

Investigating the Dark Side of Stories of “Good” Leadership: A Discursive Approach to Leadership Gurus’ Storytelling

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Abstract

Since the quest for locating an agreed upon prediscursive phenomenon behind the word “leadership” has proved fruitless, some researchers have suggested that leadership is an empty signifier to which many meanings can be attached. Taking this ontological shift seriously, rather than trying to locate leadership as a “thing” that is out there somewhere, it is perhaps better to investigate how meanings of leadership are constructed as in situ social practice. Adopting a discursive approach to leadership and using transcripts of a celebrity interview with management gurus Jack and Suzy Welch, this article analyses the stories they tell in which they provide normative accounts of what good leadership should be. Rather than taking these stories at face value, this article investigates both the way in which these stories are told as in situ social practice and the Discourses of leadership that are used as resources for storytelling and which are (re)produced in the storytelling. Findings indicate that while Jack and Suzy Welch do morally accountable identity work that presents leadership as heroic and positive, these stories also hide a darker side of leadership that is revealed in the analyses of wider societal Discourses that are invoked. The article closes with a call for a more critical approach to stories of leadership.

Keywords

discursive leadership, narrative, positioning theory, dark leadership, interviews, management gurus

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Introduction

Providing a single catchall definition of leadership has proved illusory, and as Bass (1990, p. 11) famously pointed out “there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.” Thus, as various authors such as Grint, Smolovic-Jones, and Holt (2016) have claimed, leadership may be an empty signifier to which any number of meanings can be attached. If this is the case, and there is no objective, entity “out there somewhere” that is hiding behind the word “leadership,” then perhaps researchers could profitably shift their efforts from trying to locate leadership as a physical reality to locating leadership as a social reality as it is talked into being as part of contextually bound social practice.

In this article, we use discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007) as an approach to investigate the in situ social practice of defining leadership. As data we use transcripts of naturally occurring storytelling, video recorded during an interview¹ with two leading leadership gurus—Jack and Suzy Welch—carried out as part of a book tour in which they promote their latest publication (*The Real-Life MBA: Your No-BS Guide to Winning the Game, Building a Team and Growing Your Career*). While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide complete biographies of the Welches, suffice it to say that they are well-known and successful management/leadership gurus. Jack Welch was the CEO of General Electric from 1981 to 2001. He brought great financial success to the company, but his management techniques were controversial and earned him the sobriquet Neutron Jack for his ability to take over companies, leave the buildings intact, but ruthlessly cut the workforce. Suzy Welch was an editor of *Harvard Business Review*, and she has had a successful career in journalism and management consultancy. She is now very active writing and presenting on management and leadership, both with Jack Welch and in her own right. In short, together they make a formidable pair of management gurus active within the leadership industry.

As Atkinson and Silverman (1997) point out, interviews have become a key cultural artefact for revealing the “authentic” selves of people and their views and beliefs. Leaders and leadership have not escaped the pervasiveness of the interview, and interviews with management gurus are a key way in which knowledge of the “just whatness” of leadership is both created and eagerly consumed in a in a burgeoning leadership industry in which few people have an interest in critically examining the positive images of leadership that are promoted. However, as Alvesson (2017) suggests, researchers should be skeptical of the superficially positive-sounding versions of leadership and that we should get behind the surface of these accounts and dig at obscured underlying meanings. Moreover, taking a social constructionist approach to leadership (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), rather than considering that leadership gurus have privileged access to knowledge of leadership, which is out there somewhere as a prediscursive “fact” waiting to be found and communicated, this article considers the Welches’ stories of leadership to be a version, among other versions, of leadership which is competing for truth and legitimacy. Consequently, the focus of the article is not on the veracity of what Jack and Suzy Welch say and whether, for example, leadership is different from management, transformational or transactional, heroic or distributed. Rather, the purpose of this article

is to analyze how stories of good leadership are constructed in talk and to deconstruct such accounts to show how a darker side may lurk behind the surface level bright side of leadership.

