This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30067704

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2014, Emerald
Exploring observational learning in leadership development for managers

Steve Kempster

Birmingham Business School, Birmingham University, Birmingham, UK, and

Ken Parry

Faculty of Business, Bond University, Gold Coast, Australia

ABSTRACT

Purpose – Observational learning within the leadership development of managers is under-theorized thus far. The purpose of this paper is to develop a theoretical argument that builds out from a relational leadership perspective to center on processes affecting observational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The contribution is to draw together research to build a holistic model of observational learning. A further contribution is to apply this model to the context of leadership development.

Findings – The paper examines processes associated with attention, availability, access, attainability, motivation and social comparison with significant others in particular contexts. The paper takes a temporal perspective to examine the ways that such interaction appears to be most prominent at particular times. Research limitations/implications – The paper concludes by outlining the opportunities for applying this understanding of observational leadership learning within management development arenas and explore future directions for research.

Originality/value – Observational learning has been relatively overlooked. Though the authors often “know” that leaders develop through experience, the role of observational learning in this experience is not well understood. This paper is intended to provide a stimulus for exploring this important area in terms of shaping thinking and designs for management development interventions.

Keywords - Leadership development, Observational learning, Significant others, Social comparison

Paper type - Conceptual paper

LEADERSHIP LEARNING THROUGH OBSERVATION

In the field of leadership studies there is an acceptance that observational learning has a part to play in leadership development, but its significance is rather under-explored and certainly significantly under-theorized. There is a well-argued position that the dominant “crucible” of leadership learning is through naturalistic events in the course of lived experience (DeRue and Wellman, 2009). McCall (2010) neatly summarizes the point: “Experience – not genetics, not training programs, not business school – is the primary source of learning to lead, and [y] our understanding of this kind of experience is far from complete” (p. 61). The aspect that is “far from complete” that we address within this naturalistic experience is learning through observing and engaging with significant others.
Research has identified many aspects of such naturalistic experiences that relate to observational leadership learning, for example, McCall et al.’s (1988) – learning from notable people; Cox and Cooper (1989) – parental influence; Jackson and Parry (2001) – learning from good and bad role models; Kempster (2006, 2009) – observational learning; and Janson (2008) – formative relational learning experiences. In this way we “know” that leadership is developed through experience; however, the dynamics of observational learning in this experience is certainly not well understood.

When considering experience and learning the oft-cited Kolb (1984) learning cycle is prominent in discussion and ubiquitous in usage (Reynolds, 1997; Kayes, 2002; Armstrong and Mahmud (2008). Yet prominently overlooked or assumed axiomatic within this cycle is observation. For sure experience is central to individual learning but in the context of leadership as a relational phenomenon, the focus perhaps should be broadened to a social learning cycle that sees experience as social encounters or events (Burgoyne, 1995). If viewed as such this would begin to embrace observed encounters and events close at hand or at a distance, or both in parallel. Viewing learning of leadership as a social learning cycle is most helpful as it embraces the social situated and relational aspect of leadership and its development. In this way our perspective of observational learning is seen to sit within notions of relational learning (Robinson, 2007; Cope et al., 2011).

Further, we seek to anchor notions of leadership also to a relational perspective drawing on the recent work of Uhl-Bien (2006) who helpfully argues that leadership should be conceived as “processes and not persons, and views persons, leadership and other relational realities as made in process” (p. 655). Drawing on this relational perspective of leadership we suggest that a leader’s (and a follower’s) idiosyncratic lived experience is set within contextualized leader-led relationships infused by a culturally embedded understanding of leadership (Meindl, 1995; Gemmill and Oakley; 1992; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Ely et al., 2011) transmitted through the multitude of significant others. Early formative leadership learning is in the relational context as a follower – with parents, elder siblings, teachers, first boss (part-time employment) and first and subsequent early career line managers. Additionally, leadership images are informed through narratives of heroic leaders and media representations of a variety of leadership role models.

This paper seeks to explore how the dynamics of observational learning occur within the context of leadership development by addressing the following questions: how does observational learning occur in naturalistic leadership development? How does context affect such learning processes? How do these processes change through time? Or finally how does knowledge of observational learning become useful within leadership development? It is to the last question that we will start with and conclude as it addresses the empirical problem that effects leadership development.

