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Take your lead: The pleasures of power in universities and beyond

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Abstract
Ken Parry once asked me *why* I wanted to take the lead on a particular initiative. This paper summarises the answer I'd like to have given him. Taking the lead is pleasurable in three principle ways: it affirms or modifies self-concept, confirms a degree of control over the external world and promises self-transcendence through relationship with others. The paper proposes three categories: identity, influence and interaction, as the basis of an analytic framework for further research into the pleasures of power.

Keywords: power and politics; leadership; management effectiveness; organisational behaviour

Introduction

I remember Ken responding to one of my enthusiastic proposals to take initiative (I have no memory of what initiative it was) with the question: 'why would you want to do that?'

Something about Ken's attentiveness guided me to answer not in terms of the tremendous good I would bring to the world – but to ponder the personal pleasures I might expect from taking the lead.

Subsequently I have been wondering about this, asking other people, and am now researching 'the pleasures of power'. I am delighted to lay out my thinking here, in this brief paper in Ken's honour.

I begin with reflections on leadership in academia, because it's the world Ken and I shared, and which I assume will be familiar to most readers of this paper who know – perhaps all too well – the opportunities and costs of taking up leadership in universities, with its many enthusiasms and frustrations. However, the ideas and concluding framework draw on enquiry across many sectors, age groups and countries. My starting point is a slightly elaborated version of Ken's simple question: 'Describe the pleasure you get from taking the lead; or from exerting power and influence even if not formally in the lead'.

Not surprisingly, answers are varied and seldom conclusive. Often they focus on motives (e.g., 'I just want to get things done', 'To prevent the same old guy taking charge again', 'To be noticed by the hierarchy'). It can take a while to get to 'pleasures', and beyond the obviously virtuous ('helping others', 'serving my colleagues', 'standing up for my values') to those that might be thought of as shameful ('compete, dominate and win', 'being in control', 'impressing my Dad'). Once 'pleasure' really comes into focus, its tendrils are many and interwoven – as I hope a moment's reflection will confirm to you, dear reader.

Dedicated to Professor Ken Parry.

Interpreting Pleasure

In the early stages (and referring to my own reflexive journal on the topic) I considered analysing responses by reference to Lukes' (1973) typology; or my own account of tactics by which people gain and keep hold of power (Gosling & Jones, 2018). But neither of these focus specifically on pleasure, and as Sutherland, Gosling, & Jelinek (2015: 610) argue 'power is more than resource allocation and structures. Power is a lived social phenomenon'.

An alternative approach – honouring the aesthetic, visceral dimensions identified by Sutherland, Gosling, and Jelinek (2015), might be to focus on 'ego defences' such as narcissism, obsessive control and dependency (Maccoby, 1998). There are echoes of this in the conceptual framework I present below, because I think pleasurable feelings are partly derived from successful defences against anxiety. But pleasure is more than that and my proposed conceptual framework addresses power as a source of positive satisfaction. This framework is summarised in Table 1 towards the end of the paper, where I also provide a necessarily brief explanation. Before getting there, however, I reflect more discursively on the pleasures of power in academia.

Taking The Lead in Academia

Coming to see oneself as a leader at any level is an affirming experience, and marks a reorientation to the work one is engaged in. An experienced academic who moves into a formal representative role on a key committee may not have set out to be a leader; but to discover that you are authorised to speak for others rather impels you to live up to these expectations. In so doing you modify your self-image; and you start to pay attention to things that seemed irrelevant before – modulating your speech and appearance, agenda items that compete or complement your own, and ways to articulate the shared identity of your own group. In doing so you may come to reify hitherto ordinary activities such as 'listening' or 'being visible' into 'leadership qualities'.

Many in academia cite the desire to serve their colleagues, college or discipline. This spirit of service may be characterised by reference to transcendent purposes, continuing traditions and other supra-personal ideals, and sometimes by an 'ethic of care' (Gilligan, 1982), a rather intimate focus on personal relationships and concern for a specific community or project. In fact the variety of motives and satisfactions, so nuanced and overlaid, go some way to explain the discomfort that most academics feel when questioned about the power they yield.

There is a sensuous aspect to leadership, a feeling that comes with it, and which is almost tangible when leaders talk about their day at work – it is a pleasure of power, not in a sinister or perverse way; but the sense of an appetite that has found its meat. It would be hard to sustain oneself in most leadership positions without some enjoyment of the power it brings, even though, like a taste for olives, it comes sooner to some than others. The sensual satisfactions of leadership are complemented by intellectual challenges, mostly from engaging in increasingly complex and ambiguous situations. Many leaders also come to enjoy the 'disciplines of the self' (Foucault, 1986; Hadot, 1995), crafting their inner responses to emotional as well as ethical challenges: a process sometimes referred to as 'managing oneself in role' (Lawrence, 1979), and a staple of classical approaches to leadership development.

