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Exige-stential leadership: exploring the limits of leadership in a crisis.

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Abstract

Mabey and Morrell (2011) pose a challenge for leadership scholars: How to undertake ontologically diverse research which promotes dialogue with less favoured theoretical standpoints? This conceptual paper aims to respond to this challenge through an exploration of existentialist thought in the context of an exigency. In particular, this paper makes an original contribution to the discourse on leadership with the idea of *exige-stential* leadership. In doing so, this paper aims to integrate ideas from existentialism into a discussion of how individuals respond to an exigency and provoke debate. The challenge presented by unforeseen events is recognised in the literature on leadership and management but this corpus of work is influenced by a dominant hegemony of rational-analytic thought that limits the possible responses of leaders and managers. Instead of these competency-based approaches that look to specify a particular set of preferred responses, existentialism explores wider understandings of what it means to be a leader and how leadership could be performed through inter-subjectivity, mutual support and shared emotional and mental models. This paper is informed by an underpinning research question: How can existentialist thought contribute to understanding of leadership in an exigency? In doing so, this paper suggests that we may be able to re-appraise how we interpret leadership from a different perspective to that in rationalist writing. Although a great deal of theorisation into authentic and servant leadership has been undertaken in recent decades, criticism of these ethics-based leadership models as being limited suggests that we should look to alternative approaches. In placing leadership behaviours in the context of a crisis, this paper provides a lens through which to re-conceptualise what we understand as leadership.

Keywords: Exige-stential leadership; Existentialism; Authentic leadership; Complexity theory; Crisis management

Introduction

Mabey and Morrell (2011) posit a challenge for leadership scholars: How to undertake diverse research whilst at the same time promoting dialogue with less favoured theoretical positions? This conceptual paper aims to explore the potential for alternative perspectives through a discussion of existentialist thought in the context of an exigency. Much has been written in recent years about volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) and the challenges that unforeseen events generate for organisational leaders (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014), the literature is characterised by an idealised approach to leadership and management that is predicated upon objectivist notions of role, identity and knowledge. This conceptual paper offers an alternative to this approach through the concept of *exige-stential* leadership. In addressing the challenge posed by Mabey and Morrell (2011), it sets out to explore a possible gap in the literature relating to ethical leadership in an exigency and is concerned with this research question: How can existentialist thought contribute to understanding of leadership in an exigency? This discussion aims to provoke debate about how leaders address an organisational imperative by integrating ideas from existentialism and the literature on crisis leadership to posit the notion of *exige-stential* leadership. In articulating this call for a new approach to leadership, this paper places the discussion within

the literature on crisis leadership, decision-making and 'progressive' leadership theory. It offers a critique of objectivist approaches on leadership through an alternative view that recognises the limitations that attend our search for a complete understanding of this complex concept.

Refining our understanding of the leadership challenge

The Covid-19 Coronavirus emergency has highlighted the manifold challenges that confront organisational leaders and managers as they tackle unforeseen events. In a rudimentary sense, the foremost function of leadership may be concerned with the survival and long-term future of an organisation in any given emergency. However, if we are to envisage leadership beyond an immediate organisational imperative, we should consider the way in which leaders practise their work, its impact on others and what we can learn from differing approaches. In particular, leaders face three principal challenges: accessing useful information, ensuring effective decision-making, and acting in an ethical and socially responsible manner. The idea that leaders should demonstrate adaptive capability is a prominent theme in contemporary leadership discourse (Betta and Owczarzak-Skomra, 2019; Cleveland and Cleveland, 2020). This facet of leadership has attracted interest because of the changing context for leadership and the rapidity of change in an uncertain world. The contemporary world appears to be setting leaders new and bigger challenges as we move from economic crises such as the Financial crash of 2008, disrupted trade patterns across the globe and the Covid-19 emergency. Betta and Owczarzak-Skomra note that 'we find different definitions of crisis, depending on such factors as: domain of activity affected by crisis, type of crisis, its scale, resulting damage, point of view or experience' (2019, p. 310), but that it is typified by a disruption to established practice that leads to a loss of control, stress and the need to respond. Furthermore, within this discussion of crisis, it is possible to differentiate between an exigency from an emergency situation. Whereas an emergency is viewed as a situation in which there is an immediate risk to life and property, an exigency is regarded as an urgent need that may relate to a financial crisis (Boggs, 2003) or a legal issue (McCarthy, 2020) or some other organisational crisis. As such, an exigency is more properly correlates to challenges that confront organisational leadership than an emergency. Once we have clarified how an exigency differs from an emergency, we may be better informed in our search for *exige-stential* leadership.