Literature Review

Gurus and their theories have received the extensive attention of management scholars (e.g., Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002; Huczynski, 2012; Jackson, 2001). Significantly, one of the key ways in which this knowledge is consumed is through the stories that the gurus tell. This is because guru stories exemplify the success of their management/leadership theories and thus provide concrete and immediately graspable normative examples of good leadership. Yet, while the stories that management gurus tell have been the focus of considerable research (e.g., Clark & Greatbatch, 2004; Clark & Salaman, 1998; Jackson, 2001), analyses of the stories that they tell specifically about leadership and has so far been lacking.

This lacuna is especially noticeable when considering the interactional achievement of stories of leadership as in situ social practice, which has been largely overlooked in favor of investigating leadership stories as decontextualized end products (Clifton, 2017). Focusing on stories of leadership as finished products means that researchers often fail to consider the storytelling-as-topic and ignore the “how” of the in situ production of the “data” that they then use to theorize about leadership. This can be seen, for example, in interview-based research in which the interviewer is erased from the interaction and in which stories of leadership are decontextualized and rearranged by the researcher, through, for example, a process of coding, to reveal descriptions from which central tendencies are then abstracted. Consequently, the storytellers lose their voice and become representatives of these ideas and “the original individuals are now changed into the sociologist’s aggregate” (Smith, 1974, p. 42). Conversely, through investigating the in situ practice of storytelling, the researcher can be sensitive to the way in which the story is recipient-designed for the interviewer and the present or future imagined audience, and therefore the way in which the story is constrained or allowed by the zeitgeist of its production.

Furthermore, stories of leadership are often treated as neutral vessels for the transmission of knowledge of the prediscursive real world of leadership that is out there somewhere and to which the teller has privileged access. Consequently, stories are rarely treated as the “politically motivated production of a certain way of perceiving the world which privileges certain interest over others” (Mumby, 1987, p. 114). Yet, as various authors (e.g., Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Kelly, 2014) suggest, this is exactly what leadership could be: an inherently ideological sense making activity which, through the promise of good leadership being the panacea for organizational problems, serves the interests of a managerial elite by strengthening asymmetrical social relations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016). Through considering how stories of leadership are told, the researcher can make visible how the gurus’ stake in promoting such a version of good leadership is managed and how it affects the end-story.

Method

In order to investigate Jack and Suzy Welches' storytelling, elicited during a celebrity interview, we take a social constructionist approach to leadership. From this perspective, leadership and leader identity are not prediscursive realities that are "out there somewhere" waiting to be found, rather they are constructed in talk. Language, in this process of social construction, is therefore not seen in terms of coding, transmitting, and decoding messages that mirror a prediscursive external reality that is perceived by the speaker. Rather, language is considered to constitute the building blocks of social reality in which forms of knowledge are discursively produced, or as Burr (1995) succinctly puts it: "when people talk to each other, the world gets constructed" (p. 7). Thus, consistent with a social constructionist approach to leadership, this article considers leadership to be a contested concept, open to negotiation, and devoid of an essence that cannot be boiled down to a single catch all decontextualized definition. Consequently, this article focusses on the way in which accounts of the "just whatness" of leadership are constructed as in situ practice and what these accounts "do" in terms of the Discourses or ideologies that they enact (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016).

To understand this process in which value-laden understandings and interpretations of leadership are constructed in talk, this article takes a discursive approach to leadership which can be summed up as an approach that seeks to engage with the actual process of doing leadership as an in situ accomplishment (for an overview, see Schnurr, 2018). Consequently, while using various research methodologies such as conversation analysis (e.g., Clifton, 2006), interactional sociolinguistics (e.g., Baxter, 2015), and speech act theory (e.g., Aritz, Walker, Cardon, & Zhli, 2017), scholars analyze transcripts of naturally occurring talk to reveal the doing of leadership as social action. However, following Alvesson and Spicer (2011), we argue that leadership should not only be considered in terms of practice but also in terms of meaning making and how practitioners attribute the label "leadership" to a whole variety of actions and activities. Therefore, changing focus slightly from prior work on discursive leadership which has tended to investigate the doing of leadership, this article uses transcripts of naturally occurring narratives in interview talk to analyze how meaning is discursively attributed to "leadership."

