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Conference or Workshop Item

Accepted Version

Ahmadi, A. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9761-7167 (2015) An exploration of the role of leader fear in the knowing-doing gap of leadership. In: British Academy of Management (BAM) 2015 Conference, 7-10 September, 2015, University of Portsmouth. Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/67518/

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An Exploration of the Role of Leader Fear in the Knowing-Doing Gap of Leadership

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Discipline/SIG

Leadership and Leadership Development

Keywords

Leadership

Leadership development

Emotion

Fear

Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative

Phenomenology

This paper is submitted for BAM 2015 Doctoral Symposium,

Stream 2: Student Paper Presentations

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Abstract

This research explores the knowing-doing gap of leadership, a challenge that is compelling in practice yet novel in leadership theory and research. It focuses on the emotion of fear, and how it may influence the transfer of leadership knowledge into leadership action in the workplace. It draws on Affective Events Theory as the underlying theoretical lens, and uses a qualitative research strategy relying on a phenomenological approach. Initial findings from interviews with 22 leaders in the United Kingdom shed light on the influence of fear in the widening and bridging of the leadership knowing-doing gap, and how this may be influenced by and potentially impact on leaders and their contexts. With further development of the findings and conclusions, this research aims to contribute towards existing approaches on leadership development, as well as emotions and leadership.

Keywords

Leadership
Leadership development
Emotion
Fear

Purpose of the research

There has been a rising interest in leadership development theory, research and practice over the past three decades (Collins & Holton, 2004; Day, 2000; Day, 2011; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Managers learn leadership from experiences on the job (McCall, 2004; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009; Tannenbaum, 1997), enact leadership as a form of tacit knowledge (Hedlund et al., 2003), or acquire leadership knowledge through leadership development practices (Hannah & Avolio, 2010), such as 360-degree feedback, coaching, mentoring, and action learning (Day, 2000). However, what managers learn is not always fully translated into action in real contexts (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Hoover, Giambatista, Sorenson, & Bommer, 2010). *Knowing* (conceptual and procedural knowledge) does not necessarily predict *doing* (applied knowledge) (Baldwin, Pierce, Joines, & Farouk, 2011). Those who possess cognitive knowledge may have not developed the behavioural skills required for actions on the job (Hoover et al., 2010). Hence, it is often unknown to what extent managers develop and then perform differently (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010). Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) refer to this challenge as the *knowing-doing gap*, illustrating how managers fail to translate their knowledge of management practices into action to enhance organisational performance. This research explores the knowing-doing gap from a leadership perspective, looking at managers' translation of their leadership knowledge into leadership action.

Turning knowledge into action in organisations may be constrained by the emotion of fear. Thus, one way of conceptualising the dynamics of the leadership knowing-doing gap (e.g. widening or bridging the gap) may be through the fear of leaders. While the workplace was traditionally treated as rational and emotionally neutral, emotions are now viewed as playing a key role in experiences at work in general (Ashkanasy, Zerbe, & Härtel, 2002, 2005; Brief & Weiss, 2002; Fineman, 2003; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Grandey, 2008) and in leadership in particular (Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011). Examples of workplace fear include the fear of making mistakes, the fear of blame, and the fear of job loss, all of which can prevent managers from acting on their knowledge (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Despite its importance in shaping behaviour in the workplace, fear receives little attention in the organisational emotions literature (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009) and appears to be understudied within the leadership domain. This research takes an affect-based

approach to study the leadership knowing-doing gap, with a focus on the emotion of fear that leaders may experience at work. It draws on the extant literature and uses a qualitative research design to explore fear and the translation of leadership knowing into leadership doing.