There is an extensive corpus of empirical and theoretical research that pertains to leadership within a crisis (Marcus, Dom, and Henderson, 2006; Caro, 2016; Betta and Owczarzak-Skomra, 2019; Russell, 2019). Much of the literature relates to the manner by which organisational leaders co-ordinate, inspire and communicate with emergency responders. For example, Marcus et al. (2006) suggest that leaders engage in meta-leadership when directing, guiding, and co-ordinating others that reaches across an organisation to wider networks of professionals, and Caro (2016) suggested that there are 12 desirable leadership characteristics involved in emergency management. In their study of the aftermath of an earthquake in China during 2008, Zhi, Ming and Lihong (2012) reported that effective leaders were typified by strong leader-member exchange behaviours and emotional control. The literature on agile leadership claims to show how adaptive leadership behaviours may enable more responsive organisations. Hunt, Boal and Dodge (1999) assign effective leadership behaviours to four categories that are described as: crisis-responsive, visionary under crisis, exchange under crisis and low expressiveness under crisis. Interestingly, both Zhi et al. (2012) and that Hunt et al. (1999) refer to emotional control with the inference of some form of detachment as being key to effective leadership in a crisis. Agile leadership

theory has been applied to other contexts, including inter-cultural relations (Cleveland and Cleveland, 2020), team-based working (Rigby, Sutherland and Takeuchi, 2016) and Human Resource Management (McPherson, 2016). For Joiner (2008), it is possible to identify levels of leadership behaviour, such the 'expert', 'achiever' and 'synergist', that promote agility within organisations and that can be developed. Such an approach is redolent of the skills-based competency-based notions of leadership and management that has underpinned much of leadership and management development since the 1970s (Albanese, 1989).

Much of contemporary conceptions of business leadership are the influenced by the objectification of leadership in terms of desirable leadership behaviours (Hall and Rowland, 2016). This 'menu-like' approach to leadership infers a standardised response for leaders, which is external to them but consistent with established expectations. For example, Agarwal and Malloy (2000) describe a five stage decision-making approach that is redolent of rationalist conceptions of cost-benefit analysis and typifies conventional ways of addressing a crisis. In addition to those skills associated with co-ordinating others and communication, Betta and Owczarzak-Skomra, (2019) highlight the importance of the process of decision-making in agile leadership. The nature of decision-making is, however, more complicated than idealised forms of leadership practice would suggest and is embedded in the complexities of organisational life. For Langley (2007), there is a need to clarify a number of ontological and epistemological issues that relate to our understanding of leadership and management in complex organisations. In particular, conventional ways of understanding leadership has been underpinned by rational-analytic forms of knowledge and the model of Classical Decision Making (CDM) practices (Abraham and Collins, 2011) that are predicated on objectivist notions of reality and the way in which people behave (Bettis, Gamardella, Helfat and Mitchell, 2014).

The challenge of complexity in organisational decision-making

A number of scholars have suggested that dealing with problems is more complex than leadership theory would claim (Chiles, 2003; Langley, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2003; Tsoukas, 2017). The rational-analytic approach to decision-making has been viewed by von Foerster (1984) as reducing organisations into 'trivial machines', within which the potential for individual agency is minimised (Nelson and Winter, 1982). Tsoukas (2017) suggests that we reject this disjunctive view of organisational processes in favour of conjunctive thinking and embrace the idea of complexity in order to fully understand leadership challenges reappraise how we theorise about organisational problem-solving. Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley (2008) highlight the importance of developing an environment within which individuals are able to respond to changing problem scenarios. For Nicolaides and McCallum (2013, p. 248), this need to empower others infers that leaders should 'unlearn the old assumptions and biases' that inhibit others and their contribution. How far should we then 'unlearn' established assumptions of how leaders should act? Is there an alternative paradigm of leadership to one that is not predicated upon objectivist notions of what leaders do and are?