To make visible and thus analyzable the process of defining the "just whatness" of leadership in stories we use positioning theory (henceforth PT) as developed by Bamberg et al. (e.g., Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). PT refers "broadly to the close inspection of how speakers describe people and their actions in one way, rather than another and, by doing so, perform discursive actions that result in acts of identity" (Bamberg et al., 2011, p. 182). Such a "close inspection" is carried out through fine-grained, conversation analytically inspired analyses of transcripts of storytelling talk, but unlike conversation analysis PT is not shy of moving out from the textual analyses to consider wider societal Discourse that are invoked by the talk. By combining analyses of transcripts of storytelling talk with the analysis of emerging societal Discourses, PT considers acts of identity at three different levels which Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008, p. 385) sum up as follows:

Level 1: How characters are positioned within the storyworld?

Level 2: How the speaker/narrator positions himself or herself and others within the here and now of the interactive situation?

Level 3: How the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regard to dominant Discourses or master narratives (i.e., preexistent sociocultural forms of interpretation)?

At level one, PT can reveal how the Welches' stories of leadership position the characters in the storyworld as inter alia leaders and followers, active or passive, good or bad, and so on. Thus, the characters (leaders, followers, and organizations) in the stories enact leadership and so provide normative exemplars of good leadership in action. Furthermore, following Bamberg et al.'s (2011) taxonomy for analyzing narratives, we analyze the stories presented in this article according to how the characters in the storyworld navigate the dilemmas of: sameness and difference, change, and agency. At the second level, PT enables the researcher to make the here-and-now production of the story visible. Through analyzing the interaction between interviewer and interviewee/storyteller the researcher can draw attention to way in which the context of the telling affects the construction of the "just whatness" of leadership. At a third level of analysis, PT enables the researcher to make visible the interplay between the storytelling talk (discourse lowercase d) and wider societal Discourses (Discourse uppercase D) of, for example, leadership, capitalism, neoliberalism, and so on. In other words, as Aritz and Walker (2012) point out, Discourse can be said to exist at two intertwined levels: talk and text (i.e., discourse lowercase d) which reflexively enacts Discourses (uppercase D) which are "culturally situated interpretive frames historically rooted in systems of power/knowledge" (Jian, Schmisser, & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 305). These Discourse are invoked by the storytellers through the way in which they draw on, and reflexively (re)produce, master narratives or storylines which are "'frames' according to which courses of events can be easily plotted, simply because one's audience is taken to 'know' and accept those courses" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 360).

Data: The Celebrity Guru Interview

The stories analyzed in this article come from an interview conducted live in front of a studio audience by Laszlo Bock, then Senior Vice President People Operations at Google, at the corporate headquarters of Google, in 2015. Bock has since left Google and is now is management guru in his own right, having written his own bestselling book (*Work rules! Insights From Inside Google That Will Transform How You Live and Lead*). The interview was framed as a talk with Jack and Suzy Welch who have come to "speak to us today about the book" (i.e., *The Real-Life MBA*, which was published in 2015). This makes relevant their identities as authors of a best-selling "how-to" management book and their guru status. In the extracts analyzed here, Bock citing stories that are in the book, raises the issue of firing people during leadership transitions.

The extract was chosen for analysis from a corpus of 50 interviews with Jack Welch that are publically available on YouTube which were downloaded and transcribed (see the appendix for a list of transcription symbols used). The stories that the Welches tell during the interviews are often very similar and are often retellings of stories to be found in their books. The particular extract analyzed in this article was chosen for further analysis because it retold stories that have wider circulation in his best-selling books and so are not “one off events” but are part of a coherent Discourse of leadership put forward by the Welches qua management gurus. Furthermore, the stories were selected because they are specifically framed as stories of leadership rather than management or organizing, therefore giving the researcher access to the in situ practice of attributing meaning to “leadership.”

