

**Putting the discourse to work: on outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development**

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Keywords:	Leadership development, Leadership, Discourse, Democracy, Post-foundationalism, Ernesto Laclau
Abstract:	<p>This paper offers a praxis of democratic leadership development, arguing that the framework presented can act as a means of rethinking how collective forms of leadership are developed within and between organisations. Building on notions of leadership development as process and person-based, we interpret these as contested, democratic and contingent discursive achievements in a process of developing. Post-foundationalist theory, particularly the work of Ernesto Laclau, is introduced as a means of 'democratizing' key dimensions of leadership development: working with 'leadership' and 'democracy' as empty-floating signifiers holding the potential to generate energetic engagements between leadership development participants. A framework consisting of four dimensions is introduced, with particular attention paid within each dimension to its practice relevance. First, we seek to democratize the leader-subject, reinterpreted as a contested and contingent signifying subject of discourse. Second, we seek to radicalize the process of development through foregrounding conflict and agonistic practice. Third, we introduce the notion of symbolic violence as a means of thinking about direction-setting within development contexts. Fourth, we argue for development that pays attention to the unknown, to the gaps in discourse. We explore each dimension in relation to an illustrative example, a cross-organisational women's group in the Pacific.</p>

# Putting the discourse to work: on outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development

## Introduction

This paper offers a praxis of democratic leadership development, arguing that the framework presented can act as a means of rethinking how collective forms of leadership are developed within and between organisations. We prefer the use of 'democratic' to cognate terms such as shared, distributed and collaborative (Raelin, 2011), because it points towards both the idea of a collective act and the notion that such an act is often subjected to contestation (Laclau, 2014; Mouffe, 2009).

Drawing on post-foundational theory, we explore democracy as a fruitful means of rethinking important dimensions of collective leadership work, situating both the leader-actor and the process of leadership as temporary, contestable and discursive accomplishments. The leader and the process of leadership, two pressing concerns in the literature, become 'democratized', interpreted and worked with as contingent, contested and temporary accomplishments enacted through enunciated discourse. We argue that adopting a post-foundational theoretical lens, particularly the work of political theorist Ernesto Laclau, allows for a rich discursive account of leadership development as a process always in motion, always unfolding. It is an account that foregrounds the *developing* aspects of leadership development.

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3 Post-foundationalism focuses on the ontological foundations of social relations (Kelly, 2014;  
4  
5 Marchart, 2007); it interprets experience and reality as only knowable through language and  
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7 acts of enunciation. In common with post-structuralist notions of performativity (e.g. Butler,  
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9 1990) it holds that we create reality through performances and participation in ongoing  
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11 discursive-material accomplishments. Post-foundationalism takes one further step in  
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13 acknowledging that language always falls short of capturing the richness of human  
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15 experience and ambition: performances are always partial accomplishments. It is this  
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17 'negative' core of language – its absences and flaws – that post-foundationalists claim  
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19 generates both energetic contestation and investment (Kelly, 2014).  
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25 Adopting a post-foundationalist stance, leadership (Kelly, 2014) and democracy (Laclau,  
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27 2014) are useful signifiers for development, not simply because people seem to attach great  
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29 value to them but also because their apparent positive meaning lacks a final ontological  
30  
31 ground. Leadership seems to attract loose and fuzzily-defined identifications of purpose, of  
32  
33 generating energy in order to be able to tackle and meet head-on problems regarded as  
34  
35 previously intractable (Grint, 2005a). Democracy, in our view, offers a way of thinking about  
36  
37 broadly collective approaches to organising that embraces discord and contestation;  
38  
39 embedding contingency within its foundations (Laclau, 2014; Mouffe, 2009), 'democracy'  
40  
41 can signify both meaningful struggle for hegemony and the ultimate impossibility of final  
42  
43 closure, as the struggle always continues. In the paper we deploy the discursive looseness  
44  
45 and the meaningfulness of both democracy and leadership in a developmental setting. With  
46  
47 this practice-focus, our contribution concerns the crafts of leadership development design  
48  
49 and facilitation. In particular our account is relevant to practitioners seeking to mainstream  
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51 energetic debate within development programmes. In respect of design and pre-programme  
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3 practice, the paper offers a way to expand the possibilities of what may be opened for  
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5 discussion – democratized – within a development intervention. In terms of facilitation, our  
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7 account offers a way for facilitators and participants to orientate and reflect upon their  
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9 enunciations amidst action: to situate themselves in a process of development that is often  
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11 experienced as, and designed to be, disruptive of organisational norms and identity  
12  
13 (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). Although our framework appears initially most appropriate  
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15 for groups that are more obviously diverse, there are cognate benefits for relatively  
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17 homogenous groups in respect of deliberately disruptive interventions and increased  
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19 democratic engagement.  
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25 Our contribution to leadership development scholarship is to offer an alternative means of  
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27 exploring what it means to research a collective process of development, one couched  
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29 within a framework (leadership) that is more commonly associated in popular culture with  
30  
31 the behaviours and traits of individuals (Ford and Harding, 2007). Introducing the notion of  
32  
33 democracy as enacted through partial, contingent and contested discursive enunciations  
34  
35 offers an alternative way of thinking through the possibilities for leadership development  
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37 research.  
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42 Our praxis framework contains four dimensions, each focusing on a different but related  
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44 aspect, namely: the democratization of the leader-subject; agonism and democratic  
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46 processes of leadership development; the discursive violence expressed through offering  
47  
48 direction in development; and, working at the limits and unknowns of group constructions,  
49  
50 through exploring discursive rupture and uncertainty. In presenting our praxis framework  
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52 we draw on an illustrative example from our research, the work of the Pacific Women's  
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54 Group (PWG).  
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3 Before elaborating upon the framework and its practice relevance, we situate our account in  
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5 leadership development literature focused on leadership as a collective process. We then  
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7 discuss the value of post-foundationalism to this study, before offering more detail on our  
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9 illustrative example. We conclude by discussing the general practice and research  
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11 implications of our framework.  
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### 19 **Existing research on collective forms of leadership development**

