

Leadership in Liquid Modernity

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores possibilities for refreshing thinking about leadership from perspectives of liquid modernity suggested by Bauman (2000), who identified several dimensions of modern uncertainty in human life and work. Reflecting unease with post-modernism, Bauman's work has been influential in contemporary understandings of society, culture, learning and identity. It is also being taken up in emerging explorations of liquid learning in the educational literature. However, its implications for leadership remain largely unexplored in the management literature. This paper considers how current conceptions of leadership that emphasise the power of individual agency might be usefully re-considered in the light of Bauman's contribution and it develops a number of generative questions to help that process. It then turns to conceptions of liquid learning to suggest some navigational aids for leading under conditions of liquidity.

Introduction

Bauman's (2000, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007) idea of liquid modernity focused on fluid and ambivalent characteristics of communities and economies, delineating several dimensions of modern uncertainty that affect individual and collective effort. His conceptual work has been influential in sociological and philosophical thinking about the dynamics of societal structures. Lee (2005, 2011), among others, has offered successive penetrating critiques of Bauman's contribution, drawing out both its strengths and its limitations. Despite its flaws, Davis (2011) has suggested that Bauman's thinking offers a useful compass to navigate the fluid landscapes of the early 21st century. Bauman's own work – and some of the work it has inspired in the educational literature – is referenced in this paper to suggest some generative questions and navigational aids in practice that might be useful in refreshing leadership thinking.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that specific application of late-modern thinking in general, and of Bauman's in particular, is difficult to find in either the broad business literature or its management and leadership discourse. At first glance, this is hardly surprising given the relentlessly pessimistic picture he paints of the consequences of borderless capitalism. However, a second look suggests another reason for this omission. Nearly twenty years ago, Gronn and Ribbins (1996) observed that leadership theory had managed to avoid the paradigm wars: the philosophical

debates about modernity, post-modernity and late modernity. Arguably, that remains the case in the management and business literature, where discussions of leadership frequently confuse paradigms with leadership styles and strategies (see for example, Feng Jing and Avery's (2008) discussion of suggested linkages between leadership paradigms and organisational performance).

Gronn and Ribbins also observed that "Leadership theorists have always attached great, perhaps exaggerated, significance to the agency of leaders" (1996: 452). Sitting under theories and research that focus on the characteristics and styles of individual leaders are undiscussed assumptions about the nature of agency and structure, concepts which are at the heart of the paradigm wars.

Over the years, some voices have tried to problematise and challenge understandings that represent leadership in terms of behaviours, capabilities and techniques that can effectively control individual and collective effort. Forty years ago, Rittel and Webber's (1973) conceptualisation of wicked problems offered a serious challenge to the notion that significant issues of policy and organisational practice could be effectively planned for, managed and led using traditional command and control assumptions and strategies. However, along with Bauman's work, such voices are not strongly represented in the mainstream literature on leadership and leadership development: literature that still focuses on the idea of leaders as masterful individuals intentionally and effectively applying human effort to the solution of systemic, complex problems. Successive theoretical interpretations of leadership as charismatic and transformational (Waldman et al., 1990; Bass, 1990) have done little to change that state of affairs. Even attempts to highlight the reciprocal nature of power and influence, the highly situational effectiveness of various leadership approaches and styles, and the complex psycho-social dynamics of authority and interdependence, do little to deflect focus in the management and business literature from the skills, qualities, behaviours, selection, development and remuneration of the leader as individual with potent agency. Both Heifetz (1994) and Clawson (2012) have popularised consideration of leadership as an influence activity open at any time to any individual choosing to modify the way things happen, but their practical focus is still concentrated on what the leader as individual agent must do. This paper proposes that an understanding of leadership agency informed by Bauman's thinking raises important questions, and new possibilities, for the ways in which leadership interventions play out in complex systems.