Analyses

After about 19 minutes of interview talk, Bock shifts topic to “leadership transition” and “firing people” as discussed below.

Fragment 1

1. LB ((book open on lap)) so when you=you have these situations I wanna=wanna circle
2. back to the career side but erm you’ve both seen a ton of companies erm and every
3. time in the book you talk about ((looks at book)) a leadership transition (.) you talk
4. about firing people↓ (.) ((gaze to JW & SW)) and this isn’t the () rank seventy
5. twenty ten stuff this is you know=you talk about ((looks at book)) Erik Fyrwald=
6. =Fyrwald at Nalco erm and he goes in and he moved on you say many top leaders
7. had to be asked to move on more than half the top hundred so ((gaze to J & SW))
8. a new CEO more than fifty percent [of the people [gone and you say ((looks at book))
9. JW [°yeah° [°yeah°
10. LB a personnel move speaks the louder than a hundred speeches ((gaze at J & SW)) and
11. there’s a few other parts of the book er when you talk about the importance of when
12. you come in as a leader firing some of the people under you [is that=that just just
13. SW [well it
14. LB good hygiene

In Line 1, Bock closes down the prior topic of talk and he introduces a new topic which is explicitly framed as a question of “leadership transition” (Line 3) and the actions of a new leader (Line 12: “you come in as a leader”). The forthcoming question is addressed to both of Jack and Suzy, as can be seen when Block says “you’ve both

seen a ton of companies” (Line 2), and through reference to the book which they coauthored. Thus, Bock orients to their joint knowledge of leadership transitions and so talks them into being as management gurus whose knowledge of leadership is to be sought. More specifically, Bock topicalises the story of Erik Fyrwald at Nalco and the fact that “many top leaders had to be asked to move on more than half the top hundred” which is a direct quote from the *The Real-Life MBA*.² Bock also projects a candidate evaluation of the story: “the importance of when you come in as a leader firing some of the people under you is that—that just just good hygiene” (Line 12). The candidate evaluation of the story of Fyrwald is generalized through the use of the generic you (Line 12: “when you come in as a leader firing some of the people under you”); thus, it has implications not only for Nalco but also as generalized leadership practice. At a third level of positioning, this does identity work that positions the company as sick and Erik Fyrwald as doctor and heroic, active agent who cured the sickness through administering good hygiene. This therefore makes relevant to the interaction a master narrative of the sick company that is healed by the leader-doctor (cf. Amernic, Craig, & Tourish, 2007), yet the question form (is that just good hygiene?) also leaves open the possibility that there is “something else,” possibly reproachable, in a leadership transition that involves sacking so many people.

Fragment 2

The story of Fyrwald at Nalco is thus briefly introduced by Bock. Once a story has been told it makes taking a stance by the recipient a relevant next action and, in this case, Bock offers a stance (it’s just good hygiene) which is implicit in his question to which Welch is constrained to reply. Welch’s reply is discussed below.

15. JW [we=we’re talking about private equity↓
 16. SW [it
 17. LB okay
 18. JW in private equity the reason why you buy a company is it’s an orphan usually in a
 19. company (.) it’s a division that isn’t liked I’m sure at Google there are some
 but I bet
 20. there are a division that’s sort of a turkey over there it gets less attention from
 the top
 21. people (.) it doesn’t ge=doesn’t get loved it doesn’t get enough resources ()
 22. there are those in most companies so you buy these companies coz the company
 23. wants to trim down you’ve got activists out there now companies are selling off
 24. divisions ↓ and you grab a division well those people haven’t been looked at
 for ten
 25. years (.) they’ve been sitting over there not growing↓ not performing↓ (.) and
 not
 26. being told anything [(.) so you bring them in and you got to get a fresh
 27. LB [°yeah°
 28. JW eye to look at the situation so we’re talking [mainly about companies you’re
 29. LB [°yeah°
 30. JW acquiring that have been dead on their feet for years