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21 Leadership development research is increasingly focusing on alternatives to accounts  
22  
23 concerned with traits and behaviours of individual leaders, instead positing the idea that  
24  
25 leadership can be approached developmentally as a collective process. Day (2001) initially  
26  
27 distinguished between 'leader' and 'leadership' development, the former concerning work  
28  
29 on an individual's traits and behaviours, the latter involving a collective view of leadership,  
30  
31 whereby capacity and process become the foci of attention. Viewing leadership as a  
32  
33 collective endeavour can appear counter-intuitive and counter-cultural, at least within a  
34  
35 western context where leadership is often equated with individualism, usually with heavily  
36  
37 masculine and competitive overtones (McCabe and Knights, 2015; Stead and Elliott, 2012).  
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39 Indeed developers seeking to pursue collective forms of leadership can be confronted by  
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41 participants who adhere to strongly-held identifications, with "heroic tales" of cultural icons  
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43 (Ford and Harding, 2007). Challenging such prototypical views can lead to significant  
44  
45 resistances on the part of participants (Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; Sinclair, 2007), who may  
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47 more readily identify with the perceived decisiveness of individualistic leadership.  
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3 Poststructuralist research has sought to overcome the individual-process binary in  
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5 leadership development by interpreting both as discursively assembled constructions. From  
6  
7 this perspective, individuals and processes can be said to be constructed through the  
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9 language, discursive practices and technologies of development. Adopting a  
10  
11 poststructuralist view of identity as drawn from a number of socio-political-organisational  
12  
13 discourses, studies have explored how leadership development programmes can act as  
14  
15 important forums for re-constructing the identifications of participants in more collective  
16  
17 terms. Although leadership development programmes can act as sites for control and  
18  
19 regulation of identity (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014), they can also act as important forums  
20  
21 for resistance and the crafting of new identifications, places where “identities inevitably  
22  
23 compete, struggle, contradict, lure, seduce, repel, dominate, and surprise” (Carroll and Levy,  
24  
25 2010: 225). These studies approach the very gaps and cracks in dominant perceptions of  
26  
27 leadership (and organisation more generally) as opportunities for re-framing work, for  
28  
29 seeing beyond socially conditioned possibilities (Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Stead and  
30  
31 Elliott, 2012). The individual leader in leadership development is thus cast as someone who  
32  
33 is positioned within, and is a shaper of, a more collective process of leadership.  
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36  
37 Raelin (2011: 196), has explicitly used the signifier ‘democracy’ to describe the development  
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39 of collective processes of leadership, which he refers to as ‘leaderful’ action and work. The  
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41 benefits of foregrounding democracy, for Raelin, are that it can generate “free expression  
42  
43 and shared engagement”. Leadership development work, for Raelin, is about re-envisaging  
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45 leadership as a process, one which is made ‘leaderful’ through the democratic participation  
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47 of a range of actors. This body of leadership development research approaches facilitator  
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49 and participant work within development programmes as grappling with and mastering the  
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3 ability to re-formulate discursive constructions: of processes and identities. For example,  
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6 Schedlitzki et al (2015) report on development work where the practice of deconstructing  
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8 and 're-storying' Greek myth acts as a means for critical reflection on the part of  
9  
10 participants. Smolović Jones et al (2015) likewise explore the possibilities of re-shaping and  
11  
12 experimenting with narratives of agency and of collaboration within a development setting.  
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14  
15 Nicholson and Carroll (2013) describe such construction work in more stringent terms, as  
16  
17 'undoing' identities alongside and perhaps even prior to the building of re-worked,  
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19 collaborative leadership narratives.  
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22 Our intention in what follows is to build on research that has sought to interpret the person  
23  
24 and processes of leadership development as discursive constructions and accomplishments.  
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26 Specifically, we seek to add value by outlining how identities and processes within  
27  
28 leadership development can be re-interpreted as fluid, developing and democratized  
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30 contingent accomplishments.  
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### 33 34 35 36 **Leadership development and democracy from a post-foundational perspective**

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39 Post-foundationalism encompasses theorists such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Alain  
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41 Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, a group with theoretical divergences but also some significant  
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43 overlaps (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Marchart, 2007). As a basis for this paper, we draw  
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45 mostly from the work of Ernesto Laclau, supplementing where relevant.  
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49 We acknowledge that post-foundational theory can be experienced as challenging but  
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51 maintain that much of the difficulty can be pinpointed at the initial entry point and that  
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53 once certain introductory assumptions are accepted the area becomes more rewarding. An  
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55 alternative way of stating this is that post-foundationalism is frequently counter-intuitive,  
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3 even playful, as it prods at and toys with some strongly-held commitments across research  
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5 paradigms. Bearing some of the introductory challenges that seem to accompany post-  
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7 foundationalism in mind, we recommend entering the paper by thinking through three  
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9 levels of abstraction.  
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13 The first is that post-foundationalism, and our paper, is concerned with the ontological  
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15 (Kelly, 2014; Marchart, 2007), in particular a radical questioning of the ontological ground  
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17 upon which notions of leadership can be said to exist and therefore developed from. As we  
18  
19 proceed, and in common with practice-based views of leadership (e.g. Raelin, 2011), we  
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21 adopt the position that leadership and its development only exist through the words and  
22  
23 actions of people: through practice. Approaching leadership development as a matter of  
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25 ontology, we hold that something valuable, energetic and contested can be brought to life  
26  
27 through an ever-present and evolving practice between people. The ontological, for  
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29 Marchart (2007: 2) is also the realm of the 'political', with political activity standing for  
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31 contestation of the very ontological ground of what can be regarded as 'real', whereas  
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33 'politics' is a term reserved by post-foundationalists for formal institutions and processes.  
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35 Realities of what we know and experience as leadership, we argue, are created, shaped and  
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37 contested through regimes of practice and discourse. This is not to suggest that leadership  
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39 may be interpreted differently depending on one's perspective (an epistemological view)  
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41 but to state that distinctive, if sometimes overlapping, *realities* of leadership are generated  
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43 through the language we adopt and the practices we participate in.  
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51 The second level of abstraction concerns the fragility of the ontological itself. Adopting a  
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53 post-foundational perspective means we assume the regimes of language used to enact  
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55 leadership development realities themselves should be interpreted and worked with as  
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3 without a final, stabilizing ground (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Marchart, 2007):  
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5 leadership is not something that can “be encountered *directly* through the senses or  
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7 through language” (italics added) (Kelly, 2014: 912). Our symbolic repertoire is always in  
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9 some way lacking against the richness of human experience: it is “contingent all the way  
10  
11 down” (Cederström and Spicer, 2014: 179). As we can only experience and know the world  
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13 via (always contingent) language, human interaction and construction is comprised of  
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15 continuous but partial attempts to fix meaning via numerous identifications.  
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19 The third level builds on the partiality and contingency of language by suggesting that it is  
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21 precisely the inadequacies and flaws of language that enable an analysis of phenomena,  
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23 such as leadership development, as always in a process of becoming, of developing. Our  
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25 post-foundational perspective interprets the movement of leadership development (and  
26  
27 hence its possibilities and energy) as made possible, if counter-intuitively, by the gap  
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29 between the wager of the contingent construction (e.g. forms of leadership claimed as  
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31 particularly effective) and the impossibility of a fully satisfactory reality (forms of leadership  
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33 experienced as having absolutely worked).  
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40 In order to outline a praxis framework it is necessary to introduce concepts that capture the  
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42 dynamics through which this ontological positioning is actualised and contested. In this  
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44 respect we turn to the work of Laclau and his account of hegemony, empty-floating  
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46 signifiers and identification.  
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49  
50 Hegemony, in the work of Laclau (1990, 2000, 2007), offers a way of thinking about  
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52 collective development work, as it evokes the presence of force and power but also  
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54 foregrounds a view of power blocs, consisting of a range of groups and actors, as temporary  
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56 and contested, enacting meaning through discourse. There is a certain pragmatism to  
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3 Laclau's theorising, with its recognition that any coalition seeking to establish broader  
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5 hegemonic acceptance for its activity will necessarily emphasise some causes and discourses  
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7 more than others; or, some particular group or discourse will always find itself in a position  
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9 of needing to represent causes or groups outside its narrower area of interest (Laclau,  
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11 2007). However, this position of a specific discourse representing the larger cause is  
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13 intrinsically flawed – a hegemonic position cannot fully capture that which is ontologically  
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15 absent.  
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20 The second concept is the 'empty-floating signifier' (Laclau, 2007). Empty signifiers are  
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22 words that not only lack intrinsic content but also act as nodes that attract discursive  
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24 investment from a range of sources. 'Floating' refers to the notion that certain signifiers  
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26 within language can be contested across contexts, an "overflowing of meaning" (Laclau,  
27  
28 2014: 20) resulting in different chains of meaning competing to ground the signifier. Empty-  
29  
30 floating signifiers play an important role in post-foundational theory as they act as nodal  
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32 points around which debate, contestation, deliberation and investment take place (Laclau,  
33  
34 1996). For Laclau (1996: 15; 2014: 20), democracy is the empty-floating signifier *par*  
35  
36 *excellence*; the concept itself is not only one that attracts significant investment from people  
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38 and groups (Ford et al, 2008; Kelly, 2014) but is also premised on contestation of meaning,  
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40 acceptance that people choose between a range of flawed choices. Likewise, the meaning of  
41  
42 leadership is not only often vague (empty), it also floats, for example between chains of  
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44 association related to positivism, heroism, constructivism, and so on. Both democracy and  
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46 leadership act as nodes, connecting a range of other associations.  
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52 The third concept is identification. As the symbolic fabric against and with which we  
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54 construct our identities is contingent, (full) identity is regarded as impossible by post-  
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3 foundationalists. In its stead are temporary and contingent acts of identification, acts which  
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5 in themselves shift the hegemonic meaning attached to a group's cause and identity (Laclau  
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7 and Zac, 1994). In the work of Ford et al (2008), identity and the status of leadership as an  
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9 empty-floating signifier coalesce. It is the empty status of leadership, the authors state, that  
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11 allows for identifications that maintain the "great libidinal energy" (Ford et al, 2008: 76) of  
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13 previous experiences with the signifier but also contestation around its performance in a  
14  
15 number of settings, including leadership development.  
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19 Together these concepts offer the possibility of an account of leadership development that  
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21 emphasizes fluidity and contestation. Contestation here is ontological and political, at the  
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23 ground of what is to be regarded as real (Marchart, 2007: 2). Fluidity is central to a post-  
24  
25 foundational approach; dynamic processes of collective work (as hegemony) and identity (as  
26  
27 identifications) stand in for the absent ontological ground. From this perspective, leadership  
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29 development should be approached as inseparable from the notion of enacting leadership,  
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31 as to enact is to develop, to re-work and re-formulate the contingent ontological terrain  
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33 upon which leadership is brought to life (Marchart, 2007).  
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### 43 **Leadership development praxis and our illustrative example**

