadership and work differently with my shifting self-identities. In the following, I describe my work with others and then offer an account of my own identity work.

There are three guiding principles in my leadership teaching and development work on identity: a commitment to reflective learning; to experiential learning from the here and now of the class process; and to applying critical perspectives. Each of these arises from particular ways of thinking about learning and its purposes (see Sinclair 2007). For me it is the explicit interweaving of the three that provides a workable foundation for exploring leadership in the classroom and with leaders.

If and when I have the opportunity to work with people over an extended duration (several months) or intensively over several days, I introduce some critical perspectives on identity. These include the ideas of our identities as multiple and potentially contradictory, as constantly being negotiated as they are being performed. We critique the notion of a single perfectible leadership identity and, tested against her or his experience and with others, most individuals readily grasp that the business of being ourselves rarely proceeds smoothly or according to plan. We read articles on authentic leadership and most see that the ideal of finding a permanent authentic self to apply to leadership is illusory. The goal is not to discover self but to get better at observing the processes and practices in identity-in-action, to perhaps be less reactive and more mindful as various apparitions of identity needs appear (Atkins, 2008). Sometimes my intent includes encouragement to relinquish habits of relentless goal-seeking too: that is, to act as if there is value in being present to and learning from what’s happening now rather than waiting for the main game.

Depending on the context and group, we work critically with ideas about power and emotion, reflecting on and experiencing how structural bases of power exert pressure and encourage self-policing of identities. Individuals often arrive with assumptions about power, emotion, gender and so on and they take up a position in the group from which to enact those assumptions. With encouragement, many begin to understand the places from which those assumptions have originated. Some experiment with different ways of ‘doing’ power, emotion and gender in the group and they are encouraged to notice how this impacts on them, their leadership and the group’s learning.

A key part of identity work, as I teach it, is to go back into backgrounds, histories and childhood. This is intended not to fix people or to act as therapy but to help them begin to unpack and work consciously with their beliefs, practices and assumptions about authority and leadership. My interest in backgrounds comes from several important places: my doctoral study under two psychoanalytically inclined political scientists and, not least, making sense of my own history and its impacts. In my experience, helping people think about their backgrounds and their early experiences of leadership and groups is often a very insight-laden and freeing step. It gives people an understanding of why they’ve developed particular ways of approaching power and authority (or lack of it). In making patterns more visible and comprehensible, it gives leaders the possibility of choosing whether to continue to be completely contained by that approach or whether to experiment. Along with critical ideas, for example about gender, the process provides new understanding of the structural and organisational obstacles to any such change: the limits to individual agency. There are also sometimes quite profound insights into what may be at stake, personally, in being different.

The three examples from my work that follow provide a sense of the range of contexts and outcomes from working explicitly on identities in leadership. The first is a colleague who does excellent work herself in leadership development with women, academics and in organisations. She attended a week’s programme which I co-facilitated. In spite of her successes, it seemed that almost always underpinning her work was waiting for the recognition of her father/managers. Some work environments activated for her a much earlier place. In fact she had become so habituated to waiting but never receiving acknowledgement that she had missed important recognition of her work. The insight she gained through identity work is that she had built her identity around waiting for the recognition of her father/managers. Some experiment with different ways of ‘doing’ power, emotion and gender and in the group and they are encouraged to notice how this impacts on them, their leadership and the group’s learning.
confirmed that she feels she now creates a different space in her leadership work: giving more freedom and permission to herself and others, which includes to be present to what comes up without making judgements.

Another example of the potential of exploring family and gender identity constructions comes from my work with, and research of, a senior Australian woman leader. In our numerous interviews, discussions and work together, we have traversed many themes of background and identities, including gender identity, and the ways these are constantly being revisited, produced and negotiated in her roles as a leader in male-dominated environments. In her own family, it was her brothers who were expected to go on to university and achieve. Yet, as is not uncommon for many young women, there were also extraordinarily high expectations of her to ‘get on with things’ and ‘get things done’ – with a minimum of fuss. When we explored the impact of these dynamics, she has been a little taken aback. However, other comments she has made suggest that these insights have given her a deeper understanding about her leadership, including strengths such as her courage, and commitment to change and areas of challenge, for example a ready propensity to take total responsibility on her shoulders. In the public spaces where her own identity seems up for debate – where stereotypes are circling amidst ambiguity about how she should act and be seen as leader – I have seen her pause, sometimes name the tensions she is experiencing, and actively experiment with being different.