In response to Bock's topicalisation of the story of Fyrwald at Nalco, Jack Welch tells a second story in which he displays his stance to it. Significantly, he orients to Bock's question as potentially critical of his advocacy of sacking people as good leadership practice and so delivers a second story in which he accounts for this leadership practice. This storied account of his version of leadership has to be positive, because, as a management guru, the advice that he gives must be seen to be good advice, and the observations that he makes must be seen to be good observations. Consequently, Jack and later Suzy Welch provide storied accounts of good leadership practice that address a specific issue which arises in a local context and so their stories are designed to do identity work that positions their version of leadership as essentially a good thing and leaders as essentially good people.

In Lines 18 ff., Jack Welch responds to Bock's candidate evaluation of the leadership transition and the moving on of 50% of the leadership by the incoming leader as "just good hygiene." To make this evaluation, Welch uses a second story which is designed as a generic story as displayed through: shifting to private equity in general (as opposed to "just" Fyrwald at Nalco); using a generic you (Lines 18, 24, & 26); and using a generalizing present tense. In the storyworld, he accounts for buying a division by positioning it as "an orphan" (Line 18) and "a sort of a turkey" (Line 20) which is "over there" (Line 20), a deictic reference which distances the division from the company. The consequences of this positioning are that the company "doesn't get loved it doesn't get enough resources" (Line 21). The solution to this problem is that "you buy these companies" (Line 22). The reason why "you" buy the company is because the "company wants to trim down." Thus, the desire to sell off of a division comes from the company, as active agent, rather than the buyer which distances Jack Welch, or anybody else implicated in the generic you, from being positioned as a corporate raider. Moreover, the company's wish to trim down is attributed to "activists out there" (presumably shareholder activists looking for a better return on investment) which again positions the incoming leader as working on behalf of shareholders and "the company" and not being the active agent responsible the takeover. In short, when grabbing a division (Line 24), the incoming leader merely acts in response to situation, not out of self-interest. Welch then returns (Line 24) to the positioning of the division as not having "been looked at for 10 years," and "sitting over there," which again deictically distances the division from the company. The consequences of this neglect are that these "orphaned" divisions are: "not growing↓ not performing↓ (.) and not being told anything" (Lines 25 and 26). The solution is to "bring them in" and "get a fresh eye to look at the situation" (Line 26).

Implicitly, and returning to the master narrative of leader-as-doctor healing a sick company, this action will revive and transform companies that "have been dead on their feet for years" (Line 30). The master narrative thus makes use of, and reflexively reenacts, a Discourse of the good, heroic transformational leader who can revive an ailing company. However, this master narrative is not the only master narrative that is enacted: the story also enacts a master narrative of the leader-as-parent. This is because the division in the company is positioned as an "orphan" (Line 18) that needs to be brought in (Line 26) and loved (Line 21). The incoming leader is therefore positioned

as a good parent who can “love” the orphaned division. Yet, looking behind the bright side of leadership that Welch enacts, loving (and being loved in return), as Tourish and Pinnington (2002, p. 159) argue, is an indicator of a cultic organization in which leaders “seduce the new recruit into the organization’s embrace, gradually habituating them to its rituals and belief systems.” Moreover, in both the master narratives (i.e., good leader-as-doctor reviving an ailing division that is dead on its feet and good leader-as-parent providing love to an orphaned division), the leader is positioned as the savior who acts upon a passive division. Organizational change is therefore an entirely top-down process initiated by leaders, which, as Wilson (2013) argues, is a key aspect of transformational Discourses of leadership in which the leader is *the one* who makes a difference, whereas others are talked into being as inert followers. Moreover, Wilson (2013, p. 19) goes further to argue that within “the idea and the ideal of the exceptional few directing the ordinary many what is implied is deference and dependence, not democracy, not participation, and not empowerment.” In short at the third level of positioning, Jack Welch is making use of, and simultaneously (re)producing, a Discourse of the single heroic transformational leader who is capable of healing, loving, and reviving the organization and its passive organizational players (followers). Leaders, in line with the widespread assumptions of the leadership business, are therefore constructed as good and exceptional people who are both separate from and different to their followers.