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45 The praxis framework that follows flows from this post-foundational perspective applied to  
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47 the area of leadership development. Of particular relevance is the reinterpretation of key  
48  
49 concepts from the leadership development literature, of the person and process of  
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51 leadership, as contingent discourse, always in the process of developing. We acknowledge,  
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53 however, that our view of what it means to be part of a meaningful leadership development  
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3 intervention is coloured by experience of practice. Drawing from Laclau (2000: 44-89), we  
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5 view our theorising as the positing of contingent and universal positions that necessarily fall  
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7 short of capturing every particularity of extant practice.  
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10 We therefore approach developing theory as inseparable from developing leadership  
11  
12 development practice: they are co-constitutive; both engage in a process of trying to ground  
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14 what it means to develop leadership. Hence our preference for the term praxis, by which we  
15  
16 hope to evoke this notion of a contingent theory of leadership development: of a  
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18 developing process of attempted groundings. Ultimately, it is a theoretical framework that  
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20 can only exist and be manifested within the contextual experiences of others (practitioner  
21  
22 and academic colleagues).  
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28 We draw on an illustrative example in order to provide relevant practice insight and  
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30 appropriate context to the theoretically-informed contributions made, to assist the reader  
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32 in understanding how this thinking can be put to work but acknowledge the particularity of  
33  
34 the example and the work it can do for our theorizing. PWG (an anonymised name) is an  
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36 umbrella group of 26 women's organisations, representing ethnic and political groups within  
37  
38 a nation under military dictatorial rule, drawing on participants from a range of classes and  
39  
40 professional backgrounds. The gender dimensions of leadership development are not a  
41  
42 focus of this paper and the illustrative example should be considered on the same footing as  
43  
44 cognate studies that more often than not offer male-dominated groups as the basis of  
45  
46 theory development. That said, we also hold gender as an under-explored but important  
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48 aspect of leadership development (and post-foundationalism) that merits significantly more  
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50 scholarly attention. Emphasising the diversity of groups represented in our illustrative  
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3 example is important, however, as this country has experienced tension and violence in the  
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5 past between elements of the Indigenous population and other groups.  
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9 Stretching back to days of colonial rule, non-indigenous groups were brought to the country  
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11 as guest workers but many remained and now comprise a substantial minority of the overall  
12  
13 population. Significant issues exist concerning the under-privileged status of these  
14  
15 minorities in comparison to the Indigenous population, particularly with regards land  
16  
17 ownership rights. Yet these minorities might also serve as a reminder that this was a country  
18  
19 occupied by colonisers. These points of antagonism have informed a series of unstable  
20  
21 elected governments and military coups. Overlaying ethnic tensions in the country is a sense  
22  
23 that, even more than most societies, this country displays a high degree of patriarchy,  
24  
25 embedded in formal state structures (government, police and military) but also within its  
26  
27 diverse range of intangible cultural practices (Underhill-Sem, 2010). The stated purpose of  
28  
29 PWG is to develop solidarity between the diverse women represented in order to: generate  
30  
31 more open discussion about the role and rights of women; enact change in the broader  
32  
33 social and formal structures of society; and, finally and most tangibly, to increase the  
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35 number of women elected in various tiers of government and working as professional  
36  
37 officials in government. Leadership and democracy are two dominant signifiers adopted by  
38  
39 PWG for its work. PWG engages in energetic online discussion forums. It holds regular face-  
40  
41 to-face workshop events where issues considered important for women are discussed and  
42  
43 debated. Furthermore, it seeks to contribute to formal government policy consultation. Our  
44  
45 involvement with PWG was largely focused on the work conducted by the group in the 18  
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47 months prior to a national election that was promised as a transition out of military rule.  
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56 During this time, the lead author observed the group and remained in contact with heads of  
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3 the organisations represented, and other actors, via email and social media. In addition, she  
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5 participated in two online workshops hosted by the group. This researcher also spent two  
6  
7 weeks with the women, observing their daily work and meetings, as well as interviewing 20  
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9 group participants. The extracts used below are taken from her programme of interviews.  
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### 16 **Outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development**

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18 In rejecting final ontological grounding, post-foundationalism offers contingency a  
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20 constitutive role whilst acknowledging that these discursive incursions of leadership signal a  
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22 defining negativity. This constitutive negativity is provocative, interleaving fluidity and  
23  
24 contestation at the heart of leadership development practice. In describing our approach we  
25  
26 present four dimensions (broadly characterised as leader, process, direction and the  
27  
28 unknown) within which this contingency is expressed, realised and contested. These  
29  
30 dimensions are not a definitive model of leadership development (this runs counter to the  
31  
32 central tenets of our approach). They are inter-related but distinctive facets that both  
33  
34 express and disrupt important signifiers held as significant within leadership studies (see  
35  
36 Grint, 2005b). What it means to be a leader ('leader' and 'direction' dimensions) and  
37  
38 processual accounts of leadership ('process' and 'direction' dimensions) are connected from  
39  
40 a post-foundational perspective because they are signifiers and debates that have grown  
41  
42 around the empty-floating signifier 'leadership'. In more plain language, we approach these  
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44 dimensions as connected because these are discursive connections to leadership already  
45  
46 made by both practitioners and scholars. From a discourse perspective we see these  
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48 dimensions as intrinsically linked rather than discrete bounded entities; for example,  
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50 constructions of leadership as person and process are held in our framework as discursively  
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co-dependent, connected via their mutual relationship to a complex ‘whole’ – a whole that, by definition is contingent and fluid, much like the leadership literature itself. In the following sections we present our framework by discussing each dimension in turn. For each dimension we describe its relation to our theorising. We then develop these points in the context of our illustrative example, concluding with more general commentary on how such insights could be leveraged by development practitioners. A summary of the framework is offered in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the praxis framework.