By way of contrast with the management literature, emerging educational theory makes active use of Bauman's construction of liquid modernity and Savin-Baden's (2007) exploration of liquid learning is examined here, both for its inherent usefulness and to illustrate the potential of the trans-disciplinary thinking encouraged from perspectives of late modernity more generally. Insofar as it involves understanding and influencing human behavior under conditions of complexity, the field of education shares much with the field of leadership and especially the archetypal issues of agency and identity: making sense of things, taking purposeful action, problem solving, dealing with change and working with others in a range of circumstances and contexts. It is suggested in this paper that conceptions of liquid learning offer a number of useful navigational aids for leadership practice under conditions of liquidity.

The first section of the paper introduces the intellectual context of Bauman's work and the concept of liquid modernity. It draws on critiques of Bauman's thinking offered by Lee (2005, 2011) to

more clearly position the relevance and value of this thinking to issues of leadership. The second section draws out some of the major questions for leadership that are implied by Bauman's framing and that are largely missing from dominant, contemporary treatments of leadership in the management literature. The third section introduces ideas about liquid learning from the education literature directly relevant to re-thinking the work of leadership. The last section draws on these ideas to suggest how certain navigational aids might work in practising leadership under conditions of liquidity.

The Dynamics of Liquid Modernity

Successive framings of modernity, post-modernity and late modernity by a number of leading theorists have been well summarised by Lee (2005, 2011). Late modernity is a state of society described as complex, global and deregulated. It is highly mobile in its capacity to move money, intelligence and human allegiances rapidly across institutional, political and social borders: increasingly privatised and fluid in its structures and forms. Bauman's intellectual journey crosses many decades and his conceptions of late modernity as liquid are considered by Lee to be part of a more general reconsideration of post-modernism:

By reducing the social to a mere system of differences and the subject to an illusion of individuality or self-presence, post-modernism exorcised actors and agents from society and therefore could not adequately explain the meaning of social action and change ... By parodying modernity, post-modernism took on a comic frame (Alexander, 1995) that could not plausibly be translated into statements on temporal changes in society. Yet the social world had moved on and had changed dramatically and social theorists had to invent new terms like neo-modernism to describe and explain these transformations (Lee, 2005: 62).

Bauman explored several dimensions of modern uncertainty that flow from a societal state that is globalised, deregulated, mobile and privatised. One dimension is the rapid rate at which seemingly solid and enduring social forms and structures of every kind can "decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them" (Bauman, 2000: 1). An example serving as a crystallising metaphor for the notion of liquid modernity is the collapse of the World Trade Centre in New York on the morning of September 11, 2001. The buildings had taken around fifty years from concept to completion and were financially viable only after a long struggle to find paying tenants. The actual collapse of one million tons of concrete and steel following the impact of hijacked commercial airliners was swift, changing irrevocably notions of what constitutes a nation under attack and what constitutes a weapon. Those attacks also changed the way travel is experienced globally, with subsequent increased security and surveillance and the loss of many individual freedoms. Other only slightly less spectacular examples include the speed of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the collapse of law and order in places such as Mexico due to the activities of drug cartels at all levels of society.

A related dimension is the permeability of borders and boundaries of every kind due to instantaneous access to information and the amassing, and global deployment, of vast resources by commercial and criminal organisations. What Bauman referred to as shape-shifting capital raising and deployment by companies can distort currency values and create sufficient debt across the world to trigger volatile boom and bust cycles, including financial crises on an unprecedented scale.

Another is the divorce of power from politics now accelerated by the ability of social media to generate and orchestrate challenges to individuals, organisations and systems anywhere in the world, including the effective influence of governments large and small. Local government in all its forms provides a striking example of potential paradigm shift in the way democracy and governance are understood: social media are particularly powerful in challenging the credibility and influence of elected local representatives (Pureau, 2012). Yet others are the exposure of previously protected citizens, workers and businesses to the vagaries of the global market place, in terms of their jobs and the value of their assets and savings; and shifting to the individual the 'freedom' to make choices that transcend their capacity to comprehend and effectively implement, but for which they must accept accountability and pay in human as well as financial terms. Bauman paints bleak pen pictures of the collapse of long-term thinking and planning and the rise of 'swift and thorough forgetting' (Bauman, 2007: 3); the loss of interpersonal connections and social capital; the avoidance of accountability; the frailty of human agency; and the elusive dynamics of power and control:

What is valued today ... is the ability to be on the move, to travel light and at short notice. Power is measured by the speed with which responsibilities can be escaped (Bauman & Tester, 2001: 95).