Conventional notions of leadership and management

The work of Burns (1978) and Bass and Avolio (1994) in the development of transformational leadership theory has been heralded as highlighting the potential for ethically-based charismatic leadership behaviour. However, there are number of concerns that attend the idea of transformational leadership that relate to its ethical context, impact on

employees, and whether it is a sufficiently robust theoretical model. Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) identify a fundamental tension that exists in the model which is linked to its ethical context. Whereas advocates of the model may claim that leaders are characterised by deontological moral principles, in practice they are driven by teleological ethics and the desire to prioritise organisational imperatives. This inherent tension within the model is extensively explored within the literature. Importantly as Stone, Russell and Patterson (2004) recognise, the relationship between leader and followers is predicated upon trust. In displaying trust in a superior, a follower opens themselves open to manipulation and possible exploitation. In particular, Tourish (2013) has highlighted the danger of inauthentic transformational leaders who are able to manipulate circumstances for their own benefit and Yukl (1989) has famously described this as the 'dark side of charisma'. After all, history is replete with charismatic leaders who exploited a crisis for their own personal agendas. As Hay (2006) notes, the amoral combination of organisational improvement together with personal aggrandisement may be most apparent in the practise of impression management which may be superficial in nature. This cult of the transformational leader may be no more than a myth (Chen, Ning, Yang, Feng, and Yang, 2018) and may have deleterious implications for organisational culture (Carlson and Perrewe, 1995).

A number of scholars extend the critique of transformational leadership beyond its ethical context. For example, Bott and Tourish (2016) report that the supposed benefits of transformational leadership are limited from a practical perspective and Chen, Ning, Yang, Feng, and Yang (2018) report that it may distort organisational performance. Moreover, Chen, Ning, Yang, Feng, and Yang, (2018) report in their study of business in China that establishing a direct causal link between transformational leadership and organisational performance is complicated by the numerous mediating factors that affect employee motivation and skill sets. To ascribe organisational outcome to transformational leaders is therefore simplistic and over-stated. The inadequacy of transformational leadership can be traced to its very conception. Research on organisational performance extends beyond the individual to an organisational perspective and with this the idea of developing capacity at all levels (Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow, 2009; Mabey and Lees Finch, 2008; Nicolaides and McCallum, 2013; Romme and Witteloostuijn, 1999). Indeed, work on process theory highlights the complex and varied nature of decision-making that often extend beyond the individual (Langley, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Tsoukas, 2017). At the root of transformational leadership theory is the idea of motivating employees to be more productive in order to benefit the organisation but this is in itself is a simplistic and narrow approach to adopt when investigating the complexities of organisational behaviour and performance. In a reductive sense then, leadership charisma is just another management tool that has the potential to fail and distort our understanding of organisational outcomes. How then can leaders demonstrate that they possess genuine personal commitment to ethical practice in a crisis?

Recent research has sought to address the idea of moral dilemma in leadership through 'progressive' models of leadership that focus on the authenticity of the individual. In particular, authentic and servant leadership theory has explored the capacity of leaders to act in an ethical and responsible manner (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2005; Stoten, 2013a, Stoten, 2013b). Both authentic and servant leadership models are premised on the idea that the individual is able to act in an ethical manner and demonstrate moral positioning in professional practice. Gardner et al. (2005) suggest that authentic leadership is manifest in a willingness to self-regulate their leadership behaviours, act without personal bias and being transparent in professional relationships. Moreover, Greenleaf (1977) claimed that some professional

contexts such as educational leadership were inherently moral in nature. Progressive leadership theory has influenced management education (Aston University, 2020 Corriveau, 2020), with Corriveau (2020, p. 1) claiming that 'to attain sustainable development goals (SDGs), organizations need authentic leaders. Authentic leaders are self-aware and are guided by a strong set of ethical values that drive their actions'. This claim is, however, should be subject to scrutiny.