Dimension	Theme	Implications for leadership development practice
Person - Democratizing the leader: foregrounding sliding subject-signification	Leaders as contingent signifiers in respect of both reference and centrality	Enabling opportunities for individuals to experiment with new leader identities  Identifying and exploring people’s shifts in leader-discourse  Exploring individual’s attachments to leader identities through discursive associations
Process - Radicalizing the democratic process: approaching conflict as a point of strength	Agonism and the symbolic order of democratic leadership	Generating processes of agonistic engagement to explore new possibilities for practice  Enabling constructive disruption at appropriate points  Democratising development practice
Direction -Grappling with targeted, reflexive acts of symbolic violence	Symbolic violence of language and its disruption	Democratising symbolic violence as a means to challenge the prevailing symbolic order of directive leadership  Enabling the reflexive interrogation of directive leadership through agonistic practice
The unknown - Limits of democratic leadership development: acknowledging and interpreting eruptions of the Real	The limits of any symbolic order and the incursion of the unknown	Exploring disturbances and uncertainty (the unknown) as critical incursions into extant symbolic order of leadership  Exploring irruptions of the Real to expose and test limits of discursive constructions

### Person - Democratizing the leader

Approaching leadership in terms of the framing of symbolic meaning enjoys a rich scholarly history (e.g. Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Grint, 2001). Smircich and Morgan (1982) approach leadership as a phenomenon that is symbolically enacted and disputed between the “moving figure” of the leader (where the constitution of this symbolic figure includes the “flow of actions and utterances” surrounding it) and a “moving ground” of “actions, utterances, and general flow of experience that constitutes the situation” (p.261). Organisational artefacts, activity and people are thus thought of as fluid symbols around which meaning is generated.

Building on this perspective, we seek to interpret ‘leaders’ (if this is how they identify) within a praxis of democratic leadership development as *contingent* discursive signifiers. This position accepts the symbolic value attached to individuals within leadership work (see Gabriel, 1997) but also approaches such individuals as subjects-in-the-making; ones that can only be known through contingent discourse. Affirmatively, their identities can be recrafted in experimental and liberating ways, while acknowledging that a ‘full identity’ will never be accomplished. This approach aims to democratize the signifier of leader-subject: the notion that the very meaning and identity of leader can be made more transparent and open to contestation. Far from interpreting shifting and flexibility as weakness, our account sees slipperiness in the signifiers drawn upon by organisational actors as a point of strength for further analysis (in the case of researchers) and development (in the case of practitioners). This is so because pinpointing a sliding of meaning in discourse can signal important movement and renegotiation – i.e. that something has developed.



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2  
3 Adopting this position does not mean reducing leadership to individual leader-subject.  
4  
5 Rather, it means interpreting leaders as signifiers that can come to represent points of  
6  
7 symbolic significance for a group. These leader-symbols can come to represent the “absent  
8  
9 fullness” of a group (Laclau, 2014: 121), indicative of the horizon of ambition towards which  
10  
11 a group works. Leaders-as-symbols are viewed as actively constructing/constructed  
12  
13 meaning-makers – their naming produces real work and consequences.  
14  
15

16  
17  
18 In the example of PWG, the dominant discourse concerning the identifications of the  
19  
20 Indigenous population of the country is often portrayed as rigid: a collection of people  
21  
22 guarding their cultural and political rights. In our research we encountered Lana, who was  
23  
24 regarded by other members of the group as a bastion of indigenous traditions. Early  
25  
26 accounts of her participation were of a dominant figure lecturing others about their roles in  
27  
28 society and the political process. Yet this position shifted to one offering more open and  
29  
30 generative possibilities:  
31  
32

33  
34  
35 I am an indigenous woman and I believe in our indigenous rights and we are part of  
36  
37 the first people of this country. We are the first national people and we have rights  
38  
39 to this country and everything else after that. We [her organisation] are a separate  
40  
41 national entity and we – indigenous women – we are ethnic! Without us there would  
42  
43 be very little of PWG. Young women in PWG continue to raise questions that  
44  
45 challenge us, to say: “what do you do in respect of young women?” So I have to tell  
46  
47 them, “I didn’t always look like this...You know when I joined [organisation] I looked  
48  
49 exactly like you but it wasn’t just this organisation that I was a member of and these  
50  
51 are the groups you need to join first in order to change things. You need  
52  
53 experience!” You need to be involved and we can help you to do that.  
54  
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3 Women are becoming enlightened. It's the knowledge and learning happening that is  
4  
5 the most important contribution. The latest workshop we did I was surprised at the  
6  
7 number of women who attended and a lot of them were civil servants, teachers,  
8  
9 nurses, civil servants who didn't know the structure of the state. So you have to help  
10  
11 them, guide them. To share experiences, you see?  
12  
13

14  
15 A detached researcher with little prior knowledge of the context could read all kinds of  
16  
17 domineering symbolism into this text: here is a woman telling others what to do, how to  
18  
19 conduct themselves, how to manoeuvre their way through but not cause too many  
20  
21 problems for the dominant power. Yet read as a series of contiguous, shifting signifiers in a  
22  
23 broader chain of signification, one notes a distinct flexibility of underlying constructions.  
24  
25

26  
27 The signifier 'Lana' can be interpreted as sitting within, even anchoring, a broader chain of  
28  
29 sliding signification. The extract begins with Lana's assertion of belonging to a strong  
30  
31 heritage, which is constructed in totalising terms ("we have rights to this country and  
32  
33 everything after that"). Yet as this extract proceeds, her identification as leader shifts,  
34  
35 adopting the identity of a guide, teacher and mentor. Guides may still be viewed as holding  
36  
37 a position of privilege, in terms of knowledge, experiences and skills to be shared, yet their  
38  
39 role can also be conceptualised as facilitating the experiences of others. The facilitating  
40  
41 identification unfolds throughout a fictitious conversation Lana holds with "young women",  
42  
43 which does bear traces of a certain exasperation – they are impatient, jump too quickly to  
44  
45 accusations of prejudice in the elder, Indigenous population. Yet by the end of the extract,  
46  
47 Lana's dominant identification has slid from privileged commander to a developer of others.  
48  
49 Naming does active work. Adopting an identification of leader-as-guide offers a different set  
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1  
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3 of relationships and conversations than that of a leader-as-conserver/protector: one that  
4  
5 indicates a horizon of developing the potential of others.  
6  
7

8  
9 In development work it is possible to interpret a 'leader' as an important discursive nodal  
10  
11 point. In such circumstances one might witness a democratizing of the leader-subject as  
12  
13 signifier. In other cases, it might be that the leader-subject is relegated in discourse to a less  
14  
15 central position, to one signifier amongst many others, with an alternative nodal point  
16  
17 offered more prominence – 'collaboration' or 'equality', for example. Paying attention to  
18  
19 discursive sliding might provide an opportunity for discovering openings in conversations,  
20  
21 areas for developing lines of thought. Noticing such shifts might enable groups to explore  
22  
23 how leader-identifications adopted signal the absent fullness towards which the group  
24  
25 aspires to move.  
26  
27  
28