**Observational Leadership Learning**

It has been shown in the empirical research of Kempster (2009) that observation of significant others performing leadership is important in formative leadership learning. It lays down foundational knowledge that implicitly shapes subsequent leadership practice – the practice that leadership development intervention seeks to address. We argue that interventions are restricted in addressing the emergence and development of leadership practice without paying attention to observational learning and understanding the dynamics that shape such learning. Our emphasis is toward an examination of the processes and contexts of learning, rather than outcomes of learning, as suggested by Ng et al. (2009). The contribution of this paper is to provide a theoretical base and model such as a framework of the dynamics of observational learning. Four areas of extant research associated with observational learning are interrelated that have not previously been brought
together in order to illuminate how observational learning becomes manifest in shaping leadership development. We commence with a relational perspective to leadership and explore how social comparison informs on observational learning through being motivated to attend observing from significant others. In particular we draw on the work of the Greenberg and Anderson. The second perspective seeks to explore processes of observational learning as outlined by Bandura (1986). This perspective places focus on attention and motivation to observe, alongside retention and production of observed learning. By drawing on Kempster and Cope (2010), we illustrate how the leadership context (dis)ables opportunities to observe. Third, we draw on the recent work of Hoyt and Simon (2011) to show how relational proximity to those we observe affects the perceived learning attainability of performing leadership. Fourth and finally, we outline a temporal pathway to observational learning and draw on the work of Gibson (2003) who outlines a typology of career stages that reflect acquiring, refining and affirming aspects of observational learning. We add to the acquiring stage a pre-career period of observations that enable us to make an explicit link to the development of implicit leadership theories as a direct consequence of relational observations. Drawn together we suggest a framework of observational leadership learning as outlined in Figure 1.

To provide a sense of the importance of holistic integration within the model of observational leadership learning we provide a brief explanation. The model illustrates the ongoing dynamic of observational learning representing a temporal perspective suggesting that what we observe changes through time. For example, family members and teachers may be highly influential at the pre-career stage. At commencement of early career, and during mid- and late-career stages observed learning becomes more contextualized to the leadership situation. More attention is given to immediate line managers. Who we observe is shaped by the availability and access of people. This observation is affected by whether we are motivated to observe particular aspects of significant others. For example, if access or motivation to observe is limited then observational learning may be limited to the pre-career influence of significant others. In parallel with motivation and access to observe significant others is the notion of relational proximity. For example, observing prominent national/international “leaders” who have a distal relationship and may be more influential at pre-career stage. Close relational proximity with an immediate line manager, for example, might lead to more influential observational learning early- and mid-career. In this way we might see learning from relatively “ordinary” significant others at early- and mid-career stages as more attainable than from prominent “exemplar” leadership role models – such as a CEO.

![Figure 1. Observational leadership learning](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational proximity to significant others, and attainability of social comparison with significant others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observational learning over time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-career marked by acquiring generic/abstract understanding of leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early-career marked by acquiring contextual learning from significant others constructing leader becoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-career marked by refining of early observed learning shaping leader becoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late career marked by affirming relevance of observed learning to leader becoming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Situation shaping attention and motivation to observe, and provides access, availability and variety of significant others to observe |
We will outline how the particular theoretical aspects of the model address the usefulness question of understanding observational learning by identifying three areas of application and research: first to stimulate a manager’s reflection on their observational learning experiences; second to explore the influence of gender on observational learning; third to outline a frame for future observational learning for undergraduates and MBA graduates to enhance their early career in terms of leadership development.

**SIGNIFICANT OTHERS AND OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING**

Relatively limited prominence or attention has been given to the leadership learning stimulus of “significant others” in the milieu of leadership lived experience (Kempster, 2006). Attention to the impact of significant others on leadership learning was identified by McCall et al. in their prominent work in 1988. Yet the significance of significant others to leadership learning has remained very much in the shadow of experience emphasized as role enactment and challenges (McCall, 2010). Vicarious learning is thus far very much the “Cinderella” of leadership learning.

Significant others are suggested as central to social categorization (Anderson and Cole, 1990). Anderson and Cole (1990) outlined how “past experiences of significant others can be activated in situations that involve new individuals who may bear only minimal resemblance to the original significant other [y] mental representations of significant others exist and can influence interpersonal interactions” (p. 385). Anderson and Chen (2002) usefully define significant others beyond parental influence and early childhood experiences as “any individual who is or has been deeply influential in one’s life and in whom one is or once was emotionally involved” (p. 619). We wish to place emphasis here on relational influence and relational context. Anderson and Chen (2002) argue that past experiences in relationships with significant others resurface and affect relations with new people (p. 619). These relationships may or may not have been seen to be important or influential at the time of the experience, or that the recall of significant others (good and bad) is not exhaustive of all significant others (the many ordinary) whose relational impact affects ongoing relations and practice. In essence the impact of significant others may not be capable of conscious awareness (Glassman and Anderson, 1999 – a useful review unconscious impact of significant others).