Power is increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive, and fugitive (Bauman, 2000: 14).

Lee's successive critiques of Bauman's work are both appreciative and critical. Lee argues that emerging complexity theory does not imagine a limitlessly fluid field but, rather, that liquidity itself eventually creates new structures that contain – or at least provide friction to – human energy, identity, agency and leadership. For example, citing a study of mobile labourers who cross national borders and become part of new regimes of power and servitude, Lee observes:

In these regimes, liquidity was not just a metaphor for dealing with uncertainty and ephemerality, but also a direct assault on workers' self-identities, as in the case of outsourced Indian workers who had to construct fake biographies while working for American companies. ... However, their study also suggests emergent lines re-solidification prompted by reactions to the exploitation of race and class, such as ongoing organisation of solidarity campaigns (Lee, 2011: 657).

For Lee, late modernity is best understood as involving multiple, rapid, non-linear and disrupted cycles of liquification and solidification. And Lee is critical of Bauman's refusal to offer a new idea of how the dynamics of liquidity might translate into a new view of agency, arguing that his more radical view of liquidity should have enriched the ongoing debate about the nature of individual and collective human agency in an increasingly complex world. Other late modernists have advanced more subtle renderings of the dynamics involved. Lee notes that they have done it through positioning agency as reflexive (Giddens, 1990; & Beck & Lau, 2003) or multiple and culturally plural (Eisenstadt, 2000). It is suggested in this paper that the education literature, also, is now exploring how agency works in Bauman's liquid world and that these ideas about agency can inform our understanding of what leadership means in contemporary times.

While Bauman's pessimism no doubt makes his work unattractive to many, Davis believes that his writings should be thought of as 'Bauman's compass', a way of:

*orienting ourselves towards the **present**, rather than towards some distant and longed-for future ... to ensure that we are better able to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the current **interregnum** (Davis, 2011: 187).*

Using this compass heading, the next section of this paper suggests some of the generative questions that arise for leadership as commonly construed in the management literature.

The Generative Questions for Leadership Theory and Practice

The still developing perspectives of late modernity raise many opportunities for how nearly every aspect of life and work is conceptualised, researched and practised. While sociologists and philosophers have perhaps been the first to find a scholarly language to describe the dynamics of liquidity, academic commentary in fields as far apart as education and policing have already taken up the term. This paper argues that Bauman's unpacking of the dimensions of liquid modernity provides a powerful and so far under-utilised point of departure to re-fresh thinking about leadership.

Some generative questions can be developed on the basis of what has been covered so far, commencing with some very general ones: What does the conception of liquid modernity draw attention to that might otherwise be missed in considerations of leadership in the management literature? What potential does it have to refresh – and perhaps complicate – thinking about leadership?

Several things are immediately made figural. The most obvious is that of individual and collective agency and the dangers of assuming that these can be thought of in simple causal terms. Yet, arguably, a persistent focus on the traits and characteristics of individual leaders does just that, continually repeated in leadership competency models, in research designs that place leadership as the independent variable in a multivariate analysis, and in textbooks that effectively do the same. While Bauman himself has not developed the agency implications of a liquid modernity, other late modernist positions implicitly pose further questions: what does a reflexive or multiple agency in leadership practice entail and how could it be translated into modern business practice? How is it different from just being reflective and consultative? Questions might be asked in relation to conceptions of identity and identity formation in the leadership space. What are the implications of having one's professional leadership identity constantly manipulated not just by media, but also by unbounded social media? How are leaders to develop the kind of cosmopolitan self, suggested by American philosopher and social theorist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) that could be at home in the range of very different dialogues and spaces that an understanding of multiple agency in leadership practice would suggest?