The literature on leadership has since the 1950s produced a range of theoretical models that postulate an idealised set of behaviours. Much of this work has been led by American Business Schools and a particular view of what leadership is supposed to be. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, leadership was associated with productivity and profit maximisation. In addition, much of this research has focussed on the asymmetrical relationship between a leader and their followers. This approach is typified through the work on Leader-Member Exchange theory and the privileged position of the authoritative leader (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). In the first half of the twenty-first century this functionalist conception of leadership is recognised as limited as it is often dependent on the quality of interaction and underlying interpersonal relations (Yu, Matta, Cornfield, 2018; Liao, Zhou, Guo, and Li, 2019; Gottfredson, Wright and Heaphy, 2020). As we search for new ways of understanding leadership in a globalised world, leadership theorists now explore leadership in other contexts, drawing from other cultures and religious traditions. This search for new understandings of leadership invites a reappraisal of rationalist approaches and the idea of modelling leadership as an intellectual exercise.

Alvesson and Einola (2019, p. 393) raise concerns about 'progressive' leadership theories, such as authentic leadership, claiming that 'leadership is hardly referred to at all in authentic leadership theory; there is almost nothing on how the authentic leader is supposed to act'. For Alvesson and Einola (2019) the theoretical claims for authentic leadership are undermined by inadequate research methodology and empirical data. In particular, Alvesson and Einola (2019) build on Heidegger's (1996) idea that humans live inauthentic lives because we subsume ourselves within the logic of organisational narratives and social norms. The research on 'identity work' reports on the changing nature of the socially-situated self and how this is conditioned by conformity to organisational norms (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Brown, 2004; Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). For Alvesson and Einola (2019, p.385), the problem with searching for authenticity in leadership is that there is an internal inconsistency within the model, as 'self is a philosophical or psychological concept, whereas role is a response to external expectations'. This incongruity within the theory of authentic leadership between self and role is one that cannot be resolved.

The relevance of existential thought to studies of leadership

Existentialism offers an alternative philosophical position to rationalist conceptions of leadership. Although existentialist writing is diverse and not entirely coherent, there are some underpinning themes that characterise existentialist thought (Kierkegaard, 1962; Sartre, 1965, 1973). In particular, Gibbs (2010) identifies the issues of being authentic to the one-self, placing the individual in their wider context and recognising the centrality of subjectivity as central to existentialism. Existentialism explores how conformity can limit authenticity and the existence of the self. Indeed, Ashman and Lawler (2012) describe how Sartrean existentialism challenges the idea of the stable self. For Sartre, each individual is a dynamic work in progress, and which is situated in its particular individual context. Moreover, much

of contemporary leadership theory is predicated upon the idea of the authentic self. For Sartre (1973), this is a false premise from which to contemplate leadership:

> The first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.

From a Sartrean perspective then, an individual whether a leader or not cannot abrogate responsibility for their actions and rely upon prescriptive menu-like approaches to decision-making. As such, existentialist thought offers an alternative view of how we may understand leadership responsibility in an exigency and how it is inescapably a personal project. As such existentialism offers a critical perspective on leadership as a personal project.

Ashman and Lawler (2008) suggest that we may review our understanding of leadership practice through a discussion of the nature of leadership communication. Much of transformational theory is predicated upon the notion of the communication of the authentic self and 'knowing thyself'. Ashman and Lawler (2012), explain that the idea of authenticity can only ever be transient and incomplete as the process of creating the self is a dynamic process and ultimately a life-long phenomenon. Instead of viewing communication as a feature of instrumental leadership, Ashman and Lawler (2008) argue that we should invert this relationship and view leadership as part of a broader conception of communication. Within this reappraisal of communication, is the invitation to revisit the nature of the message itself. Implicit within transformational leadership behaviour is a working premise that there exists an ethical ground to the message that is underpinned by moral values. Agarwal and Malloy (2000) describe how deontological ethics that are rules-based and teleological ethics, which are focused on achieving the best outcome, are challenged by existentialist thought. In a particularly apposite observation, Agarwal and Malloy (2000, p.152) describe how individuals stand at 'the edge of the decision abyss armed with the available knowledge of the best ends and best means and with this must make a leap of faith- he or she must choose'. In this sense, existentialism highlights the vulnerability of what it means to be a leader and take difficult decisions, particularly under challenging circumstances'. In short, an existentialist perspective re-orientates our discussion of leadership since it aims to redefine the very essence of what it means to lead, and be a leader.