The relationship between significant others and role models requires clarification. A role model can be seen to be a person who occupies a social role to which the observer aspires, described by Holton (2004) as “a person who serves as an example of a positive behavior” (p. 514). A role model has predominately been seen to “exclude learning how not to do things” (Sealy and Singh, 2010, p. 286). However, Gibson (2004) – whose work we draw on shortly) enables negative role model experiences through social comparison to be part of learning to lead. They helpfully expand the definition of role modeling as “a cognitive process in which individuals actively observe, adapt and reject attributes of multiple role models” (p. 136). Yet this definition assumes an active observation. Wood (1989) criticised studies on significant others as being overly centered on conscious active processes of comparison, confirming that much comparison occurs without conscious recognition – an imperceptible process. In related work exploring tacit leadership learning through lived experience (Kempster, 2009) suggested that observation of significant others was part of this tacit learning. We thus see a role model as significant others who sit within a continuum of positive and negative, who have impact through the contextual and relational circumstances of a managers lived experience, and having influence consciously and unconsciously. The term “significant other” will be used throughout the paper. It will subsume notions of role model and reflect McCall et al.’s (1988)
important contribution of significant others (referred to as “notable others”) being reported as highly influential in the development of leadership practice (See also the work of Conger, 2004; Kempster, 2006, 2009; Janson, 2008; Day et al., 2009; and Kempster and Cope, 2010).

The fundamental importance of significant others shaping leadership learning is captured through the notion of implicit leadership theory (Lord et al., 1984, 2001). Implicit leadership theories are seen to reflect learnt experience and become generative about expectations of leadership [y] expectations and interpretations of what good or bad leadership would be. The development of implicit leadership theories is socially constructed within a series of contexts. It is embedded in experience both as passive observation at a distance – for example, media images of leadership – and participative observation in action – for example, leader-follower relationships (Schyns and Meindl, 2005; Kempster, 2006, 2009; Middlebrooks and Haberkorn, 2009).

Associated research on the development of implicit leadership theories anchors such learning as being generated through early observational childhood experiences (Hall and Lord, 1995; Engle and Lord, 1997; Keller, 1999), particularly parental influence (Stark, 1992; Keller, 1999). It has been shown that parents provide anticipatory socialization about work and leadership and illustrate to children role-model leadership as the first notable leadership influence (Keller, 1999). Through relational experience implicit theories become contextualized by engagements with significant others (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005). Alternatively if there is an absence of significant others, or non-attentive observational learning from significant others (Bandura, 1986), leadership learning reflects the formative unrefined and prototypical conceptions of good/bad leadership. The work of Epitropaki and Martin (2005) and Ritter and Lord (2007) is important for the arguments to be outlined in this paper in terms of the development of leadership learning through observation of significant others: the identification that followers form and maintain prototypical representations of leadership until they have close interaction with significant others. Subsequently leadership conception becomes contextually modified. Based on this discussion we offer our first proposition:

P1. Leadership understanding in early- and mid-careers will become contextualized through relational observation and engagement with significant others.

The importance of significant others to the development of leadership conception in both followers and leaders is broadly understood. The above proposition focusses attention toward leadership development shaped by significant others within an organizational context. Related to this proposition is understanding how observational learning processes, that affect the motivation and attention to observe significant others and the retention and reproduction of what has been learnt in everyday leadership practice, occur within organizational contexts.

**Processes of Observational Learning**

The limited focus on the influence of significant others on leadership learning, in part reflects the dearth of discussion in the extant literature about processes of observational learning. Unlike learning through experience of action (Reynolds, 1997; Kayes, 2002; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Armstrong and Mahmud, 2008; Ng et al., 2009) there are few studies specifically oriented toward processes of observational learning. Certainly there is an anticipatory assumption that processes of observation occur within naturalistic learning, evident in discussions, for example, of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Gherardi et al., 1998) and the notion of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), both of which emphasize relational learning in particular contexts.
For example, identity construction, meaning and practice are argued to be learnt through participation in relational experiences in particular contexts (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, there is limited discussion of the underlying dynamics by which observation influences learning. The notion of situated learning provides a useful contextual framework, but we need to look toward other fields for additional insights of the processes of observational learning that occur through participation.