Are there other fields of leadership practice (for example in the third sector or government) that understand more completely the limits to control, and the essentially slippery nature of power that liquid modernity suggests? Constructions of distributed leadership have been taken up increasingly over the last 15 years in the literature on leadership in the public sector and education. However, quite early in the discourse, Starrat (2001: 333) asked whether democratic leadership theory in education was an 'oxymoron or an ironic possibility'. More recently, Bolden et al., (2009) have questioned whether distributed leadership in education has been any more than influential rhetoric in terms of moulding perceptions of participation, influence and identity in the leadership space, while masking subtle and evolving power dynamics. And what conscious and unconscious dynamics are in play when mandates to lead – whether imposed or self-authorized – are rapidly negotiated, melted down, and as rapidly replaced?

Another closely related but distinctive set of questions relates to what it means to participate in teams as leader, follower or colleague. How are mutual trust and mutual accountability negotiated when teams are liquid, virtual, hybrid, formed only for limited projects and times, involving people one might never talk with or meet, but with whom one must carefully choreograph and calibrate effort? What happens to identity when multiple team commitments demand different aspects of self? What forms do authority and power take?

This list is meant to be indicative rather than exhaustive (or exhausting!) The questions are intended to generate thinking and debate and it is not the intention of this paper to try to answer them. Rather, in the spirit of Davis' (2011) notion of the compass, it explores ideas from another discipline's usage of modern liquidity that could provide navigational aids for engaging with these questions: most particularly, to ideas associated with the dynamics of *liquid learning*.

Liquid Learning

Thinking about Bauman's notion of liquidity has been taken up in a range of contexts. Some have explored the connections between complexity theory and liquid modernity alluded to by Lee: for example, Bryant (2007) speculates about the self-organising dynamics of apparent chaos, and how this modifies the notion of liquidity as being the only permanent state of affairs. Vaccaro (2010) has identified with it in his examination of how different localities struggle with transition from being central in global mercantile networks to being on the periphery: 'ephemeral' industrialisation reflects 'market integration, hyper-mobility, expansion, abandonment and reinvention' and along the way 'creates traumatic severing of ties with the consumptive centers of the world' (Vaccaro, 2010: 22). Pollock (2007) explores what the sociology of liquid modernity means for cultural theory and analysis, suggesting that it encourages a richer take on transdisciplinary study, so that 'a different kind of knowledge emerges in the act of intersection and traverse of varied fields through which a shared concept might travel' (Pollock, 2007: 113). And in a very different, but no less complex context, some explore what 'being a new police in the liquid 21st Century' entails: the new ways in which police should be thinking about their role in a plural, neo-liberal, and networked society (Shearing & Marks, 2011: 210). However, it is thinking in the field of education – the business of learning and facilitating learning – that is the focus of this section of the paper. And it is suggested that as the reader engages with the rest of this section, the word learning is bracketed with the word leading.

Bauman problematised the whole business of learning and education quite explicitly, in his representation of 'swift and thorough forgetting' (Baumann 2005: 304); information as instantly, randomly and endlessly available in bite-sized pieces; brains that can download content and thereby empty themselves; and students as consumers of knowledge modules that must be constantly replaced:

The present-day challenges deliver heavy blows to the very essence of the idea of education: ... they put in question the invariants of the idea, the constitutive features of education that have thus far withstood all the past challenges and emerged unscathed from the past crises – the assumptions never before questioned, let alone suspected of having run their course (Bauman, 2003: 19).