29  
30 In practice, working with leaders as embedded in contingent discourse holds possibilities  
31  
32 and challenges. Hawkins and Edwards (2015) describe a key task of leadership learning as  
33  
34 supporting students and participants as they travel between identities, as they sit "on a  
35  
36 threshold between one identity and another", in a "liminal" space (p.25). Certain people  
37  
38 may hold strong associations with what it means to be a leader. This may especially be the  
39  
40 case within organisations or groups whose successes and group identity seem almost  
41  
42 inseparable from the personality of a leader. Others may find the notion of stepping into a  
43  
44 leader identity intimidating or even inappropriate. We are not suggesting that  
45  
46 democratizing the leader in this sense means forcing individuals into accepting majority  
47  
48 opinion. By contrast, democratizing the leader-symbol may mean offering opportunities to  
49  
50 experiment with adopting new identities in the workplace and/or development session,  
51  
52 inviting them to try a counter-normative identity and to reflect upon the resulting responses  
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3 from colleagues and results at work. A developer may also pay heed to the movement of  
4  
5 leader-identity in discourse throughout the duration of a development programme, drawing  
6  
7 on such evidence as a means of taking stock or generating further conversations with  
8  
9 participants: Was this shift intentional? Are there aspects of a previous identity you would  
10  
11 like to revisit?  
12  
13

14  
15 Inviting development participants to experience being a leader-in-discourse might also help  
16  
17 make more explicit the connection between being-a-leader and the process of leadership:  
18  
19 that both seem interdependent, contested and incomplete. Viewing being-a-leader as being  
20  
21 enmeshed in a democratizing process of contested meaning might make it possible for  
22  
23 participants to see which aspects of an identity they would like to fight for and how this may  
24  
25 be approached through language and discursive associations.  
26  
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### 33 **Process - democracy as radicalizing development**

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35  
36 Democratic leadership development can be thought of as a task of facilitating a process of  
37  
38 struggle for purpose (Rhodes and Harvey, 2012: 52). We treat democratic engagement as a  
39  
40 means of conceptualising the struggle inherent between individuals, groups and discourses  
41  
42 within processes of development. Rather than focusing on consensus, accounts of radical  
43  
44 democracy underline dissent as the driving force for healthy democratic practice, a  
45  
46 *perpetuum mobile* of the political (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe 2009). We live in a  
47  
48 'pluriverse' of identifications rather than a universe of fixed identities (Mouffe, 2009);  
49  
50  
51 clashes between opinions, classes, genders, races, and other identifications are inevitable. A  
52  
53 praxis of democratic leadership takes this insight a step further through providing a  
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1  
2  
3 framework whereby the point of conflict can be identified as *the very limit of people's*  
4  
5 *symbolic constructions and identifications*. We might theorise one aspect of facilitating  
6  
7 leadership development as supporting and assisting the transition of people to the point of  
8  
9 symbolic 'agonism', to "the limit of all objectivity" (Laclau, 1990: 17) and the creation of  
10  
11 forums through which such processes might take place.  
12  
13

14  
15 In the case of PWG, agonistic dialogue was posited as core to the healthy functioning, even  
16  
17 solidarity, of the group. Practicing an agonistic form of democracy was regarded as standing  
18  
19 in contrast to the high-handed practices of the government. This was starkly delineated by  
20  
21 many participants, for example Selina:  
22  
23

24  
25 I think it is important to have a messy...PWG is...messy. It is messy. It is emotional. It  
26  
27 is like...You know when you see cartoons and people are in a scuffle? There is always  
28  
29 dust around and you see these hands flying and PWG is kind of like that. It's like that.  
30  
31

32  
33 What we have done is created this democratic space within a non-democratic  
34  
35 context. We have pushed and pushed and pushed and negotiated and wrangled with  
36  
37 each other and created this democratic space and that's messy and that's exactly  
38  
39 what democracy is. It's very messy, it's competing interests, it's diverse voices, it's all  
40  
41 of that messiness which authoritarian regimes can't stand but which is what  
42  
43 democracy is. I mean, you know, just because you feel you are right it doesn't  
44  
45 necessarily mean that you're going to win the day. But hopefully we created the  
46  
47 space where that is ok. We just keep pushing and negotiating and talking and I think  
48  
49 that's what is most exciting about it. The creation of this space, despite the odds  
50  
51 against it and then...that gives us the...You know? The legitimacy in this platform to  
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3 speak about women's issues, women in politics...We have this mandate, we have this  
4  
5  
6 group of leaders.  
7

8 Selina provides an almost textbook description of an agonistic process. There are limits  
9  
10 reached in her discursive constructions throughout, via pronounced hesitations and pauses.  
11  
12 The "messiness" of a democratic process is placed in a signifying chain with emotion. Her  
13  
14 stream of consciousness appears to be triggered by this word "messy": indicative of the fact  
15  
16 that the very definition and principle of democracy means accepting symbolic contingency.  
17  
18 The hesitation before and after she enunciates this word 'messy' indicates that she is  
19  
20 scanning her discursive repertoire to discover a signifier that will provide a satisfactory  
21  
22 explanation for the democratic process she has experienced.  
23  
24  
25  
26

27  
28 Repetition of derivatives of the word 'push' indicate that she, and her group, are  
29  
30 continuously exploring the limits of democratic practice and identity – and it sounds  
31  
32 exhausting, especially when evoked via the image of a cartoon skirmish. This radical  
33  
34 contingency is framed in liberating, excited language. A further hesitancy is notable in  
35  
36 Selina's talk when she reflects on the "legitimacy" of PWG. Her confidence in the robustness  
37  
38 of her bold chain of signification appears to gain momentum as she identifies herself and  
39  
40 her peers as "leaders" – leaders sanctioned to be so symbolically via a "mandate", a  
41  
42 mandate gained through participation in ongoing agonistic engagement. Process and person  
43  
44 in leadership are joined at the hip via the contested exploration of discursive limits. Viewing  
45  
46 conflict in democratic practice as a source of strength for developing democratic leadership  
47  
48 can be seen in itself as providing a form of what Raelin (2011) refers to as 'leaderful'  
49  
50 practice – people are pushed to (exhilarating) limits and these are drawn upon as areas for  
51  
52 further growth and development.  
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3 Within leadership development sessions there is a balance to be struck. As facilitators of  
4  
5 leadership development, we have experience of discussions that digress and run out of  
6  
7 control, losing coherence and purpose. Facilitating development can be seen as preserving a  
8  
9 balance between maintaining structure and allowing for constructive disruption from  
10  
11 participants, the “mess”, in the words of Selina. “Mess” can generate discovery, unexpected  
12  
13 insights and even moments of revelation, as groups and individuals come to see themselves  
14  
15 or problems in a new light. “Mess” can also lead to an erosion of confidence in the  
16  
17 facilitation team, of whom a degree of content and process expertise is expected (Perriton,  
18  
19 2007). Approaching development group discussions as moments of agonistic engagement  
20  
21 can be a useful way of establishing expectations within programmes, of establishing norms  
22  
23 and introducing participants to the idea that some sessions will be allowed to travel if the  
24  
25 agonistic process appears to be generating new possibilities. Participants in a democratic  
26  
27 process should be able to have a say in whether to stick with a line of enquiry or move on.  
28  
29 Finally, agonistic practice seems like tiring work and it is unrealistic to expect participants to  
30  
31 be continuously engaged in such debates. In practice, drawing on agonistic confrontation  
32  
33 within development programmes may be a matter of ‘adaptive’ facilitation (Heifetz, 1994;  
34  
35 Smolović Jones et al, 2015), of judging the readiness at a particular time of a group to  
36  
37 experience moments of intensity, discomfort and even insecurity.  
38  
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#### 49 **Direction - Grappling with targeted, reflexive acts of symbolic violence**