Related research about observational learning is mostly within the fields of applied and social psychology and social cognition, with particular application in the arena of sports performance and the development of motor-skills. The impact of significant others is linked to research on social comparison (see Greenberg et al., 2007 for a review of social comparison processes in organizations). Greenberg et al. (2007) touch on leadership in terms of emphasizing that organizational leaders are highly salient as bases for social comparison:

   An explicit link between social comparison processes and leadership has yet to emerge [y] Social comparison processes have the potential to promote understanding of the fundamental interpersonal processes on which organizational leadership is based. Indeed, future researchers would do well to develop this potential (p. 34).

The focus of social comparison that we seek to examine is toward an aspirant leader social identity. Observations generate prototypical representations of the aspirant leader image enabling initial self-categorization (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Higgins and Bargh, 1987; Hogg, 2001) shaped by prominence of emotional connectedness to significant others (White, 1982). An important part of leadership learning through a manager’s lived experience is toward the notion of an aspirational leader identity (Kempster, 2006) that is constructed by social comparison through observational learning. Ibarra (1999) suggested a similar notion of provisional selves – experimenting with aspects observed and “moving from a provisional identity to a more central and enduring one” (Ely et al., 2011, p. 476) – to be outline further on.

In Kempster’s (2009) empirical work on leadership learning he suggested the notion that managers transmit organizationally situated leadership practice and associated leader social identity through observational learning. His argument built on the work of Bandura (1977, 1986). Bandura’s work is central to the construction of our model on observational leadership learning. Bandura (1986) argued that observation has significant power in influencing others “values, attitudes and patterns of thought and behaviour” (p. 47) that is able to be contextualized to shape leadership practice to “suit different purposes and circumstances” (p. 48).

In addition to generating symbolized broad patterns of social knowledge, observational learning can serve as social prompts to individuals to enact previous learning that may have been inhibited, or is being induced to enact through salience (Anderson and Cole, 1990). Anderson and Cole argue that the impact of significant others acts as a stimulus for activating and refining symbolized concepts (such as leadership) that are readily recalled from episodic long-term memory (White, 1982). A process of observational learning outlined by Bandura (1986) suggests four key constituent processes:

   ● Attention – what is being observed in the social world is influenced by conspicuousness and attractiveness, salience and perceived value, preconceptions and prior knowledge. For example, “experienced people within a particular domain recognize fine differences that are undistinguishable to the untutored” (Bandura, 1986, p. 53).
Retention – observed activities are recalled in memory as “abstract symbols” that act as representative guides (Bandura, 1986, p.59). These appear to be very predominant in early formative learning from which learning becomes refined and contextually more specific. In particular, significant others are recalled for their difference in particular contexts, and such differences enable deepening self-categorization to a particular identity (Anderson and Cole, 1990).

Production – converting the symbolic conceptions into appropriate actions that match the circumstances. Formative observation leads to generative schemas applicable in a range of contexts (Bandura, 1986; additionally argued in Medin, 1989; and amplified in Idson and Mischel, 2001) that become contextually refined through participation and identification (similarly argued [from a very different perspective] by Wenger, 1998, within notions of communities of practice).

Motivation – people do not enact everything they observe, but rather recall and act upon observed learning when there are incentives to do so (Bandura, 1986). In essence, people are more likely to attend to particular observed behavior if it results in valued outcomes (Slife and Rychlak, 1982). This motivational bias in attention and encoding is shaped through salience of observed people in particular contexts.

Bandura (1986) drew attention to the salience and conspicuous nature of significant others to be observed. In this way if the notion of leadership is salient to an individual, perhaps through observing one or more significant others then there is an ongoing and arguably re-enforcing dynamic through which the conspicuous nature of leader significant others become more salient.