However, many in the field of education have been quick to see the invigorating possibilities opened up by the notion of liquid learning. Savin-Baden (2007) and Alison Lee (2010) are among those suggesting it useful both philosophically and practically in reconceptualising learning spaces, and, in turn, in engaging with key issues of contemporary community. They are by no means the only writers to draw on the idea of liquid modernity in thinking about learning in the twenty-first century (see for example, Barnett, 2012; Poikela & Poikela, 2005; McCormack et al., 2011; Engestrom, 2004; & Garrick & Usher, 2000). However, they are indicative of the potential in making the idea of liquidity central in ways of thinking about learning.

... learning is on the move. ... cyberspace has resulted in a sense of multiple identities and disembodiment, or even different forms of embodiment. ... (And) in the process of trying out new identities in virtual 3D worlds, what I would term our representative identities, questions arise about the impact of these representative identities on our physical, embodied or place-based identities. ... For example, it might be that 3D worlds and gaming not only have different, or diverse, underlying pedagogies (and pedagogical possibilities), but also the assumptions that are made about issues of power and control in games where avatars are representative of 'someone else,' as opposed to a representation of one's own identities (Savin-Baden, 2007: 2).

Savin-Baden argues that liquidity requires *troublesome learning spaces*: the experience of *stuckness* and *disjunction*, where threats to personal and professional certainty and control create the possibilities for reflection. This view incorporates Barnett's (2004) account of *Mode 3* knowledge that creates more uncertainty and more dilemmas for action. However, Savin-Baden suggests that other modes of knowledge are necessary: for example, "knowledge that is 'counter intuitive', alien (emanating from another culture or discourse) or incoherent (discrete aspects are unproblematic but there is no organising principle)" (Savin-Baden, 2007: 7).

Savin-Baden implicitly supports Lee's view that things are not permanently liquid: even such reflexive spaces as action-learning sets tend to move to points of certainty, to create structures through artefacts and protocols that become increasingly solid. Ironically, then, the educator's role is to create spaces (structures) that hold and sustain liquid learning. She suggests the stuckness and disjunction that such spaces must hold includes moments of conceptual puzzlement (where the person is at a loss, sometimes exposed to the point of feeling paralysed or fragmented). The role of the educator/leader is to recognise the avoidances, postponements and temporising that accompany engagement. Silent 'lurking' is recommended as an antidote to the very noisy spaces of late modernity, where many voices continually speak at once. Savin-Baden also places high priority on learning bridges (structures) that support journeys between positions, framing these positions not as destinations (certainties), but as temporary platforms from which the world can be seen differently: platforms that are not prioritised or hierarchical in rigid ways but are open to constant revision.

This is an essentially optimistic view of what can be done, offering interesting interpretations of late modern notions of agency as reflexive and multiple. McCormack et al., (2011) take a similarly positive view, offering some development of Bauman's urging for practical engagement in liquidity:

... this new form of learning is focused on the capacity to engage with new and unfamiliar discourses, to deal with overlapping theories from competing disciplines, and to keep in touch with the continually moving 'state of play' of digital technologies ... new learners must be able to engage with the undefined, the indefinite, the emergent, through the exercise of (nuanced) practical judgement (McCormack et al, 2011: 46).

If, as suggested earlier, the words learning and leading are bracketed, then ideas about liquid learning offer useful perspectives on how we can think about leading in liquidity. The last section of this paper returns to the world of leadership, beginning with a pen picture of some of the dynamics of liquidity in play. Without labouring the point, it also *offers a hypothetical picture of leadership practices in that context.*

Navigational Aids in Liquid Practice Conditions

Organisations and the people who lead them can easily find themselves in the environmental conditions that Bauman has described as liquid. In conditions of liquidity, hostile websites and 'new media' can be used to furiously attack individuals as well as organisational policies and practices. Highly sensitive systems and protocols may be breached and those responsible may sometimes be hired to defend against future breaches by others. The range of interested parties and onlookers becomes unlimited as issues are taken up in social media. The scrutiny can be excoriating with employees being named and their privacy breached. Their professional credentials can be called into question and compared unfavourably with those of experts around the world, some of whom even add their own voices to the debates. Attempts by organisations to offer (exculpating) information and explanation can immediately be appropriated, altered or challenged. What may start out as a single, seemingly manageable issue can bring into play much larger ones, from the past as well as the present. In leadership teams, old divisions may quickly return to the surface at the same time as new and different ones appear. The boundaries of the organisation may become blurred and permeable while professional accountabilities, duties of care and issues of trust may become contested; and all of these things may happen at great velocity, often with little warning.