Most importantly, success germinates an aspiration to leadership – more so if it's recognised by peers. People who feel successful in whatever they are doing are likely to see themselves as actual or potential leaders; the misfit or outsider are rare aspirants to leadership of established institutions. But what makes an insider a 'good fit' for leadership? Asked which characteristics are typical of the people in senior leadership roles in universities, academics cite as many heinous as virtuous traits – including enthusiasm, focus, self-belief, ambition, ruthlessness, lack of integrity, inclined to take decisions regardless of the data, afraid of real change and so on (Bolden, Gosling, O'Brien, Peters, Ryan, & Haslam, 2012). Although some of these seldom feature on lists of *ideal* qualities, they probably give a fair description of *actual* traits. This complicates

our notion of 'misfit' – someone who fits perfectly well in an academic job, for example, might not fit in amongst those hungry to lead the university. But even more likely is that this is fluid – misfits may discover unexpected pleasures of power, and be drawn into commitments that turn out to have some leadership in them. Conversely, it is sometimes misfits and outsiders who, opposing the establishment, become identified as prophets of a coming change; they attract a cult following and become leaders at the centre of an enthusiastic movement.

Asked about why they want to take on a particular leadership role, many say they want to influence what counts as important and the way things are done.

In some situations, acknowledged expertise in a subject area carries with it sufficient authority to assert power; but this is always mediated by organisational structures, through which it is mobilised. For example, the scholarly authority of a PhD Supervisor is reinforced by status, administrative procedures and a tradition of research supervision; the voice of the researcher can still be heard, and have a formative effect on the progress of research and the career of a student. In this way the established system, for all its faults, is an enabling structure for influence at the very core of academic work. Participating in it can be a source of pleasure in spite of its frustrations.

Up the hierarchy a Dean of Faculty is afforded a systemic perspective wider than that available to many colleagues, and can thus bring a sense of proportion, as well as represent collective interests to peers in the wider institution. In this case the influence of the Dean as boundary-spanner is exerted through his or her ability to interpret one part of the system to another. Again, it is a role embedded in the structures and practices of the institution, which becomes 'leadership' by virtue of the skill and zeal of the incumbent. It might seem that at this level leadership is largely a matter of rhetoric: sense-making and persuasion. There is more to it; the many pressing issues create a predicament for everyone on faculty boards and committees: to determine what really matters.

Every decision becomes political because it is about whom is included in deliberations. Often institutional structures and procedures become the carefully crafted means for influence, not simply its context. In this realm, courage and craftiness are crucial.

Although leadership in HE is visible in formal managerial roles, most people will tell you that success depends on informal networks. Some of these are rather like shadows of the formal structures: examples might include regular dinners of a sub-group of committee members; a private email list through which people discuss and coordinate responses to an official project; occasional catch-ups between professors in different parts of the institution. Some are woven deeply into the fabric of the place through patronage and obligation, and the political trades – exchanges of favours and debts – that are so crucial in the realisation of leadership. If you want power, you had better enjoy these many kinds of interactions through which it is enacted.

Pleasures of Identity, Influence and Interaction

I think these suggest three types of pleasure that make leadership attractive.

   (1) *Identity-related pleasures* derive from self-affirmation, favoured modifications of self-image, the experience of agency through impacting the world around one, experiencing advancement in social standing and the respect of others. Overall, these might be bundled as 'disciplines of the self' and offer the pleasure of finding and crafting an identity associated with efficacy, status and – probably most importantly – a sense of self-mastery.

These identity-related pleasures are usually most pertinent early in a career, constructing oneself as (in this case) an academic, becoming more confident in that social-identity. But many experienced adults submit themselves to extraordinary work pressure, and perhaps some of this is a

continuing desire to test oneself – perhaps for reassurance, or perhaps as a kind of personal and rather ascetic spiritual exercise, as has been suggested elsewhere (Case & Gosling, 2007).

(2) *Influence-oriented* pleasures derive from being able to control the external world – people, agendas and projects. It's the satisfaction of making a difference, steering and supporting priorities. 'Controlling' and 'creating' can indeed be pleasurable – and for some they become a comfortable assumption. Initiating and running projects, managing teams, directing the application of resources: these are the core pleasures of managerial life for many.

As head of department or chair of a committee one can set the agenda, ways of dealing with topics; equally as a committee member, one can campaign to upset the plans of the Chair. As Dean, one can – craftily – vire budgets, make or decline appointments … there's quite a lot of influence in all these, though rather less direct control than sometimes imagined (or desired!).

But the pleasure can pall. Managing ever larger, more unwieldy projects can be somewhat like fighting the Hydra – the more action one takes, the more overwhelmed by reactions. If your ideas are approved, you have to deliver; as your empire expands so do the demands and the uncertainties, and especially the web of interdependent factors – other agendas, competing interests, budget priorities, delivery-timescales, all of which can be unexpectedly upset by changes beyond your control. Not to mention 'difficult people'.