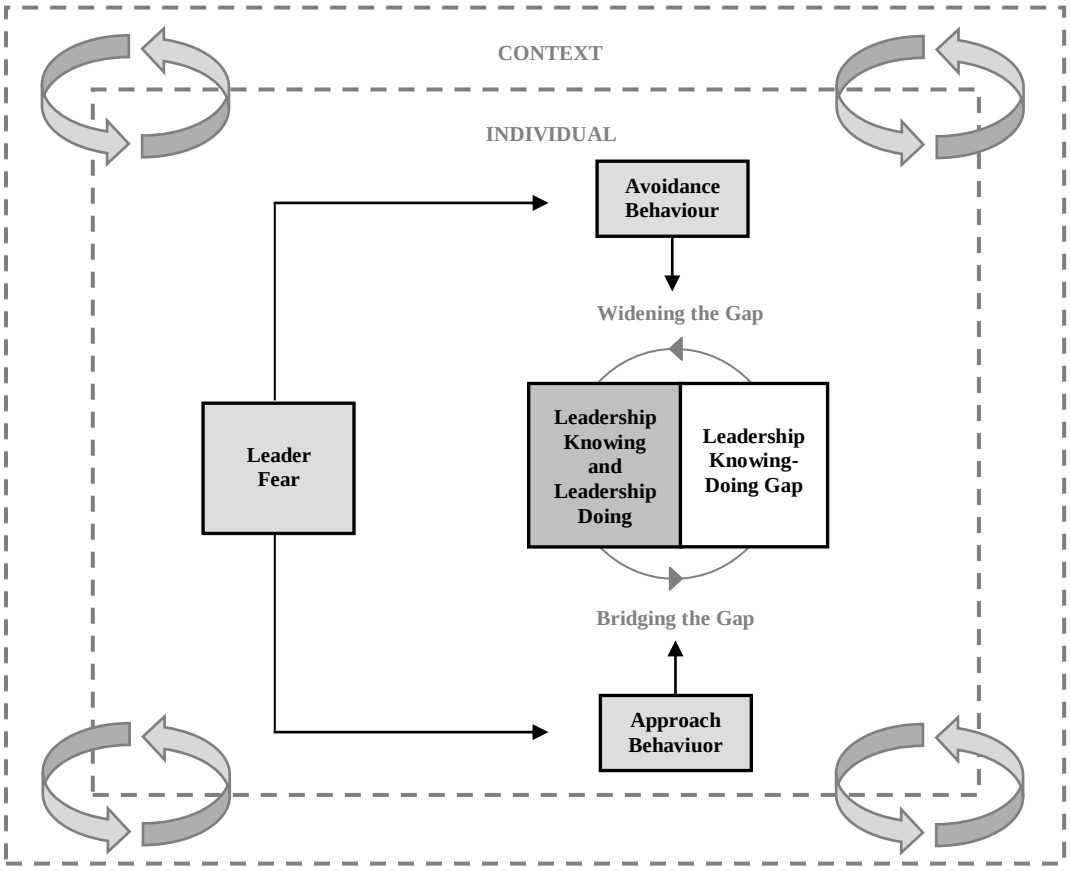
Theoretical background

Given that people spend considerably more time acquiring leadership knowledge than taking action to apply it (Blanchard, Meyer, & Ruhe, 2007), an exploration of the leadership knowing-doing gap is needed. Previous research often neglects the link between leadership development and leadership emergence or leadership performance (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Furthermore, there is a lack of follow-up to determine the return on leadership development investment and the desired positive impacts on the attitudes, behaviours and performance of leaders (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010). This lack of enquiry may be partly due to the traditional misconception that holding a formal leader position in an organisational hierarchy prescribes or inherently conveys leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Thus, the leadership knowing-doing gap appears to be largely ignored. In addressing this gap, this paper draws on relevant concepts such as knowledge-in-use (de Jong & Ferguson-Hessler, 1996), applied management knowledge (Baldwin et al., 2011), and the motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), as well as previous work on the psychology of doing nothing (Anderson, 2003) and preferences for non-action (Steel, 2007). Furthermore, it builds on contextual theories of leadership that emphasise the significance of context characteristics in influencing leadership behaviour and effectiveness (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006; Shamir & Howell, 1999). From this, it views the translation of leadership knowledge into leadership action as a dynamic and context-specific phenomenon. It aims to understand how leaders may translate, to varying degrees in different situations, their leadership knowledge into leadership practice, thereby widening and bridging their leadership knowing-doing gaps across various contexts.