Existentialism challenges the idea that communication is simply a transactional process between a leader and their followers and that it should also be viewed as a personal endeavour in the search for meaning. In functional-rationalist approaches, leader-driven communication is presented as a pre-requisite leadership competency (Albanese, 1989). Typically, this is evident in corporate mission statements of the idea of a strategic vision. This privileging of the leader in communication and knowledge production is predicated upon the premise of legitimate power that is based on a particular role in an organisational hierarchy, expertise or experience. Jaspers (1997) views this practice of corporate leadership communication as flawed since there are many truths and that none should be privileged over another. For a number of scholars, truth can only be socially constructed through inter-subjective meaning and informed with shared ideas relating to integrity, dignity and responsibility for others that arise from 'being in the world' (Buber, 2002; Cammock, 2003; Ford and Lawler, 2007; Gibbs, 2010; Heidegger, 1996; Jaspers, 1997; Lawler and Ashman, 2012). The idea of inter-subjectivity within organisational discourse is not exclusive to existentialism and is explored extensively by Habermas within social constructionism (Grady and Wells, 1985; Habermas, 1984/1987; Imafidon, 2015), as well within Husserl's

phenomenology. The importance of the particular aspect of existentialist thought is, however, located within the idea of multiple truths and how it challenges the prevailing orthodoxy of the corporate message that underpins much of the literature on leadership. In particular, it raises questions as to the 'power' to persuade that are typified in transformational and authentic leadership theory. Ultimately, for Ashman and Lawler (2008) existentialism necessitates a reorientation of how leaders communicate with others in a more open, empathetic, transparent and genuine manner.

   Both Kierkegaard (1941) and Sartre (1965) questioned the notion of knowledge as the defining characteristic of leadership. Instead of a reductionist approach for conventionalised 'facts', Polanyi (1975) prefers to search for wider metaphysical claims to knowledge that are derived from a fuller understanding of socially-situated human existence. For Gibbs (2010, p. 7):

> Rationalist conceptions of self lead human beings to inauthentic living, or borrowing expressions from others; and thus being less than they could be…. Presenting the notion of being inauthentic and not true to one's own meaning. This suggests a turning of the individual leader towards inwardness for understanding, subjectively, rather than for external objective truths.

The concept of existenz has been proffered by Jaspers (1997) as a way of conceptualising how individuals make sense of their existence and its context. Although the work of Nicolaides and McCallum (2013) and Tsoukas (2017) in highlighting the complex nature of decision-making is useful in this context, their contribution falls short of a satisfactory explanation of the individual in crisis. Instead of looking for new models of organisational decision-making, existentialism suggests that we look for how individuals make sense of the world and how they communicate this to others (MacMillan, Yue and Mills, 2012). In this sense, the importance of organisational processes is superseded by the concept of the ethical self in context. Importantly, Tanguay-Renaud (2009) recognises that morality is not attached to roles but to people and posits the question: to whom do organisational leaders have a duty of responsibility in a public emergency? Ultimately, existentialism re-defines leadership from being associated with organisational imperatives to one that is personal and an ethical endeavour.

Research method
This conceptual paper is the outcome of a review of the literature on existentialism and leadership, leadership theory and crisis management. Jaakkola (2020, p.19) offers a distinction between focussing on a phenomenon or theory when writing a conceptual paper. In discussing a theoretical issue, a conceptual paper should explore whether:

> A particular concept, theory, or research domain is internally incoherent or incomplete in some important respect and then introducing other theories to bridge the observed gaps. In this case, the choice of theories or concepts is based on their ability to address the observed shortcoming in the existing literature, i.e. their supplementary value.

Cropanzano (2009) suggests that a good conceptual paper should explore why an area of study could be moving in the wrong direction. This paper therefore looks to address a gap in the literature, with no discernible work on existentialist interpretations of leadership during an exigency. In particular, this work aims to contribute to the theoretical discourse on

leadership through theory adaptation (MacInnis, 2011). Jaakkola (2020) explains the objectives in such an approach are to: offer a new theoretical lens on a defined problem, expand the domain of the existing theoretical discourse and provide new dimensions to an established construct. This paper conforms to these objectives through exploration of the problem of leadership in a exigency, integrating ideas from existential philosophy, and offer the concept of *exige-stential* leadership.