After Jack Welch’s story, Suzy Welch adds an increment to this storytelling turn and so coauthors the storytelling and extends it with what becomes a third story in the cluster as discussed below in fragment three.

Fragment 3

31. SW and I think a lot of times and especially in those stories when look er when you want
32. your company to be productive and fast and creative and innovative and all these
33. things you want people pretty much need to share the values and the values have to be
34. things like teamwork and=and erm maybe you have fast failure I mean you have to
35. have values that are=that you want people to demonstrate and so er when there are
36. these leadership transitions if a leader comes in and says you know what I am
37. installing these values the values of urgency and speed and boundarylessness and
38. you have people who er are=there’s a great story in the book, I think when erm=when
39. erm Dave Calhoun came into Nielsen and erm he knew that this was a silo company
40. where nobody spoke to each other and knew that if it was going to survive and be the

41. company he wanted it to be he needed people who wanted to share ideas and he tried
42. and tried to get that value across but when he found managers that just would not
43. share ideas he had to ask them to move on so that= it's a lot about values which you
44. guys talk about values a lot ((gaze to audience)) so this should sound pretty familiar
45. right ↑ ((gaze to LB))

Initially in the here-and-now of the interview world, Suzy Welch adds to the coda of Jack's prior story (i.e., its relevance to the here and now) through use of the conjunction "and" (Line 31). Through doing this, she both displays her stance to the prior story and she also displays the identity of costoryteller with commensurate rights and entitlements to tell stories of leadership. The coda is that in "those stories" (i.e., the stories that have just been told of Fyrwald and the generic story of leadership change told by Jack Welch) you want "your company to be productive and fast and creative and innovative and all these things" (Line 32). Suzy Welch then projects a turn describing what the generic you wants and so generalizes her advice and claims an entitlement to describe the essence of leadership. However, in the continuation of her turn, she self-repairs to upgrade from what you want to what "people pretty need to do" which is to "share the values" which she exemplifies as "things like teamwork and=and erm maybe you have fast failure" (Line 34). The upgrading from leaders' wants to people's needs thus acts as a way of deflecting self-interest and making the action appear to be driven by the externality of the situation independent of the leader's interests, wants, or desires thus reducing his or her agency in a possibly criticisable matter. Suzy Welch then reiterates this coda (Lines 34 ff.) "I mean you have to have values that are=that you want people to demonstrate" and she continues "so er when there are these leadership transitions if a leader comes in and says you know what I am installing these values the values of urgency and speed and boundarylessness and you have people who er are." However, rather than completing the coda, she latches on a story (Line 38: "there's a great story in the book"). She then tells a story which acts as an exemplum of the point she is making (i.e., leaders need to install values). The story she tells is that of Dave Calhoun at Nielsen which also appears in *The Real-Life MBA*.

This story, which is explicitly framed as being about leadership transition (Line 36), is one in which the complicating action is that Calhoun comes into "a silo company where nobody spoke to each other" (Line 39). The survival of the company is at stake (Line 40), which now invokes the master narrative of active, hero leader-as-savior who alone has the power to save a threatened company. The resolution of the story and the way to achieve survival is to get people to share ideas. As before, Suzy Welch starts by projecting a turn in which Calhoun's wants are foreground (Line 41: "he wanted it to be"), but then she self-repairs to topicalize his needs (Line 41: "he needed people who wanted to share ideas"). This upgrade thus creates a sense of obligation and being responsive to the exigencies of circumstance rather than self-interest (cf. Line 33). To resolve the problem, Calhoun "tried and tried to get that value across" (Line 42), the

repetition of tried thus emphasizing the extent to which Calhoun goes to persuade the recalcitrant managers to accept his values. However, “when he found managers that just would not share ideas he had to ask them to move on” (Line 42). The modal of obligation (had to) combined with the effort that Calhoun makes in order to persuade the managers to accept his vision (“he tried and tried”) are thus rhetorically designed to show Calhoun’s reticence to fire people and to present this as something that he was constrained to do. The evaluation of this story and the new coda is that “it’s [leadership transition] a lot about values” (Line 43). Through the tag “right” with rising intonation and eye gaze which fixes Bock, agreement with this coda is then projected on Bock and agreement or disagreement with this coda then becomes a conditionally relevant next action (Pomerantz, 1984).