Motivation to observe is interrelated to notions of attention directed at observing significant others and seeking out significant others to observe. In this way motivation to observe is also interrelated with significant others becoming more salient and conspicuous. The individual might be conscious of the incentives and valued outcomes that are sought. However, the link between the leadership that is observed and those outcomes of often not conscious to the individual. We wish to emphasize that the increasing salience of significant others does not mean that the observational learning is an overt and consciously managed process. What is observed is conspicuous and conscious. However, the leadership learning often is unconscious. Bandura has established that the phenomenon of observational learning occurs without consciously directing such learning processes. However, greater motivation and attention toward such observation provides a potential opportunity for consideration and judgment about whom and what to learn from significant others. Scope within this paper does not allow us to explore the nature of unconscious learning through social comparison. Rather we have illuminated the dynamics of observational learning that occur through lived experience often both unconsciously as well as consciously drawn together in Figure 1. This discussion on salience and motivation leads to our second proposition:

P2. The increasing salience of leadership over time is strongly related to the conspicuousness of leader significant others and motivation to observe such leaders.

However, there is a connected issue of availability and access to observe significant others, and this varies considerably by context. It is interesting to contrast observational learning through a social comparison set within the large organization context, with that of the self-employed context. In the work of Kempster and Cope (2010) they have shown that owner-managers have a restricted relationship with leadership; often associating leadership with negative experiences of their early and limited careers in employed contexts. Kempster and Cope (2010) argue that the limited variety of, and access to, significant others in terms of social comparison is potentially a major structural issue for the development of leadership in the small-business context. Low motivational and
consequential low attentive issues limit the potential to observe and further accentuate this structural issue. In striking contrast to the self-employed context, Kempster (2009) showed how the employed context in both public and private sectors provided a career pathway: of pathway for access and participation with a variety of significant others. Through such a pathway the salience, conspicuousness, motivation and attention to significant others reflects the reinforcing dynamic. It is axiomatic to state but the point needs to be made that context greatly impacts on observational learning. Such context can be seen through self-employed – employed comparison but also needs to be seen in terms of socio-historic cultural context embracing issues of ethnicity and gender (see Ely et al., 2011 for a review of contextual dynamics impacting on women’s leader becoming).

Additional to aspirational motivation and attention to observe assisted by contextual availability and access to significant others, is the related issue of attainability: the extent to which an individual’s perception of whether what is being observed from significant others seems relevant and realistic to their expectations of what they wish to become. The next section explores whether the observed learning is attainable, and such attainability is related to relational distance.

**ATTAINABLE LEADERSHIP LEARNING AND RELATIONAL PROXIMITY**

“Comparisons with people who are similar on surrounding dimensions are especially potent” (Wood, 1989, p. 243). This aspect of observing significant others gives emphasis to a term we introduce here of “relational proximity.” Wood (1989) argued that a key aspect of social comparison relates to the dimensions by which we make the comparisons of others to ourselves. People will apply particular dimensions to evaluate themselves. For example, in terms of self-enhancement a non-club runner will judge her/himself not against an elite runner but rather against other runners of a similar age whose performance is most similar. In terms of organizational leadership, social comparison dimensions of relational proximity locate social comparison closer to line managers than to the CEO. Supporting evidence for this has been outlined in the recent work of Hoyt and Simon (2011) who explored the relationship of social comparison with attainable roles. In particular they focussed on the differentiated impact of gender. Hoyt and Simon emphasize that much literature on social comparison focusses on who people select as role models drawn across contexts and examine the subsequent influence (see Wood, 1989 for a useful summary of such foundational literature). In contrast there is a dearth of research on upward social comparison of role models within organizational contexts (Hoyt and Simon, 2011, p. 146); and certainly there are few studies of significant other influence within leader-follower relationships specifically examining leadership learning (save for mention of the influence within McCall et al., 1988; Hill, 2003; Janson, 2008; Kempster, 2009).

Drawing on a range of work in the field of social psychology Hoyt and Simon (2011) have explored gender effect on social comparison. Experiments with female undergraduate students showed that leadership role aspiration was affected by attainable expectation through social comparison. For example, a “high-level” female role model – a person relationally distant from the students such – as a Judge – had less impact on raising expectations than a “mid-level” role model – a description of the high-level leader at their mid-career stage. The affect was further enhanced through the nature of the relationship. If the role model was a close in-group superior this was seen to raise role performance expectation (p. 155). In a sense the close contextualized relationship can be seen to make more attainable the leader identity observed from the role model; while a distant,
romanticized, heroic and extraordinary high-level role model appears to do the opposite (p. 155). This leads to our next proposition:

P3. Relational proximity impacts upon the perceived attainability of observed learning from significant others.