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51  
52 Viewing leadership as an act of symbolic violence is rooted in the underlying ontological  
53  
54 stance of post-foundationalism that the imposition of language upon a subject is in itself an  
55  
56 inherently violent act. None of us choose to enter language; it is an imposition, and  
57  
58  
59  
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1  
2  
3 symbolization similarly imposes its simplified orders over complexity (Žižek, 2008). This may  
4  
5 explain why leadership, in populist-cultural terms, is celebrated for simplifying and clarifying,  
6  
7 either through directive or emotive masculine language, or both (Oseen, 1997). As subjects,  
8  
9 we are integrated into a symbolic fabric that is constructed in patriarchal ways – a masculine  
10  
11 universe of symbolic norms that privileges a certain autonomy and rational order (Fotaki  
12  
13 and Harding, 2013; McCabe and Knights, 2015). Against this Laclau seeks to redefine what it  
14  
15 means to work within the (necessarily) violent impositions of language. As noted above,  
16  
17 inherent in his work is this notion that in any hegemonic formation, one particular discursive  
18  
19 position will always adopt a more prominent role than others (Laclau, 2014). There is a  
20  
21 certain symbolic violence, however, in this stance, with other positions necessarily emerging  
22  
23 in diminished discursive form.  
24  
25  
26  
27

28  
29 Leadership, as a construct, seems to imply a necessity of one particular discourse, or  
30  
31 collection of discourses, enjoying a position of prominence, of leading other discursive  
32  
33 positions. Vince and Mazen (2014) note that such symbolic violence in leadership often  
34  
35 comes cloaked in 'innocent', even romanticised language, and yet the cloak of innocence  
36  
37 does not obviate the violence of staking a leadership position in discourse. Nor within  
38  
39 collective forms of leadership development does this innocence negate the inherent  
40  
41 violence of infringing upon previously held 'sacred' identifications rooted in more passive  
42  
43 hierarchical relations (Grint, 2010).  
44  
45  
46  
47

48  
49 Our framework suggests that democratic leadership development will require a degree of  
50  
51 shaping, of provoking and of excluding – of directive (rather than domineering) discursive  
52  
53 work. The tension at play is that such direction may slip into norms of symbolic domination.  
54  
55 Our intention is not to somehow solve this dilemma but to highlight the immanent challenge  
56  
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1  
2  
3 of re-enacting oppressive leadership practices (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). By situating the  
4  
5 directive dimension of leadership in relation to the contingency of the symbolic itself, we  
6  
7 can be better positioned to encourage reflexive practice concerning the type of symbolic  
8  
9 direction a group believes will best unite and stretch its horizons.  
10  
11

12  
13 In the case of PWG, the role of directing was adopted by a few individuals, people who  
14  
15 sought to unite the group around the signifier of 'women'. To some this category may seem  
16  
17 benign, but in the context of PWG, placing 'woman' ahead of 'ethnicity' is a bold discursive  
18  
19 move. One of these leaders, Ellen, offered the following explanation for her leadership  
20  
21 work:  
22  
23

24  
25 It is important to have, I think it is important to have someone who can constantly  
26  
27 push the line, who knows what the goal is: "Ok, cut out the white noise. Focus.  
28  
29 Focus. This is what we have in common. This is what we said we were going to do.  
30  
31 This is what we stand for, what we're about. Let's not worry about all this other  
32  
33 stuff. We can deal with it later. Let's try to focus on this. Stop squabbling like kids."  
34  
35

36  
37 So I am always trying to play that...trying to translate, because I think a lot of the  
38  
39 discussion gets lost in translation. Because of culture, a person might misinterpret it  
40  
41 but they don't mean to be offensive, they mean it in another way, you know what I  
42  
43 mean? So I am constantly trying to negotiate that and extend it. We are all here for  
44  
45 the same reason, for women. It comes back to connecting shared experiences.  
46  
47

48  
49 Some of us have to take the leadership role in doing that and trying to unpack,  
50  
51 unpack a lot of these things. And it doesn't happen overnight. It is a process that is  
52  
53 going to take a long time...I try to make it real for them. It is not some fluffy thing.  
54  
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3 And, you know, a lot of people actually feel that I can be quite a bully...Because I was  
4  
5 quite strong about these things. I was like "You have to understand". Yeah because I  
6  
7 am a very, quite focused person.  
8  
9

10  
11 Ellen's extract brings to the fore what she constructs as a "leadership" role within a  
12  
13 developmental frame. Read in one way, this participant's focus upon placing boundaries  
14  
15 around discussions, around the agonistic explorations of participants, whose utterances are  
16  
17 characterised as at times resembling "white noise". Her language is declaratory ("this *is*")  
18  
19 and is peppered with staccato commands – "Focus". But what is it that Ellen is attempting to  
20  
21 focus the rest of the group upon? The answer to this question is hinted at in the extract but  
22  
23 elaborated upon elsewhere in her talk. Ellen believes she is speaking on behalf of a unifying  
24  
25 cause – that of women's rights, and specifically, a woman's right to be a full participating  
26  
27 member of society. For Ellen this hegemonic position acts as a kind of nodal point informing  
28  
29 the rest of her textual work. Other positions are acknowledged but are subsumed within an  
30  
31 admittedly broad focus upon women's rights.  
32  
33  
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37  
38 In practice terms, this is undoubtedly a subtle, even precarious, balancing act. A contrariness  
39  
40 is offered by this dimension within our framework. On the one hand a certain pragmatism is  
41  
42 involved in recognising the symbolic as violent in and of itself, and of the act of directing via  
43  
44 symbolism as perhaps more symbolically violent than alternative organisational constructs.  
45  
46 Viewing directive 'leadership' as one dimension amongst others within a development  
47  
48 framework, however, points to a notion of a more reflexive and therefore accountable form  
49  
50 of symbolic violence.  
51  
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53  
54  
55 Transparent and accountable intentionality are important when thinking about the role of  
56  
57 symbolic violence in development interventions. A degree of direction-setting appears  
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59  
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1  
2  
3 necessary within leadership development and the notion of leadership, no matter its  
4  
5 incarnation, evokes direction and purpose. Such direction-setting need not be reduced to  
6  
7 the symbolic violence of imposition but can be incorporated within a broader agonistic  
8  
9 frame. In metaphorical terms, perhaps such symbolic violence may be thought of as akin to  
10  
11 curating a provocative art exhibition, holding loose thematic boundaries with the intention  
12  
13 of discovering new possibilities and encouraging their exploration. Thought of in terms of  
14  
15 leadership development, a facilitator might treat symbolic violence as the grounding of  
16  
17 nodal points, of how much one is prepared to let a signifier slide before it starts to lose  
18  
19 meaning. For Ellen, the boundaries not to be crossed were notions of feminist solidarity; in  
20  
21 other contexts such boundaries will manifest differently. The danger here, of course, is that  
22  
23 groups may miss important external insights and possibilities if the discursive boundaries  
24  
25 are set too rigidly.  
26  
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35 **The unknown - Limits of democratic leadership development: acknowledging and**  
36  
37 **interpreting eruptions of the Real**  
38  
39