(3) *Interactive pleasures* include being in relationship with others, and thus being part of something more than oneself. It can be exciting to find oneself amongst other 'players', especially those perceived as more powerful. For some there is great pleasure in just being a part of a network, and in the political manoeuvring where no-one has absolute control over anything; so doing power – powering – is like navigating constantly shifting currents, attempting to use, combine or oppose one with another. Here also one may be afforded a systemic overview of emerging patterns of disruption and re-organising. For investors and non-exec board members, there can be great aesthetic pleasure in this rather abstract perception of the organisation and its ecology. So the pleasure we are talking about, and the sense of power, is to do with unfolding and emerging relatedness, and although personal relationships are an important aspect, there is more to 'relationality'.

Interactive pleasures, therefore, are probably more salient at senior levels in a hierarchy, where networking and organisational politics become the principle mode for maintaining and exerting influence; and where managing – even manipulating – interdependency is a crucial part of the role: amongst departments, with community stakeholders, planners, competitor organisations, government policy-makers and so forth. In traditional hierarchical organisations such as universities, interactive pleasures are especially pertinent as a Council Member or Board Director. But interactive pleasures are available to all who delight in a community of plural interests and values. Figuring one's way through a multi-disciplinary, mixed-methods research partnership has little reward in the way of direct influence, but plenty of interaction to enjoy if one can!

Finally, perhaps an underlying source of pleasure in relational interdependence is the opportunity to share in aims that transcend personal or corporate instrumentalism. It is not (always or only) having power *over* others, but powering *with* them.

Power Pains

These three types of pleasures – identity, influence and interaction – have their shadow sides: narcissism, megalomania and totalitarianism, for starters. Space precludes a discussion of the personality traits that might lead some people (for example) to seek particular pleasures – to be

the constant centre of attention, to maintain rigid control over their circumstances, or to dominate and colonise the world around them. However I will point out that some organisational practices seem designed to satisfy particular pleasures. In academia the obsessive celebration of authorship in high-status publications focuses our desire towards pleasures of identity. Performance appraisals are staged asymmetries of power, where the pleasures of influence (for the appraiser) are tied with threats to identity (of the appraised). Here the pleasures of power have – to put it mildly – a certain frisson, and sometimes too many opportunities for abuse. On the other hand it would be naïve to deny the collusion of the subordinate in these kinds of staged, almost ritualistic practices (Ford, 2019). Organisational power relations provide for varied interwoven pleasures, many of which must have sado-masochistic aspects (Ford, 2019). How else would universities cohere?

In this short paper I can't go more into the intriguing aspects of possible abuse, collusion – and even pleasure – in painful power relations. But clearly this is worthy of further research and I will be happy to hear of readers' experiences.

Beyond Academia

Identity, influence and interaction are ubiquitous sources of anxiety and growth, and universities are characterised by specific ways in which powering assuages these anxieties, and the pleasures it offers. Other types of organisations, and other ways of working outside formal organisations, fulfil these three types of pleasure in different ways. For example, management consultants and coaches may have control over their own schedules, but very little influence over ongoing operations and group efforts. However, they may derive great pleasure from observing and contributing to the dynamics they observe across an organisation or a wider client-base. Somewhat similar, private-equity investors enjoy being 'players' in the market, as well as potent influencers on the management of companies they acquire, reform and sell. But although the practices of power in each industry and organisational form afford characteristic pleasures, I think that the drivers are fundamentally similar – hence my proposed conceptual framework.

I have a burgeoning data set of interviews including people in tech start-ups, libraries, health services (in the UK and Africa), financial services companies, non-executive boards, consultancy and coaching, post-career 'retirement', full-time parenting. If any readers of this short paper would like to be interviewed for this study, please get in touch. Most seem to find it a pleasurable encounter!

Applying this Framework

So here, in conclusion, is a suggestion for how this framework might be operationalised in further research (See Table 1). The tabular format is necessarily brief, but I hope suggestive enough to indicate linkages to other theoretical streams, ways to analyse data on pleasures of power, and worthwhile interpretative discussions. I also hope readers will spot ways in which this framework might be used to interpret and improve organisational practices, to critique those that pander to abusive power and to foster more humane and generous pleasures.

What would Ken have said?

I will never know what Ken would have made of this reply. But I am grateful for his question, and for having known a scholar who was always open to speculative thought – so long as he could reel it back into some tangible application for theory, method or practice. He said as much in what must be one of the last of his published pieces (Kempster & Parry, 2019). This is, for me, Ken's legacy: confidence in scholarly collective effort – contentious, imaginative, caring and practical.

Table 1. Pleasures of identity, influence and interaction – potential implications

Pleasures of…	Focus	Source of pleasure	Career stage	Desire/rewards	Risks	Extreme	Perverse expressions
Identity	Self	Care of the self	Early	Self-esteem	Failure, envy	Narcissism	Status, personality cults
Influence	Other	Agency	Mid	Control	Defeat, loss	Obsession	Control-freakery, surveillance, voyeurism
Interaction	Relationships	Inclusion	Later	Social capital	Exile, exclusion	Paranoia	Neurotic networking, political gaming

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