The relational aspect connects with a temporal and contextualized perspective to observational learning. We suggest that the nature and context of leader-follower relationships at particular moments in time appear significant to observational leadership learning. For example, Lockwood and Kunda (2000) identified the temporal and contextual nature of role modeling influence. Using undergraduate students, first year students were identified to be more inspired by a high-performing graduate student than fourth year students who perceived the role model performance as unachievable and deflating in expectation. In terms of observational learning the fourth year students were not motivated to attend to the role model. Their three years of undergraduate performance suggested that they could not achieve the suggested role performance. Thus through time and context the attainable and relational process attributes of observational learning become modified; and so does what we are motivated to observe, what we pay attention to and as a consequence what we retain and produce.

Such a dynamic needs to be both contextualized and placed within a particular temporal perspective. For example, as a child, or young adult, or early-career manager do we draw differently on close and distant role models in comparison to mid-career or late-career managers? Or, are we motivated to observe particular people and do we attend to different aspects of those we observe at different temporal periods? Helpful to this contextual and temporal perspective is the work of Gibson (2003).

**TEMPORAL ASPECTS OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING**

A major criticism of studies of social comparison has been leveled at the lack of contextualization (Wood, 1989; Sealy and Singh, 2010). In some respects Gibson’s (2003) work (see also Gibson and Cordova, 1999 and Gibson 2004) is in response to this criticism. Gibson’s research has identified how the development of social identity is malleable through adulthood by social comparison. Of importance in Gibson’s work for this paper is the explicit links made regarding temporal and contextual dynamics of observational learning. Of particular importance is the process by which professionals select significant others in their organizational context and attach meaning to these people through different moments in their organizational careers.

Gibson (2003) suggests that people construe their significant others from a number of dimensions: positive and negative; global and specific; close and distant; hierarchically superior, peer or subordinate. These dimensions are seen to vary between career stages. In early career, people were found to focus on significant others to create their self-concept; in mid-career they seek models to refine their self-concept; while in later stages they seek out significant others who affirm their self-concept. Sealy and Singh (2010) suggest the importance of the mid-career period to enrich the process of refining through extending relational networks. They characterized this mid-career period as one of ambiguity and uncertainty and emphasize the importance to leadership development of this life stage.

The exploration of these dimensions temporally has not occurred. Sealy and Singh (2010) report that only Gibson has looked at significant other influence through career stages. As a consequence there
is no empirical work we can draw from. However, Gibson focusses on identity development and the
related work of Markus and Nurius (1986); Ibarra (1999) and Ely et al. (2011) helps elaborate on
relational and temporal influence of significant others on identity construction.

The temporal notion of an identity forged from past experiences and linked to future
expectations creates a current provisional identity that is continually in flux (Markus and Nurius,
1986; Markus and Wurf, 1987; Ibarra, 1999). Ibarra term “provisional-selves” describes a process of
refinement of repertoires, moving from role prototyping, through discovering what constitutes
credible role performance, to identity matching of significant others are compared to themselves in
their contexts (Ibarra, 1999; similar ideas on identity and context in McGuire, 1984). Ibarra (1999)
argues that the process of developing repertoires, through continual interaction of observation,
experimentation and evaluation, both internally and externally, provides an explanation of how
leader “becomes” (p. 110). Ibarra connects observation and experimentation as key processes of
identity development and that exposure to a broad range of significant others in a variety of
contexts extends the richness of repertoires (similarly explored in Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). This
very much reflects Gibson’s (2003) ideas of career stages where the mid-stage is developing and the
late stage is affirming. The latter point links to the earlier discussion on the contextualization of
implicit leadership theories through experience with others (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005; Ritter and
Lord, 2007). Drawing from this temporal perspective we offer this proposition:

P4. Observational leadership learning will vary through pre-career, early- mid- and late-
career moving from acquisition, refinement to affirmation.

**SUMMARY**

Our model outlined in Figure 1 has shown how we suggest the four aspects can be seen to be
integrated. Seeing these dynamics in a holistic manner we believe is important to an appreciation of
how observational leadership learning occurs. We offer our final proposition to capture such
interrelationship:

P5. The dynamics of observational leadership learning are shaped by the interaction of
motivation, attention, availability, attainability, relational proximity and career.

Such interrelated dynamics need to be seen as a contextualized relational process. The contribution
we seek to make is not in a critique and re-examination of these areas but rather seeking to show
how when brought together they can help to understand the phenomenon of observational learning
in the context of leadership development.