In the third example, I was teaching an executive group and we were working through some ideas about identities, such as those described above and exercises which encourage participants to explore the themes and strands of identity that have shaped them and continue to regulate them, and consider what identity questions they are working on now. At the end of the session I walked out with one of the participants, who told me the session had felt like it had nearly knocked him over: it had ‘hit him in the chest’. Belatedly, and as we talked, I realised that he is an indigenous man and someone who self-identifies strongly as Aboriginal. He has been initiated into cultural practices and is closely guided by elder men. For him, our work that day raised issues about his Aboriginality and his leadership that defy simple resolution and go to the heart of how he sees himself. For example, should he continue in a role working with Indigenous communities or should he pursue a leadership role beyond the bounds of his strong cultural identity, in the latter case perhaps risking rejection or being seen as positioning himself above members of his community? These identity-related tensions are built into the structure of being for many Indigenous Australians. They are created by the political and ideological context that regulates how and which identities may be taken up. In this example, racial and cultural identities already prefigure and constrain leadership. Negotiating through such contradictions is a fact of life for many undertaking leadership work.

My own Whiteness, in contrast, gives me a pre-existing freedom and relative invisibility in not having to think about, or be identified by, my race. But it also creates an obligation. For me, it re-emphasised the importance of not making assumptions about identity from the relatively blind position of my own privilege (Sinclair, 2007). This man’s response powerfully demonstrated that identity work for him is deeply embodied, which he demonstrated in talking about the whack in the chest.

These three examples show three leaders engaging very differently in identity work. Despite the differences, my overwhelming experience is that critical ideas and theories about identities are often valuable to people doing a wide range of leadership. It helps them understand and get perspective on the multiple and often conflicting identity pressures from which their own approaches to leadership spring. The ideologies and structures that constrain them become more visible, yet people also feel supported to undertake experimentation in doing their leadership and in being. Also, the persistently fickle pressures from followers on identity become more visible. A particular peril associated with wanting to be a leader is getting caught up in always performing to follower fantasies. Identity work often helps leaders get some understanding of these temptations and seductions (Sinclair, 2009) and navigate through them in a way that allows for disappointment and disillusion – on both sides of the leader and follower relationship.

I have been deeply touched by the work that leaders do and the changes in understanding that are, in many cases, sustained and sustaining. People often seem happier, more open and feel less trapped. Paradoxically, perhaps they seem freer from themselves and the burden of continually producing a version of themselves. There is less egocentrism and narcissism, not more. Importantly, from a leadership point of view, work on identities seems to free leaders to pay attention to others and to intervene thoughtfully in what’s really going on.

BEING IN LEADERSHIP:
MY OWN IDENTITY WORK

Alongside the research and teaching described above, has been my own identity work. The first
time I started thinking about identity and connecting to my leadership was about 12 years ago, when my brother and grandfather died within a few months of each other. Both had lived for their work, in very different ways.

I started to think then more deeply about how I wanted to be in my life and for what. I also recognised I was one of the key obstacles to me being different. The following year, when I had my fourth child and wrote Doing Leadership Differently, I was looking for a way to both intellectually and practically be different, and by that I mean less driven, more compassionate towards myself and others, continuing to critique and innovate but in less punishing fashion.

Of course, quite quickly, I found myself back enacting the familiar self – working very hard and beating myself up for not doing many things well enough. In 2003 I resolved to resign. When I told my boss, he provided the option of leave without pay and I completed my yoga teacher training the following year. Yoga and the Eastern philosophy, Buddhism and meditation I studied and practiced taught me a whole lot of new things: ways of thinking about self, identity and the mind, ways of stepping back from my self and observing many habits of producing myself. These ideas have substantially influenced my own thinking about identities and informed my practices of identity work.

My evolving understanding of identities and identities in leadership thus derive from what ostensibly seem very disparate sources: Foucault, feminism, Buddhism and neuroscience, among others. Despite their eclecticism and perhaps contradictions, they have deepened my insights into what I might do to reduce oppression and create conditions for freedom and openness for others and myself. Let me say a little about these diverse influences on my own identity work.

