

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mutiny and leadership

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Abstract

Mutiny is often regarded as a consequence of dire conditions and failed leadership. This reflection on Ken Parry's work suggests it is neither and much more the consequences of a socially constructed world.

Keywords: leadership; social construction; historical analysis; leadership theories

Ken Parry made the case for a socially constructed perspective on leadership that considered it to be related to the relationship between the leaders and followers, and not the property of the former, as so often has been, and still is, the case. In what follows I want to take Ken's lead and look at what might be regarded as the ultimate failure in leadership: mutiny, and explore why this context is best explained by the line taken by Ken.

A mutiny is defined as a refusal to obey commands in a military or naval context involving two or more subordinates. Outside a military context we consider such rejections of legitimate authority as strikes, or rebellions or revolutions and if there is only one recalcitrant then the law does not regard the act as mutinous (even if the consequences are severe).

History is full of mutinies, including those that have become iconic (*The Potemkin*, 1905; the *Bounty*, 1789; and the Indian Mutiny [or first War of Independence], 1857), and those that barely get a mention (in the British Army, 1919 for example). But each one occurred against a background where authoritarian discipline, appalling conditions and quotidian dissent were commonplace, but mutiny a rare occurrence. To explain why mutinies occurred is also to raise the opposite question: why they do not, because although leadership is critical to both the officers and the subordinates it is the specific relationships between these two groups, in conjunction with the nature of the context, that differentiated between mutiny and compliance, and between a successful and a failed mutiny. Here I want to amplify the social constructionist approach so dear to Ken's approach because there were no 'objective' or 'transparent' or 'determining' contexts, and if there had been such contexts then the presence or absence of mutiny in markedly similar circumstances is inexplicable.

Thus, for example, the mutiny at Spithead by British sailors in 1797 is generated by conditions very similar to those at the Nore in the same year, but while the former was successfully negotiated to a deal including an increase in pay and conditions and the removal of unpopular officers, the latter's almost identical demands led to mass executions. Here, similar conditions generated dissimilar results and the primary explanation for the difference related to the active leadership on both sides and the configuration of different narratives that explained the same event differently. For the British Navy, Spithead was configured as a spontaneous – and mistaken – response to a set of unfortunate conditions that the Admiralty quickly addressed. The Nore, however, was represented as a Jacobin-inspired threat to the very fabric of the nation that demanded a

Dedicated to Professor Ken Parry.

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necessarily coercive response. We also need to consider the importance of the collective *and* individuals. The collective leadership of the mutineers at Spithead was robust enough to maintain the necessary solidarity amongst the crews, especially when faced with a sympathetic Admiral Howe. But the willingness of the Nore mutineers to let Richard Parker take the sole leadership position when faced with Earl Spencer, always looking for bloody revenge, was a much more dangerous situation.

On the other hand, the Indian ‘mutiny’ that occurred in 1857 did not generate conflict across all the Indian armies under British control and whether it was a mutiny or a rebellion depends upon whose account is accepted.

In short, what counts as a mutiny, what appears to be the result, and what role the leaders of various bodies play in the development of the situation, is, as Ken would have suggested, not something to be read from the context but something to be fought over and subject to continuous debate. What is interesting here is not the dispute between ‘truth’ and ‘fake news’ but which account is believed by whom, and why, and what the consequences are for those involved. Unlike disputes between academics about leadership, the consequences of disputes between leaders in mutinies are not usually restricted to bruised egos, but often lead to barbarism; if leadership academics are to engage with the world – and we should – we should tread carefully.

Reflective note on Ken

I came across Ken’s work on Grounded Theory before I met him and what really struck me about his ideas and his character was how comfortable he was with uncertainty – it was OK not to know, as long as you kept heading in the right direction that accepted the need for both theory and evidence. The other aspect of Ken that I came to appreciate more as I got to know him better was his sense of humour; too many academics take their work and themselves too seriously; Ken never did either.

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