Sealy and Singh (2010, p. 295) conclude their review of literature on role models and identity
construction by confirming that little is still known of how organizationally situated role models
shape leadership and management development in terms of identity construction. The contribution
this paper provides is to orient our focus and extend understanding of how we learn from significant
others through observation. We draw on Spreitzer et al., (1997) who emphasized the importance of
a “theoretical framework for understanding the processes by which endstate competences and the
ability to learn from experience contribute to the development of executive potential” (p. 26). The
final section of the paper suggests areas of application of our theoretical framework to both future
research and intervention designs.
DISCUSSION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION

Significant others are central to processes of leadership learning through participation with others. Those significant others need to become much more prominent in shaping interventions in leadership development. We suggest that our model of observational leadership learning can be usefully utilized in three research and educational thematic areas: managerial reflection on experience; examining gender influence on observational leadership learning; preparing undergraduate and MBA graduates for their careers ahead.

Managerial reflection on observational leadership learning

We have argued the importance of observational learning to the development of leadership understanding and practice. However, managers appear to be very unaware of the significant people who shape such development – notably the very many ordinary significant others whose impact appears imperceptible at the time (Kempster, 2006, 2009; Janson, 2008). Bringing attention to the impact of significant others is not in its self new to leadership development. This is already recognized as important. However, we suggest that presently engagement is often restricted in being able to guide reflective attention to different aspects of observational learning that has been drawn from different career stages. Bringing attention to the unconscious appears to be more important than ever. Our model provides a frame for how to bring this to managers attention; in particular exploring the temporal, contextual and processual dynamics of observational learning. For example, delegates can be asked to identify significant others from their timelines and reflect on the period of their career and the context of the relationship. Conversations could explore the relational proximity of the significant others at particular points of time – seeking to illuminate how they may have drawn on distal significant others earlier in their careers alongside significant others from the broad familial context. Dependent on the career stage, managers can be assisted to illuminate their provisional self and related situated leader identity – who they are comparing themselves to and why. This examination can also be seen to be related to the notion of attainability and relational proximity. They can be asked to examine their experiences of leader-follower relationships (as a follower) and the nature of what they can recall and its association with their understanding of how to lead and association with their sense of the leader they aspire to become.

Reflecting Kolb and Kolb’s (2005) notion of a “learning space,” classroom discussions can examine the implications of this learning to the manager’s everyday practice. Of significance in these discussions can be a sense of realization that they are potentially the significant others in the timelines of their direct reports. This is just one example of how individuals can be made more conscious of the previously unconscious learning that was going on. It is the knowledge of observational learning that seems to be of benefit. As such we suggest it can bring to the fore a sense of heightened responsibility for their leadership behavior. An aspect affecting the observational learning of practicing managers is that of the gendered organizational environment.

Examining gender influence on observational leadership learning

The historic male/female profile within organizations has numerically seen a very low proportion of women in senior management roles (Ely et al., 2011). Ely et al. report, for example, that 2.2 percent of women constitute the Fortune 500 CEO’s (Catalyst, US Women in Business, 2011). Gibson (2008) comments that although “demographic data indicate progress in the representation of women in management, access to senior-level leadership positions for women remains limited. Such historic cultural perspectives thus generate an organizational context for observational leadership learning that is not gender neutral; a context described by Eagly and Carli (2007) as a leadership labyrinth –
the unsanctioned barriers preventing women from securing top leadership roles (Hoyt and Simon, 2011). The dynamics we have outlined of observational leadership learning may give insight into the gendered context of observational learning related to leadership development. For example, issues of attention, motivation, access and availability seem most significant. So too do issues of perceived attainability and relational proximity (see Hoyt and Simon, 2011, p. 145, for a discussion on attainability of female role model influence).

Along both temporal and contextual dimensions there appear to be significant differences in the dynamic of observational learning between male and female managers. For example, Kempster (2009) illustrated that male managers’ timelines outlining the influence of significant others were drawn mostly from organizational contexts. In contrast the female managers described significant others from a range of contexts throughout their timelines; in particular, an emphasis to pre-career significant others in terms of parental influence and women teachers and during the early- and mid-career periods complementing organizational notables with non-business social networks and activities (echoed with Elliott and Stead, 2008; Gibson, 2008). Stead and Elliott suggest this extended social network incorporating significant others is a response to structural and cultural dynamics. However, they emphasize that there is a dearth of empirical evidence examining women’s experiences of leader becoming within organizational contexts (Elliott and Stead, 2008, p. 160). Undoubtedly the impact of gender on observational leadership learning is an important area for future research and policy debate.