At the third level of positioning, Suzy Welch enacts the master narrative of the single heroic transformational leader-as-savior who comes into a company and who is able to save it from failure so that it becomes “productive and fast and creative and innovative” (Line 32) and it has the “values of urgency and speed and boundarylessness” (Line 37). Moreover, this is achieved in a top-down manner in which the other organizational players (“people” Lines 33, 35, and 38) are distinct and separate from the heroic leader and are passive recipients of what the leader needs to do. As such, Suzy Welch’s turn aligns seamlessly with Jack Welch’s story in which the good and heroic transformational leader is able, single-handedly, to save an ailing organization. However, in her storytelling turn, Suzy Welch goes further than Jack Welch and she is more explicit in describing how such a transformation is achieved. This is achieved through enforcing values, and so her story invokes the Discourse of alignment that Jack Welch and Suzy Welch expound in *The Real-Life MBA* and it serves as exemplum of alignment in action. Alignment involves adherence to the leader’s values and failure to do this results in being asked to move on. This, as with the parental Discourse of love previously discussed, is also an aspect of cultic leadership in which “members also replace their pre-existing beliefs and values with those of the group” (Tourish & Vatcha, 2005, p. 457). However, more than this, if “people” fail to change their values, punishment follows and so Suzy Welch enacts a Discourse that condones the leader’s right to use coercive persuasion. The term “coercive persuasion” was first coined by Schein (1961) in his study of the brainwashing of American prisoners of war in Korea, and it is defined by Tourish, Collinson, and Baker (2009, p. 363) as a form of persuasion which “encourages subjects to internalise dominant cultural norms as their own, subsequently producing individuals deemed to be ‘appropriate’ by the ruling group.” Thus, as with cults, the leader claims the right to dictate the values that followers display and it is through having such a monoculture in an organization that the organization can be saved. This, to paraphrase Tourish (2013), is dangerous since if we have leaders who have the power to reward, punish, or fire followers depending on how enthusiastically they embrace the goals and values set for them by leaders, then it becomes a model of leadership in which a kindly uncle can easily morph into an angry god. Indeed, Tourish (2013) also argues that coercive persuasion is a key element of cults and was a significant reason for the mass suicides of cult followers ordered by the leaders of both the Heaven’s Gate Cult, in California in 1997 and The People’s Temple, in Jamestown in Guyana in 1978.

Fragment 4

In Lines 46 following, Bock responds to Suzy Welch's statement "you guys talk about values a lot so this should sound pretty familiar right ↑" (Lines 44-45).

46. LB but are there right I mean could you imagine erm like imagine a company that's going
 47. great and you have a leadership change at whatever level right doesn't have to be
 48. CEO could be division what have you what are are the odds that you're not going to
 49. fire anybody from the direct reports
 50. JW we've had erm we've bought two medical companies

In response to Suzy Welch's final turn, Bock begins his turn with "but," thus projecting disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984) and so he minimally resists and projects disaffiliation with the stance shown by Welch. However, keeping a neutral footing in line with his identity as interviewer, Bock does not offer his stance. Rather, he asks a further question: "what are are the odds that you're not going to fire anybody" (Line 48). Thus, while Bock's interviewing is far from sycophantic, he offers no challenge to Welch's evaluation of good leadership as being all about (enforcing) values. In Line 50, Jack Welch answers this question with a personal story of taking over a medical company in which nobody was fired. After this story, he then carries out a topic transition to the remuneration of key organizational players ("the aces"). This story and the subsequent topic transition are not analyzed for reason of space.