Foucault’s later work resumes an interest in what he calls ‘practices of the self’ (1994). Here he was not retreating from the structural – the way discourses and power operate at a meta-narrative level – but was adding in to that analysis new ideas about how we might think and be with ourselves in the face of these conditions. For Foucault, freedom lies in our ongoing commitment to practices that put a persistent value on reflexivity and seeing things as they are, rather than getting caught up in the truths we are told about them.

Buddhism and many Eastern philosophies also encourage scepticism towards self, and particularly the pompous, demanding and self-important self that is ego. For Foucault, self is a big production, a highly engineered but fragile palace. In Buddhism, self is an illusion – though a captivatingly plausible one.

Where reading Foucault has helped me intellectually to understand the topography and the traps of self-making, meditation and mindfulness practices have helped me cultivate a set of practices for observation and intentional intervention in self-production. They have created a capacity to catch myself in the perpetual and often slightly ridiculous process of defending and securing myself: common self-talk phrases like, ‘Why don’t they understand me?’ ‘If only I could be left alone’, ‘If only they’d appreciate me, life would be easy’. Of course these phrases continue to circulate, particularly in circumstances where I am trying to ‘be’ different and feel a large discrepancy between the self that I feel others may be expecting and the one I am interested in being and believe is potentially more helpful to others. Yet I can and do simultaneously understand that these are all ways of thinking about the self that assumes the self to be precious and need defending. They are ways of entrenching a self, of lending it solidity which I don’t actually need to engage in.

Buddhism teaches that stepping back from that clutter of upholding and securing a needy self gives access to a different set of possibilities of being. Some call it a wider consciousness, a knowledge that the self is not separate – that the idea of the separate individual is a doctrine which also holds us in the desperate effort to discover and prove ourselves.

Here I want to bring in feminism and the work of scholars like Butler (2005) and Benjamin (1998). From a very different direction, they highlight how performance of our identities often requires definition and subordination of the ‘other’: how we use others in order to be ourselves. Benjamin is interested in charting a different territory of inter-subjective space where we are truly with, and present to others without this instrumentality. For me this is again a very Buddhist idea and one which some other leadership researchers are exploring under the label of ‘presencing’ (Scharmer, 2007; Senge et al., 2005).

In her book, Giving an Account of Oneself, Butler offers an unexpectedly compassionate view of identity and ethics. She reminds us that ‘becoming human’ is no simple task and it is not always clear when or if one arrives’ (2005, p. 103). While we may wish ourselves to be ‘whole perspicacious beings’, a morality based on a hastily constructed authenticity of being true to oneself is insufficient. Rather, perhaps morality entails refraining from self-assertion and recognising ‘the way social forces take up residence within us, making it impossible to define ourselves in terms of free will’ (2005, p. 106). According to Butler this understanding – of the limits in knowing self – is the basis of a new form of morality with others. For her, a moral path lies in confronting our narcissistic wish for complete self-knowledge, understanding that we are all products of our
When organisational theorists such as Alvesson and Wilmott began exploring identities in organisational life, there was an invitation, I believe, to begin to be reflexive about our own identity-making. Collinson (2005) says there should be more attention to the ‘multiple, shifting, contradictory and ambiguous identities of leaders and followers’ (2005, p. 1436). Yet in our rush as researchers to chart this rich territory, we risk ignoring the processes by which our research constitutes our own identity work. At a basic level it is likely that we use observations of others as a device to secure a self. Furthermore, we may inadvertently be contributing to the construction of a hierarchy in identity-making (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004), where the efforts of some are subject to scrutiny while our own are above it. Although it may be inevitable that our own identity work is accomplished via our analyses of leadership, it seems essential that we pause to notice that and consider the consequences.

The possibility that I am interested in and have attempted to explore in this chapter is how might leaders – indeed ourselves – be in these identity spaces reflexively. How might leaders get some distance from and not be so captured by the business of producing themselves? I have drawn on leadership, critical, feminist and other writers who show that identities are not ours to craft. I have also drawn on ideas from and my experience of meditation, mindfulness and the perhaps implausible junction where psychoanalysis meets Buddhism (Epstein, 1995), to describe some of my own efforts to be in leadership lightly: with a less pressing need to be myself and with more freedom of thought and action. From a leadership point of view, my observation is that when leaders are less engrossed in being themselves, they are better at providing leadership – they are more present, more able to see what’s going on and more able to be open and connected to others.

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