Regarding leadership development interventions, the most basic starting point is to draw the issue of gender and observational learning to the attention of both male and female managers. Indicative questions to be explored from a gender perspective might include: Who were the significant others? In what context and time were they significant? In terms of relational proximity, how distal or close were the significant others? How does attainability become manifest in social comparison? How accessible and prevalent were organizational men and women as significant others? In terms of attention to observe who were the significant others? In terms of motivation why were they observed? Did the pattern (acquiring, refining and affirming) of what was observed from the significant others change through time? Such questions would provide rich in-depth empirical insights.

Opportunities would follow to explore the gendered nature of the working environment and the impact on leadership development as a consequence. This approach with experienced practicing managers provokes insight into retrospective experience. Complementary to this would be to explore pre management career observations of both men and women.

**Undergraduates and MBA graduates: early career observational leadership learning**

To our knowledge there has been no research so far that has sought to first baseline and then follow the leadership development of graduates. Recent work of Benjamin and O’Reilly (2011) has examined MBA graduates in their early leadership career identifying periods of transition coupled with common challenges. These transitions and challenges are most helpful in providing insight to the experiential aspects of graduate leadership development. However, it was notable that Benjamin and O’Reilly did not make mention of observational learning and processes of social comparison in leader becoming. In part this might reflect a continuing expectation of experiential learning to focus almost exclusively on enactment as pre-dominant management development. Yet as we have made central to this paper learning about leadership, as a relational phenomenon, formatively draws from observations which are subsequently developed through experimental participation. It is through researching the
development of graduates examining both observational learning and experiential enactment that a greater insight into leadership development can be obtained.

Undertaking research with a cohort of undergraduates and MBA graduates would ideally follow a longitudinal approach. Prior to commencing their management careers the classroom educational design would enable graduates to understand the importance of significant others and how we learn from such key people in organizational roles, thereby having the potential to structure their career development: more attentive and motivated to learn from those they engage with; more cautious and selective to the practices they observe in particular contexts. Through such consciousness-raising, the invisible nature of observational learning that appears so influential to leadership development can be reflectively critiqued by undergraduate and MBA graduates as they proceed along their informal naturalistic development within the organizational setting. The longitudinal research approach would additionally allow exploration of Gibson’s (2003) observational typology of acquiring, refining and affirming. Related research questions might involve the following:

RQ1. Do people pass through these stages in a normative way?

RQ2. Do graduates revert to acquiring in new contexts even if they are in their mid-leadership careers?

RQ3. If this is the case do they pass through this stage more quickly every time they change context?

A variety of contexts was identified by Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) to be significant to management development. What is not known is how the dynamics of observational learning relate to changing contexts for early career managers.

SUMMARY

In a sense we simply do not have a clear understanding of whom and when significant others have impact and how such impact affects management practice. Such knowledge would greatly enhance the educational designs for management and leadership development. Benjamin and O’Reilly (2011) conclude that the next important step is to obtain the “granular” detail of the specifics that shape junior managers (p. 470). The suggested longitudinal approach would give opportunity to obtain such granular detail through examining contextual, processual and temporal insights of the influence of significant people to a manager’s leadership practice.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that observational learning is under-theorized; and in the field of management education there has been a dearth of attention given to exploring the dynamics and application of observational learning within debates and practices associated with experiential learning. That leadership as a relationally learnt phenomenon acquired through experiential engagement with others suggests that observational leadership learning requires considerably greater attention than has thus far been given. This paper has sought to begin to address this gap and hopefully contributed to an understanding of observational learning by showing how the dynamics surrounding observational learning interrelate, and how fundamental this observational phenomenon is to leadership learning. We have proposed a model to capture these dynamics of
observational leadership learning in which we holistically connect processes of observational learning to temporal and contextual influences. The opportunities for the development of observational leadership learning in the classroom appear significant and clear avenues for research anchored to the educational context may provide important insights for the field of leadership and management development. In essence, a better understanding of how observational leadership learning occurs and can be managed would make considerable impact on emerging leadership practice. We hope that our paper may stimulate debate and research into this most important aspect within management development.

REFERENCES


Schyns, B and Meindl, J.R. (2005), Implicit Leadership Theories: Essays And Explorations, Information Age, Charlotte, NC.


FURTHER READING


CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Professor Steve Kempster can be contacted at: s.kempster@bham.ac.uk