40 This dimension shifts perspective to explicitly focus on the gaps and lacks implied by  
41  
42 contingency. In doing so we adopt the terminology of the 'Real' (Cederström and Spicer,  
43  
44 2014; Laclau, 2014). The Real from a post-foundationalist perspective indicates points at  
45  
46 which incursions from a radical outside of the knowable symbolic system appear. These are  
47  
48 points where the discursive and symbolic repertoire of groups fails to capture the  
49  
50 experiences or ambitions of the group; it becomes insufficient. The Real inhabits language as  
51  
52 a persistent and even constitutive absence/presence, an intrinsic "moment of antagonism"  
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3 (Laclau, 2000: 77) in any discourse. The Real, for Laclau, is what prevents language from  
4  
5 being fully representative, from discourse completing itself.  
6  
7

8  
9 Of particular interest to us is analysing points at which the 'Real' may become visible in  
10  
11 language, via a "positivization of the negative" (Laclau, 2000: 185). These are points of  
12  
13 negativity, points where language falls short of expressive ambition, such as pauses in talk,  
14  
15 half-finished sentences, and so on (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002); or such negativity comes  
16  
17 packaged in the form of the construction of a "partial object", which comes to represent "a  
18  
19 fullness which always evades us" (Laclau, 2005: 116) - a Real that always slips beyond our  
20  
21 lexical repertoire. By contrast with Lacanian accounts that stress the role of desire in the  
22  
23 practice of leadership (Driver, 2013), Laclau's emphasis is more formal; concerned with the  
24  
25 political role of this unknown Real in generating and disrupting alliances. Such a political  
26  
27 function of the unknown in leadership might be more akin to ground touched upon by Grint  
28  
29 (2005a) and Heifetz (1994) in the leadership literature when they posit 'wicked questions'  
30  
31 and 'heat' respectively as means for people in a process of leadership to open their work up  
32  
33 to new possibilities in tackling intractable problems – the unknown, in other words.  
34  
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40 Acknowledging and allowing space for interruptions of the Real is therefore an important  
41  
42 dimension of democratic leadership development praxis, for staying reflexively accountable  
43  
44 to what lies outside a group's regimes of discourse. To illustrate this point we draw on the  
45  
46 following narrative from Filo. The extract follows a seemingly innocuous line of questioning  
47  
48 from the interviewer, which yet seems to trigger a response of insecurity and loss on the  
49  
50 part of the interviewee:  
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3 Filo (F): Speaking as someone indigenous of this country, the level of things that  
4  
5 were going on in equality with every race was ok. I understand and I accepted that.  
6  
7  
8 But...we were not recognised as indigenous...to give us some recognition.  
9

10  
11 Researcher (R): Like special recognition?  
12

13  
14 F: Yes...no...to take us away from the main...you know, to at least recognise that  
15  
16 these are the first people of this country. Because according to this country  
17  
18 development and things like that...within the rural areas and things...to understand  
19  
20 us as a nation, or globally - they are left out.  
21  
22

23  
24 R: How, in your view, have other women failed to recognise you?  
25

26  
27 F: My expectation is, for example, women from the rural areas to be...We cannot  
28  
29 involve them, the transportation and getting them across is expensive. To go to them  
30  
31 and see how they feel, how they view things. Mostly we are meeting on the level up  
32  
33 here. A higher level.  
34  
35

36  
37 R: You feel that women from rural areas should also be included?  
38

39  
40 F: Now and then to be represented...from the rural areas...from the grassroots level.  
41  
42 There are some who are only in the rural areas, which are only indigenous. Mostly  
43  
44 that's how I feel...Only the heads are coming.  
45  
46

47  
48 R: I see, but what was the reason for not voicing it with other women?  
49

50  
51 F: I was thinking it was, like, selfish.  
52

53  
54 R: How was it selfish?  
55  
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3 F: ...Just because I don't want to be named like...They probably think otherwise, not  
4  
5 the way I think. Sometimes when you say things, get involved emotionally...it  
6  
7 touches.  
8  
9

10  
11 Filo grapples with the symbolic limits highlighted by her attachment to an indigenous  
12  
13 identification but also her identification as an active participant of PWG. We note her  
14  
15 dissatisfaction with the dominant discursive repertoire via repeated pauses and a stumbling  
16  
17 over words in contrast to the remainder of the interview, which is lucidly enunciated.  
18  
19

20  
21 The eruption here, which sabotages Filo's chain of signification, is this notion of the other as  
22  
23 represented by an imprecise category of rural indigenous women and an insistence on a  
24  
25 vague, and lost, affirmation. This other seems to be invested with a significance that  
26  
27 destabilises the consistency of other symbolic meaning. The specific identity of these actors  
28  
29 – and the source of affirmation - remain imprecise. Filo experiences her uncertainty as a  
30  
31 form of shame, that articulating her feelings within the symbolic boundaries of PWG would  
32  
33 somehow violate its symbolic norms. The significance of this subjective conflict is  
34  
35 underscored by its emotional weight – “it touches”.  
36  
37  
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40  
41 We interpret this negativity as creating space for contesting the underlying purpose of  
42  
43 leadership within democratic development work. Filo knows that something is amiss – she  
44  
45 can feel it in the gaps of her own symbolic identifications, in the Real of what is missing in  
46  
47 the constructions of the group. The universality of a certain position (universal women's  
48  
49 rights in this case) is counterposed and undermined by the particularities of subjective  
50  
51 experience, of living life as a woman from a specific time, place and culture. Noticing and  
52  
53 building upon such interruptions provides a necessary supplement to the leadership that  
54  
55 tries to restrict and direct – or even perhaps to an internally-focused group process.  
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3 From a practice perspective, identifying such moments might enable the growth and further  
4  
5 development of democratic work, generating insight into the kinds of challenges  
6  
7 organisations might seek out if they want to extend their hegemonic reach. In facilitation  
8  
9 terms, two points are relevant. Firstly, a facilitator might seek out points of uncertainty in  
10  
11 participants' speech, particularly if a pattern seems to be emerging over the duration of a  
12  
13 workshop, or longer, probing such gaps and the construction of 'partial objects' with further  
14  
15 questions to a group – noting that such practice might veer off course, into obscure  
16  
17 territory. Secondly, paying attention to the Real offers opportunities for interventions with  
18  
19 individual participants within, for example, coaching sessions, peer mentoring relationships  
20  
21 or aside conversations during a leadership development programme. The benefit of this  
22  
23 approach is to assist participants in seeing the limits of their constructions, of their  
24  
25 discursive community, even if the result of this work is that participants decide to defend  
26  
27 these boundaries more carefully, to more tightly ground and define their purpose. On the  
28  
29 other hand, we are also cognisant of the danger of creating anxious participants, eroding  
30  
31 confidence by picking over and deconstructing micro-language.  
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#### 42 **Discussion and conclusion: the practice and research-relevance of a praxis of democratic** 43 44 **leadership development** 45

46  
47 Having presented our framework, we turn to consider points of practice relevance that cut  
48  
49 across each dimension. We conclude by reflecting on some of the implications we believe  
50  
51 our framework holds for future leadership development research.  
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53