The practice of undertaking an ordered review of the literature is reported widely (Cropanzano, 2009; Hallinger, 2012; Lee, Chamberlain and Brandes, 2017; Snyder, 2019; Jaakkola, 2020). However, Hallinger (2013, p. 127) concedes that 'it is somewhat surprising that, until recently, scholars have not paid sustained attention to the "methods" employed in conducting reviews of research'. This paper therefore aims to explain the research approach taken and provide some illustrative criteria of quality. Snyder (2019) highlights the benefits of undertaking a review of the literature in Business research, especially as literature reviews delineates the nature of discourse and serves to develop theory. In general, there are three stages to such an exercise, the initial search, a clarification of key concepts and foci and reporting on findings. Hallinger (2013) usefully differentiated between relatively narrow 'selective', focussed 'bounded', and 'exhaustive' searches. Lee, Chamberlain and Brandes (2017) suggest that the identification of keywords and the scope of review are essential as an initial step in planning. The key words used in this 'bounded' search were emergency, exigency and existentialism, critiques of transformational leadership, authenticity, and existentialist psychology, as well as concepts derived from the theory of crisis and agile leadership. Academic search engines, such as Google Scholar, were used to search for relevant literature and journal papers and books were used. Academic papers were drawn from a range of journals including *Philosophy of Management, The International Journal of Philosophy and Management Concepts, Leadership and The Leadership Quarterly,* as well as Higher Education research repositories. Cropanzano (2009, p. 1306) considers that 'theory articles are more interesting when they underscore commonalities that build coherence'. Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014, p. 257) describe this process of developing coherence in terms of an iterative hermeneutic approach that involves 'continuous engagement with and gradual development of a body of literature during which increased understanding and insights are developed'. In order to facilitate understanding, the key themes were organised through a mind-mapping exercise that identified important conceptual links and thematised the overview (see Figure 1 for an illustration of this process). It is within this second stage of conducting the review that early decisions relating to useful concepts and thematic development were implemented, particularly in relation to leadership communication, the concept of the self in leadership studies and the limitations associated with both conventional rationalist and existentialist approaches. In the final stage of the research exercise, the findings were organised through a series of thematised mind-maps and their outcome is reported in the paper itself.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Discussion

This conceptual paper has identified the limitations associated with rationalist-functionalist conceptions of leadership. An exigency may present a wide range of immediate challenges for leaders but do conventional theoretical models of leadership fully address all of these issues?

The representation of organisations as 'trivial machines' (Von Foerster, 1984) in which individual agency is minimised is an important starting point for this discussion. Instead of conceptualising leadership in conventional rationalist terms with its emphasis on functionality, existentialism offers an alternative perspective based on humanity. In doing so, existentialism offers a markedly different view of leadership is, and the importance of how we conceive relationships within organisations.

What could exige-stential leadership be?

Informed by existentialist thought, this paper offers the concept of *exige-stential* leadership- but what would be its defining features? Although there exists an inherent challenge in attempting to codify any notion of leadership from an existentialist position, we may make some tentative suggestions that build on earlier work on leadership (Buber, 2002; Ashman and Lawler, 2008; Gibbs, 2010). Buber (2002) highlights to centrality of communication between individuals and the importance of developing inter-subjective understanding that is predicated upon mutual respect. Such a position raises questions as to how we frame common mental models of our world and mode of communication. For both Buber (2002) and Raelin (2016), this goal can only be achieved through a shift from the 'I-It' relation, which is functional in nature to the 'I-Thou' relationship that assumes an understanding of others' views and feelings. Although this recognition of leadership as a process of social interaction is not new, the ways in which existential thinking approach the concept of leadership itself offers a radically different conception of what it means to lead others.

Von Fricks (2020) highlights the importance of dialogue for those who would claim to lead. If we accept that *exige-stential* leadership should be inter-subjective in nature and situated socially within 'being in the world', it must not only be aligned with Jaspers (1997) ideas of empirical existence and consciousness but also of his notion of existenz that is tied to intangible and subjective nature of truth. Such a situation may be viewed as creating problems in developing inter-subjective understandings of what an exigency is and how best to address it. For Jaspers (1997), the truth of existenz can only be realised through the clear demarcation of circumstance through situated boundaries- but how are these defined and by whom?