Conditions of liquidity create a troublesome learning space for leaders and leadership teams and, arguably, the familiar management language and tools cannot quite capture their predicaments. In liquidity, new navigational aids might be needed or existing ones may need to be adapted for leaders to plot a course through the complexity.

It might be that different members of the leadership team, not previously known for their co-operative efforts, for quite different reasons form an uneasy and temporary coalition and then suggest that the group shares what is front of mind for each of them: where their attention is focused; or if not focused, the ground it is covering. They might map this while also noticing what they are not paying attention to or avoiding. They might repeat this exercise, but this time the question is: who and what do we feel the need to protect, and from what?

As the group takes further soundings, it might become clear that their attention and concern is oscillating between now and later, between different networks and coalitions and between personal and professional fears. They might then more dispassionately map the dilemmas they face, since anything they do will create further uncertainty and difficulty. A traditional, linear project plan is not going to help here because there is no clear endpoint. So instead they might prepare a short summary of each of what they believe to be their dilemmas. They then take time to ask what perspective or data or instinctive wisdom they have so far disregarded that could be helpful in better naming and describing, without glossing over, the dilemmas. They identify the people they

most want to connect with, consult, or support and what conversations, so far avoided, must now happen. They describe the conversations they plan to have and what would be a range of good-enough, immediate, but provisional, outcomes. They consider creating forums different from the ones they would normally use, inside and outside the organisation, crossing the normal boundaries that separate one part of the organisation from another and teaming with other members of the leadership group to facilitate these different conversations. They invite people from other sectors who also deal with serious dilemmas and crises, but in a range of different ways, to join them. They regularly debrief their practical interventions: what's working and why, what's not working, and what needs to be tried. They pay particular attention to what new language is being used by staff and other stakeholders to describe what's happening. They are mindful that what is said now, and what is left out of the conversation, is itself a process of organisational shape-shifting. Just as surely, they know that they and their organisation will always be under surveillance of several kinds.

Whilst painted in broad strokes, this picture tries to translate into practical terms what leadership practices for liquidity might look like. The navigational aids used in the course of such practice include the forming of temporary alliances, even with those we might not wholly trust at other times; checking in to see where awareness and attention is focused and what is omitted; the initial marking of boundaries; the naming and mapping of dilemmas and areas of avoidance; the regular taking of soundings; the eventual crossing of boundaries; inviting the outside in; finding new language to re-discover some things and discover others for the first time. Intentionally, the navigational aids described here look a great deal like learning aids designed to assist in traversing risky and unknown territory. These pen pictures are intended to generate questions and provoke thought, to create troublesome spaces in their own right. In assessing what is already liquid and what might unfreeze at any moment, the opportunity exists to design navigational aids that are fit for purpose: good enough to do the practical work at hand, open to revision and robust enough to be named and talked about.

Conclusion

This paper has invited fresh thinking about leadership from perspectives of liquid modernity suggested by Bauman's (2000) exploration of several dimensions of modern uncertainty in human life and work. Bauman's work has been influential in contemporary understandings of society, culture, learning and identity and is also being taken up in emerging explorations of liquid learning in the educational literature. However, its possibilities for creating new understandings of leadership remain largely unexplored in the management and business literature. This paper has considered how current conceptions of leadership that emphasise the power of individual agency might be usefully re-considered in the light of Bauman's contribution. It has developed a number of generative questions to help in doing that and, inspired by conceptions of liquid learning, it has also suggested some navigational aids for leading under conditions of liquidity.

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