54  
55 Within a formal, largely classroom-based leadership development programme, the  
56  
57 framework can be used as a means of monitoring and normalising a particular culture of  
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2  
3 discussion, as a means of maintaining “free expression and shared engagement” (Raelin,  
4  
5 2011: 196). It could be utilised to embed democratic principles whereby the signifiers  
6  
7 adopted in discussion, particularly empty signifiers, as well as the identities represented by  
8  
9 participants, are ‘democratized’, opened up for debate and re-structuring. Approached in  
10  
11 this way, designing development workshops as democratic forums would go some way to  
12  
13 ameliorating the ethical concern that such programmes can be adopted as a means of  
14  
15 discipline, vehicles for engendering acquiescence to certain loaded signifiers that in practice  
16  
17 disguise a tranche of ideological assumptions (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014). Democratic  
18  
19 leadership development praxis can be seen as one means of building upon resistances  
20  
21 within development programmes as a basis of strength, whereby participants enact free  
22  
23 expression concerning the problems and possibilities generated through discursive  
24  
25 contestation. The ultimate strength of post-foundationalism, in highlighting the radical  
26  
27 contingency of language, is that it facilitates such collective processes. Likewise, for the  
28  
29 researcher observing development programmes, analysing chains of signification and empty  
30  
31 signifiers may act as a means of exploring points of democratic potential and points  
32  
33 whereby democratic contestation is less tolerated; thereby offering novel insights into  
34  
35 normative and ideological assumptions of organisations, participants and development  
36  
37 professionals.  
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45  
46 Our framework could be adopted as a means of informing post-event, critically reflexive  
47  
48 interventions. The fundamental notion within post-foundationalism of examining people’s  
49  
50 investments within contingent signification suggests rich possibilities for engaging in activity  
51  
52 that seeks to connect and make visible ideological and political identifications. Working with  
53  
54 the language of critical reflexivity, post-foundationalism provides a framework for analysing  
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2  
3 and rebuilding our very structures of thought, our “foundational assumptions” (Hibbert,  
4  
5 2012: 805), based upon identified fractures within these frameworks. Researchers will be  
6  
7 interested in the utility of a post-foundational framework in deepening insight into the  
8  
9 development of leadership processes and identities in a variety of settings, whereas a  
10  
11 practitioner might be more interested in how sessions can be made more energetic and  
12  
13 developmental through developing democratic practices.  
14  
15

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17  
18 Our framework also holds relevance for more dyadic settings, such as mentoring or coaching  
19  
20 sessions, where researchers or practitioners might be able to explore the movement and  
21  
22 attachment to certain empty-floating signifiers in these sessions. Potential may exist in  
23  
24 envisaging more intimate development encounters as co-constructed coaching  
25  
26 interventions, forums in which the expertise of each participant is brought to bear as a  
27  
28 means of deconstructing discursive attachments in order to build new constructions  
29  
30 (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2012). Post-foundational thought provides one way in which  
31  
32 the foundations of the relationship of power in a coaching (or teacher-student) relationship,  
33  
34 enacted via particular privileged signifiers can “become a visible part of the dialogue”  
35  
36 (Hibbert, 2012: 809).  
37  
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41  
42 This praxis framework is more readily suited to more experiential and social forms of  
43  
44 learning; a certain affinity exists between our framework and the leadership-as-practice  
45  
46 area of theory and practice (Carroll et al, 2008; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Raelin, 2011).  
47  
48

49 This approach claims that leadership should be sought in the actually-existing, “every-day”  
50  
51 and “in-the-moment” relational practices rather than in advance via a rationalist  
52  
53 construction of best-practice competencies (Carroll et al, 2008: 367). As envisaged by  
54  
55 Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) a focus on practiced relationality involves taking seriously what  
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3 is “embedded in the everyday” (p.1428), with “conversation [approached as] a process of  
4  
5 interaction and struggle” (p.1436). Our framework offers a set of analytical tools to enable  
6  
7 developers and researchers to track the attributions made in the name of certain empty-  
8  
9 floating signifiers within conversation, to observe how and where they float (who, where  
10  
11 and how people seek to contest meaning) and to analyse the range of contiguous  
12  
13 connections made via chains of signification.  
14  
15

16  
17  
18 One valuable contribution of post-foundationalism for leadership-as-practice theory exists  
19  
20 in its potential for ameliorating the dangers of researcher (or developer) attribution, of  
21  
22 attributing signifiers such as ‘leadership’ and variants thereof to interactions where  
23  
24 participants themselves do not explicitly use such language. Are these signifiers of  
25  
26 leadership and democracy freely adopted and contested by participants or are they  
27  
28 signifiers applied retrospectively by the researcher? If the latter then one could add a  
29  
30 further post-foundational twist and question whether such attributions might be examples  
31  
32 of academics exercising power over the meaning-making of research participants. A post-  
33  
34 foundational framework is valuable here in that it seeks to identify and work with the  
35  
36 signifiers *actually used* by research participants. The absence of the signifiers ‘leadership’  
37  
38 and ‘democracy’ within organisational talk does not mean that such signifiers should not be  
39  
40 adopted by the academic writer but it does mean that their use becomes an exercise in  
41  
42 reflexivity on the part of the writer: why posit these signifiers and not others and what does  
43  
44 this say about the writer’s own preferences and commitments?  
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50  
51 We conclude the paper with a brief postscript on the ethics of adopting a post-foundational  
52  
53 perspective within development work. Having observed the presentation of post-  
54  
55 foundational ideas at academic events, we note a tendency for such ideas, if not fully  
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3 discussed, to engender a form of postmodern fatalism amongst listeners: if human  
4  
5 experience is without foundation, then one construction is as good as another. Such a view  
6  
7 may be countered via the foundational premise within post-foundationalism of the  
8  
9 ontological ground of attachments and constructions being meaning-full, rather than  
10  
11 without any ground whatsoever. Post-foundational perspectives should precisely be  
12  
13 interested in the value and meaning people attach to certain constructions and signifiers  
14  
15 and seeks to amplify the points of contestation and movement around these. In this sense  
16  
17 our framework can be said to offer more transparent and democratic scrutiny and  
18  
19 contestation of foundational constructs commonly adopted within leadership development  
20  
21 work. We do note the possibility of development participants experiencing a degree of  
22  
23 vulnerability or even animosity when the implications of symbolic contingency are  
24  
25 contemplated. “Are you saying my commitments and beliefs are not *real*? Are you saying  
26  
27 that I am not *real*?” People do become attached to certain management and leadership  
28  
29 approaches, as well as to political causes, to certain views of the self in work, as well as to  
30  
31 the self in activism. A post-foundational approach does not seek to chide such attachments  
32  
33 as naïve but does seek to make them more open to democratic scrutiny and discussion. As  
34  
35 such, this approach may not indeed be suitable in practice terms for organisations and  
36  
37 groups that want more of the same and as Heifetz (1994) states, it is worth reflecting upon  
38  
39 the tolerance and readiness of people in context before introducing more moments of  
40  
41 ‘heat’. Bearing this in mind, a post-foundationalist might respond to a sceptical participant  
42  
43 or researcher: “You and your concepts are real, but not *the Real*, i.e. not everything.”  
44  
45  
46 Furthermore, we could add: “We work towards the everything, the complete all, but it is  
47  
48 probably to be welcomed that this destination is never fully reached – life without  
49  
50 contestation would be quite a boring, unemotional and anodyne life.” We hold that  
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3 adopting a framework of democratic leadership development praxis holds the possibility for  
4  
5 liberating and energetic interaction: at its root is the idea that we continuously seek real  
6  
7 meaning, even if such attempts are only ever partially successful, and that along the way we  
8  
9 can build in powerful ways of relating to and analysing the power that is enacted over us  
10  
11 and in our names.  
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