Exploring the limitations of exige-stential leadership?

Since leadership can only be realised in the moment of existence, any extrapolation of leadership into a temporal timeframe invites critique. Given the socially-situated exercise of role within organisations and the allocation of responsibility within this context, how is it possible to move to *exige-stential* leadership? For Salamun (1999), the fundamental premise that should underpin existentialist approaches must be through the identification and sharing of moral attitudes that invoke honesty, integrity and equality. Although these ideals may be laudable, research on organisational culture reports on the difficulties in coalescing around commonly-held ideas and the development of sub-cultures (Schein, 1997; Handy, 1999).

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Kierkegaard (1992) recognised that understanding cannot be imparted by a leader but discovered by the individual through personal realisation. This enterprise can only hope to succeed if there exists psychological closeness that facilitates a shared identity and genuine dialogue (Ashman and Lawler, 2008) that extends beyond what is said to the way it is communicated, including indirect communication through body-language. For Ashman and Lawler (2008, p.16), this dialogue must be conceived 'as a creative process, allowing the development of potential of all those involved in leader relations and as such it moves beyond the relative fixity of roles, implied in the leadership literature'. Perhaps the role of leadership can be reduced to one imperative- facilitating communication on how to tackle a common challenge?

Placing theoretical development within a practical context:

This exploration of existential thought and leadership practice has generated a number of issues for practice. Most importantly, the existentialist challenge to rationalist thinking questions established notions of idealised leadership behaviours and how we should view 'good' leadership training. Existentialism rejects the abstraction of experience into typologies of preferred behaviours and a menu-like approach to leadership problems. Indeed, for Mulvey (2013, p. 273) existentialist thought 'does not offer solutions to the problems people present with, but encourages a way of being with those problems, or embracing the full catastrophe'. In this respect, any attempt at conceiving a prescriptive existentialist training programme for aspiring leaders is somewhat limited in what it can hope to achieve. If traditional approaches that are based on prescribed forms of knowledge are to be rejected, then what is there to do? Ultimately, if we are to accept Sartre's interpretation of authenticity, then the answer must be concerned with the individual and their conception of their place in the world (Adams, 2014). As such, instead of conceiving leadership as the practice of abstract theory, we should consider it as a sense-making exercise in which the individual and their values condition behaviour. Kabat-Zinn (2001) recommends mindfulness meditation as a way of individuals coming to terms with their challenges of a crisis. In order to facilitate meaning, support should be offered so as to enhance personal reflection on action (Schoen, 1991) rather than training to act in a pre-determined fashion. In the context of an exigency, for example, an environment should be enabled within which an individual is able to gain a deeper understanding of how they communicate with others and its consequences. In instances where the experience has been particularly traumatic, the provision of counselling support should be made available. Shahar and Schiller (2016) point to the potential benefits to be derived from therapeutic approaches influenced by existential-integrative psychology. Altogether, then we need to consider how leaders can move beyond 'being in the world' to an individual meaning of their world.

Conclusion

Complexity appears to be an inescapable feature of our world, both in terms of the challenges they face and the processes adopted in response. A process-oriented perspective (Tsoukas, 2017) provides some understanding of this challenge and places complexity within an organisational context that is conditioned by hierarchies, bureaucracy and internal micro-politics. The events of 2020 have highlighted the ways in which nations, organisations and individuals cope with unforeseen events. Hitherto, much of the literature on VUCA has focussed on developing competency, certain skills and mind-sets in tackling emergent crises, but the effectiveness of such rational-analytic approaches is open for debate.

This conceptual paper has posed a question How can existentialist thought contribute to understanding of leadership in an exigency? An exigency is a particular form of crisis as it demands an urgent response and one for which we may be unprepared from an ethical perspective, as well as in from a practical viewpoint. How do we address the ethical, inter-personal and wider societal issues during an exigency? What do our actions infer about us and how we view leadership and the way organisations should work? How can organisations facilitate personal leadership development? These questions underpin how we can reappraise our understanding of leadership and management is and can become.