In exploring the role of fear in the knowing-doing of leadership, this research draws on Affective Events Theory, which offers a “macrostructure” to understand emotions at work (Weiss & Beal, 2005, p.2). Affective Events Theory states that organisational characteristics and conditions and every day work events (hassles and uplifts) are affective events in that they can

initiate or influence the emotions of members, which in turn can have an impact on their behaviours, attitudes and performance (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). As the workplace can trigger negative emotions such as fear (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004) and due to its potential to influence the transfer of knowing into doing (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000), this research looks at how leaders may experience fear, and how their fear experiences may disrupt or promote the translation of their leadership learning into leadership action. The proposed theoretical framework of this research draws on cognitive appraisal theories that explain the development of fear (Lazarus, 1982; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1990; Roseman & Smith, 2001; Scherer, 1988; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) to explore how leaders may experience fear at work. It also looks at avoidance and approach behaviour in fearful situations (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Ohman & Wiens, 2003; Rachman, 1990) to explore leaders' behavioural responses to fear. Moreover, it draws on contextual theories of leadership (Antonakis et al., 2003; Osborn et al., 2002; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006; Shamir & Howell, 1999) to explain how work events may shape experiences of fear in leaders, which in turn may influence the translation of their leadership learning into leadership practice. From this, a multidimensional theoretical framework is developed as a starting point towards exploring fear and the leadership knowing-doing gap, as presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Proposed theoretical framework



To elaborate further, cognitive appraisal theories that link thoughts with feelings posit that emotions result from appraisals, interpretations and evaluations of situations (Frijda et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1982, 1991; Ortony et al., 1990; Roseman & Smith, 2001). Fear appraisals are generally associated with unpleasantness, uncertainty and low situational control (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Building on fear appraisal tendencies and adapting from the application of cognitive appraisals of fear to employee silence at work by Kish-Gephart et al. (2009), leaders may experience fear when they appraise work events or contexts as threatening to their goals and not under their control. Drawing on fear action tendencies, an experience of fear can result in *avoidance behaviour*, with attempts to avoid or escape the

situation, or freeze and do nothing (Frijda, 1986; Grandey, 2008). Avoidance behaviour may decrease the likelihood of leaders translating their leadership knowing into leadership doing. Thereby, avoidance behaviour induced by fear may be a possible explanation behind widening the knowing-doing gap of leaders. On the other hand, fear can promote the willingness and ability to *approach behaviour* (Rachman, 1990). While flight and freeze are avoidance-focused defence mechanisms (Ohman & Wiens, 2003), approach-focused motives can drive people towards opportunities and action (Maner & Gerend, 2007). Thus, approach behaviour may increase the likelihood of leaders translating their leadership knowledge into leadership action. From this, approach behaviour in situations of fear may influence bridging the leadership knowing-doing gap. This shows that the interplay between the individual leader and the context may shape leader fear and the translation of leadership learning into leadership practice, which in turn may influence the individual and the context.

Forming the basis of the perspective of leadership in this research is a useful categorisation that is put forward by Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, and Johnson (2011), differentiating between two principles: (a) the loci of leadership: where leadership comes from, classified as leader, followers, dyads, collectives and contexts; and (b) the mechanisms of leadership: how leadership is transmitted, categorised as traits, behaviours, cognition and affect (Hernandez et al., 2011, p.1166-1167). This research takes into account the complexity of leadership, recognising the co-existence of leaders, followers, dyads, collectives and contexts (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2011; Yukl, 2010). This pluralistic standpoint on leadership informs the research, yet the vantage point for studying the leadership knowing-doing gap is the individual leaders in their leadership contexts. Thus, for the purpose of this research, the focus is on the *leader* and the *context* as the main loci of leadership. This research looks at the knowing-doing gap of the individual leader, aimed at understanding the experience of transferring the individual's leadership learning into leadership action on the job. Moreover, this research looks at the context for the purpose of exploring the situations in which leadership is enacted. In terms of the mechanisms of leadership, the underlying theoretical lens of Affective Events Theory used in this research focuses primarily on *affect*, while drawing on the *cognition* and *behaviours* mechanisms to support the understanding of the leadership knowing-doing gap.

Research questions

With the aim of exploring the role of fear in the leadership knowing-doing gap in leadership, and in response to the challenges and opportunities of the literature reviewed, the focal research question of this study looks at the leadership knowing-doing gap phenomenon, asking, "What is the experience of the leadership knowing-doing gap like for leaders?" The second research question revolves around the emotion of fear, asking, "What is the role of fear in influencing the leadership knowing-doing gap?" The third research question involves the context, asking, "What is the role of context in influencing the knowing-doing gap of leaders?" Finally, the forth research question asks, "What is the impact of the leadership knowing-doing gap on leadership in organisations?"

