Juxtaposition of Evolution of Leadership Theories and Foucault’s Power Knowledge Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the juxtaposition of the evolution of leadership theories from transactional, to transformational and also to the new age theories, which are based on ethics and aesthetics like the servant leadership with Foucault’s epistemology of genealogy of power-knowledge. Genealogy is an anti-method which begins with a critique of the present. Foucault’s genealogical episteme has been used to elicit problematization of the established field of leadership which the authors believe to be scientifically evolved and academically established. The article critically traces, the historical account of developments in leadership theories and questions the perfection and hegemony of transformational theory, questioning the reliable assumptions and potential limitations of transactional and transformational theory to finally establish constant evolution in the subject as the stable new construct of leadership. Though Foucauldian thought argues for the balance of power between follower and leader and leader’s power being interdependent on knowledge, on the contrary, this article highlights the concentration of power in the hands of privileged few in the existing paradigms of leadership. The panopticon, as a metaphor of vigil focuses on the concentrated power in the hands of those at a higher pedestal and the self-government and objectivizing of followers which prevails in the organisations. While mapping these transitions in leadership theory with the genealogy of power-knowledge dynamics of Foucault’s episteme, the article contributes to the existing literature on leadership by acknowledging a need for a newer leadership in the current complex business environment in accordance with the genealogical theme of pastoral power.

KEYWORDS

Foucault’s Power-Knowledge Dynamics, Genealogy, Leadership Evolution, Transactional Leadership, Transformational Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Leadership studies have gained much momentum in the current times (citation statistics), beginning with the classic debate of ‘Are leaders born or made?’ to researchers tracking the entire evolution of leadership. One of the most consequential leadership theories that have dominated the leadership studies for over three decades has been the transformational leadership theory. Transformational
leadership was initiated by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later popularized by publication and further research in this field by Bernard M. Bass (Bass, 1990; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Researchers and practitioners alike have contributed to the strides achieved by this thought in recent years in a variety of organizational settings.

The traditional conceptions of leadership tend to be dominated by the reflections of the “great men,” in his definition, James MacGregor Burns (1978) disdains the obsession of the leader with power and domination and aims to establish true leadership as a dynamic relationship between values, motivations and resources of both the leaders and the followers. This comprehensive study of the political, social and psychological dimensions of leadership ultimately proposes that the test of leadership is intended social change and ignores the dialectic relationship between those who “lead” and those who “follow” (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978), both these articles make a central distinction between “transactional” and “transformational” leadership. The foundation of transactional leadership is dyadic relationship of exchange while the Transformational leadership appreciates morality and higher levels of motivation (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978a). While transactional leaders achieve performance as merely required by the use of contingent rewards or negative feedback, transformational leaders are hypothesized to be able to deliver performances beyond common expectations since they bind people with a sense of common mission, giving them insightful learning and imbining in them creative innovative ways of doing even mundane work (Hater & Bass, 1988). Certain characteristics have been taken synonymous with transformational leadership viz. Charisma, Individual consideration, Intellectual simulation and Inspirational Motivation (Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006; Bass & Riggio., 2006; Hater & Bass, 1988). A transformational leader is engaged in the process of raising consciousness of the followers and engages in common enterprise; the leader also touches upon the self-actualization and makes the followers aware of their true needs, apart from being visionary and charismatic (Bass & Riggio., 2006; Burke et al., 2006). For twenty years transformational theory has continued to create spur in the leadership literature but what remains to be looked at is the genesis of this widespread concept; how it evolved, what defines and distinguishes leaders of one time from another. Analysis of Transformational leadership highlights that, this invigorating turn in the leadership studies is more a pragmatic creation evolved as a resolution to the modern-day management problems and assumptions about progress than an objective scientific discovery. Exposure to works of Foucault makes us draw similarities in the evolution of leadership theory and also perceive growth of newer leadership theories from a Foucauldian perspective.

Much of Foucault’s work was based on Archaeology, which considers the truth of a time period, only later did he develop analytical questioning of this truth and evolved to genealogy. The methodology of this paper is based on genealogy and problematizing the accepted discourse of leadership. Primarily Foucault’s genealogical method is used to review Transformational leadership as a concept by viewing it skeptically to assess the credibility of new claims in the light of the problems of the previous theories and to establish the power-knowledge relations involved. This paper examines the historical evolution and power related effects of transformational leadership concepts, demonstrating the fertility of Foucault’s critical methods and other convention, that of the Panopticon, the technologies of self and the power-pleasure subjectivities to understand better the postulates that operate within management knowledge. Also other theoretical frameworks like feminist standpoint explain some aspects of the leadership discourse and have been explained consequently.

The paper begins with an overview of the leadership styles, with much focus on transactional and transformational theories. The next section explicates Foucault’s work and thus set the theoretical framework. The works of Foucault can be primarily divided into 3 stages viz. Archeological, Genealogical and the aesthetic, of which the genealogical approach has been explored with much emphasis in the power-knowledge dynamics operating within the management knowledge. Following section connects the two discourses and views this transition in leadership theory from the problematization view of the Foucault’s view, thus establishing genealogical methodology in the leadership evolution study. Finally, the paper has been concluded with implications suggested for theory.
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