The idea of *exige-stential* leadership draws from the literature on existentialism and seeks to place it within the context of an exigency. This paper offers an original contribution to the discourse on leadership through its identification of how we can develop a wider, more inclusive approach to organisational leadership that recognises the very diversity in experience that exists within ourselves and our organisations. In order to develop *exige-stential* leadership beyond its initial conception described above, we need to explore how existentialist ideas can be developed further through published research. This research could usefully report on reflection during critical incidents and explore the ways in which leaders responded and how they were able to communicate inter-subjectively with others in order to explore a common emotional and mental model of their challenges, consensus and context. In addition, research could explore the capacity of leaders to detach themselves from the crisis and how they are able to come to terms with the aftermath of an exigency, as well as the nature of support provided by organisations. This focus would infer that existentialist perspectives should inform the interpretation of organisational support. Organisations should explore the benefits to be derived from an existentialist understanding of exigency, personal choice and the reconciliation of the manifold tensions inherent in leading through crisis. As such, this conceptual paper invites those who are concerned with leadership to reappraise its meaning for individuals in crisis.

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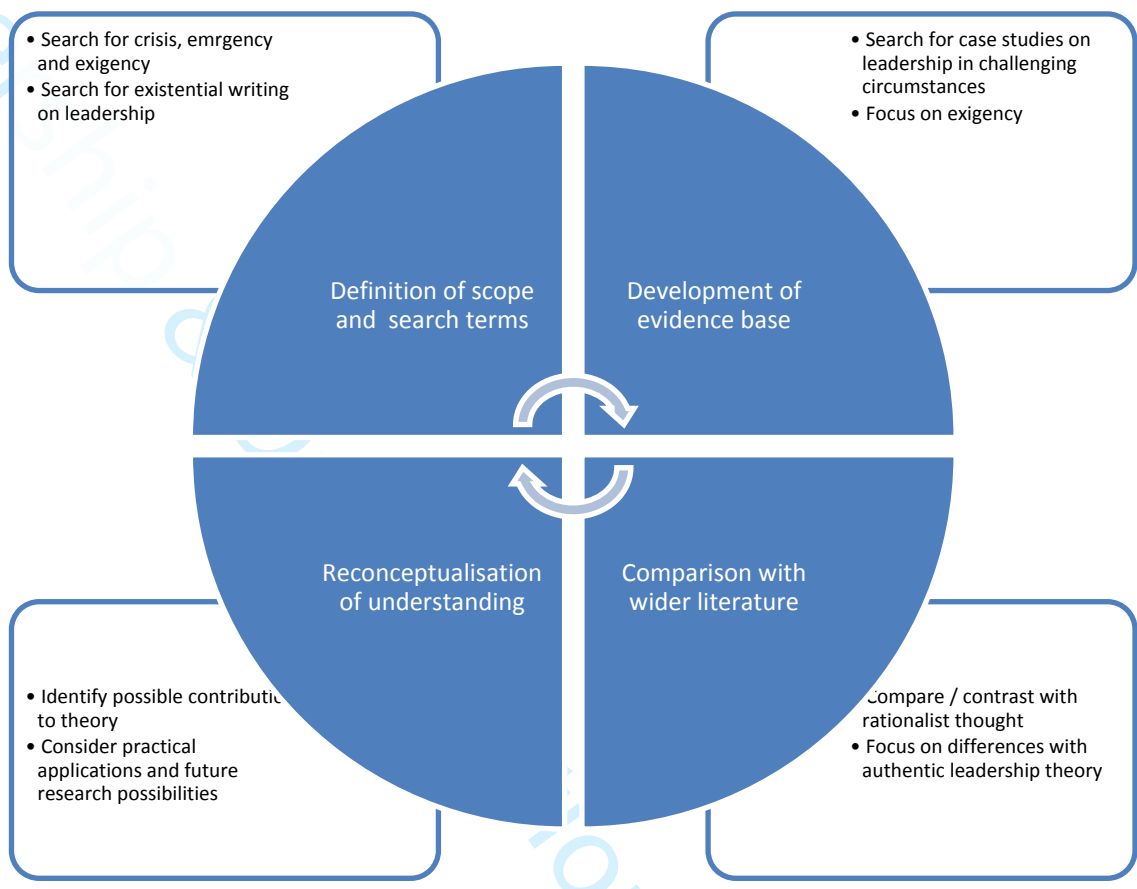41
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Figure 1. A representation of the review of literature.