Research design and methodology

This research is based on a subjective ontological and an interpretive epistemological orientation (Bryman & Bell, 2007). An inductive qualitative strategy is chosen to provide greater in-depth insight into this unexplored area of research (Silverman, 2010). There is no general model of leadership development yet (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Yukl, 2010) that could provide a basis for measuring the leadership knowing-doing gap, nor well-established constructs and measurement instruments that may be suitable for a deductive strategy with relevance to this study, due to various limitations in previous literature. This research takes a phenomenological approach to studying the topic, employing in-depth interviewing (Cassell & Symon, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This is aimed at seeing things from the point of view of leaders, seeking to understand how leaders view fear in the workplace, and how they make sense of their leadership knowing-doing gap. Data collection and data analysis employ the steps of phenomenological research as laid out by Moustakas (1994), whose approach especially recognises Husserl's transcendental phenomenology.

This research utilised purposive sampling (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Silverman, 2010), in the form of criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) which is commonly used in the phenomenological tradition (Kuzel, 1999). It pursued interviews with 22 leaders in the United Kingdom, across various industries and organisational levels, ranging from supervisory, to middle management to

top management, to the point of saturation (Kuzel, 1999; Patton, 2002; Bryman & Bell, 2007). Leaders are operationalised in this research as managers who have a people responsibility in organisations, within a project, team, department or division, for instance. This formed the main criterion for approaching individuals who are likely to be both interested as well as information-rich in terms of reflecting on their leadership experiences and understandings of fear and the leadership knowing-doing gap. While this research recognises that holding a formal leadership position in an organisation does not inherently convey leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), this operationalisation of leaders serves as a starting point towards understanding how managers engage in leadership in organisations. It potentially allows shedding light on the idea that the accumulation of leadership knowledge does not necessarily prescribe actual leadership engagement in organisations (Blanchard et al., 2007; Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999).

Interviews were semi-structured (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Klenke, 2008; Patton, 2002) and Critical Incident Technique (Chell, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2007) was utilised to delve into particular instances and events in which fear and the leadership knowing-doing gap manifested in the experiences of participants. Analytic induction is the general strategy of data analysis for this study (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), using a systematic procedure provided by Moustakas (1994) based on his modifications of the Van Kaam method of analysing phenomenological data. The main stages involve horizonalisation, bracketing and phenomenological reduction to determine the invariant constituents of the experience, clustering and thematising the invariant constituents, and writing individual and synthesised textural and structural descriptions of the phenomena in study.

Initial findings

Some initial findings revolve around the following areas. First, while the leadership knowing-doing gap may manifest itself as a phenomenon that leaders may be conscious of and able to identify, some participants showed variations in their awareness of the leadership knowing-doing gap at different situations or points in time. More specifically, some described being unaware of the leadership knowing-doing gap as it initially resides in their sub-conscience. Second, participants pointed to a range of negative and positive emotions and moods that they experienced in situations of the leadership knowing-doing gap. Third, participants' responses to

the leadership knowing-doing gap incidents involved some form of behavioural change, either immediately as they identified the gap, or a planned behavioural change for similar future instances of the gap. Forth, based on participants' descriptions of their gap incidents, it appears that fear influenced both widening the gap as well as closing the gap. Fifth, participants highlighted a number of negative and positive contextual conditions that affected their fear and leadership knowing-doing gap. Finally, they pointed to the impact of the knowing-doing gap on them as individual leaders, as well as on their leadership contexts. Further analysis and interpretation of the specific findings for each of these areas is currently underway in forming the conclusions of this research.

Anticipated contributions

As this research is developed further, it aims to contribute towards existing approaches on leadership development as well as emotions and leadership in at least three ways. First, it is one of the first scholarly attempts to uncover the gap between knowing leadership and enacting leadership. Second, it adds to the scarce literature on negative discrete emotions in the workplace, and the limited existing literature that links fear with leadership. It is one of few scholarly explorations of fear *in* leaders as opposed to fear *of* leaders (e.g., Fry, 2003; Ryan & Oestreich, 1998) within the leadership arena. Third, it potentially offers a theory (data analysis still underway) in which both fear and leadership are multidimensional, dynamic, and context-specific (Gooty, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2011; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008; Yammarino, Dionne, Uk Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). By drawing on emotional, cognitive and behavioural approaches and integrating them with arguments from individual and contextual leadership theories, this research shows how fear appraisals, responses and impacts on the leadership knowing-doing gap can vary for each person, between persons, and in different situations. Thus, it aims to contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of both emotions and leadership. The next step is to finalise the findings and contributions of this research, with the hope of spurring interest for future research on the topic.

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