Conclusions and Observations

In the here-and-now of the interview world, the analyses make visible stories that are specifically framed as stories of leadership transition, rather than, say, management or organizing and in this way the stories fill the empty signifier of leadership. Bock's initial question is oriented to by Jack and Suzy Welch as a source of potential criticism for which they have to account. Consequently, their stories are designed to counter possible criticisms that there is something other than good hygiene involved when firing people. To do this they make use of the master narratives of leader-as-doctor, leader-as-savior, and leader-as-loving-parent. This entails positioning the organization as sick, orphaned, and failing. Returning the Bamberg's (2011) taxonomy for analyzing narratives in terms of agency, change, and sameness/difference, we can see that in terms of agency, the leader is then positioned as the heroic protagonist who turns the situation around. It is also noticeable that while the leader-as-doctor, savior, and loving parent is portrayed as active, other organizational players are positioned as passive beings upon whom the leader imposes his or her values. Thus, on the one hand, a passive follower/active leader dichotomy is talked into being in which the heroic leader dominates, and, on the other hand, in terms of the dilemma of sameness/difference, the storytelling talks into being a difference between leaders and others. Furthermore, when any possibly negative

actions are undertaken, the leader is either not attributed agency or he or she is presented as being obliged to act by external forces. Thus, by juggling agency, a good leader identity is preserved. Finally, in terms of change, the leader transforms the company from unloved to loved, ailing to healthy, and failing to successful and the leader also transforms the workforce who take on the values of the leader.

The talking into being leadership as being something good and heroic is compounded by the interaction in the here-and-now of the interview. This is achieved because, on the one hand, Bock retains a neutral footing and does not seek to seriously counter the Welches' argument and, on the other hand, Jack and Suzy Welch act as a team and support each other's stance. Thus, the genre of the celebrity interview, at least in this case, is conducive to avoiding confrontation and allowing the interviewees to express their views in an uncritical environment, which is hardly surprising since all three of the interactants are part of the same managerial elite. Furthermore, stories are a venue in which a good self is constructed (Linde, 1993). Faced with a possible criticism inherent in Bock's question, Jack and Suzy Welch do identity work that maintains their identity as gurus who are knowledgeable and so who are able to give good advice about leadership. Thus, given the context of the celebrity guru interview, it is hardly surprising that the bright side of leadership is invoked. This is because the interviewees have a, financial as well as personal, stake in presenting a positive side to leadership. Moreover, since stories are recipient designed to present an easily digestible way of understanding the world that is acceptable to the present and future imagined audience of wannabe leaders in the early 21st-century neoliberal society, it is not surprising that the Welches' stories align with Discourses of the new work order (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002). These Discourses promote both the idea that organizational players must align with the values of the companies they work for (Hull, 2001) and the idea that market-oriented human resource policies are justified when they provide a good return on investment (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2005).

At a third level of analysis, the master narratives of the leader-as-doctor healing an ailing company, leader-as-savior saving a failing company, and leader-as-loving parent showering attention and love on an unwanted company make relevant the Discourse of leadership to be found in the widely accepted and promoted concept of transformational leadership. In transformational approaches to leadership, the heroic leader transforms not only the (failing) organization but also the organizational players. As Sashkin (2004, p. 175) puts it: "leaders transform followers. That is followers are changed from being self-centred individuals to be committed members of a group." However, as Clifton and Van De Mierop (2016) argue, the Discourses that are invoked by the storyteller's master narratives may enact, and may be enacted by, multiple, and perhaps even competing, Discourses. In this case, we argue that if the researcher scratches the surface of the Discourse of the heroic and transformational leader, the apparent benevolent side of leadership coexists with a darker side that is communicatively masked to make the illegitimate appear legitimate. As Suzy Welch's story indicates, leadership transition is achieved through coercive persuasion in which adherence to the new leader's organizational values is encouraged by fear of dismissal for non-compliance. In this sense, thought control through displaying the values of the leader

is set up as a model of what successful leadership transition should be. This comes (uncomfortably) close to advocating some kind of Orwellian dystopia in which the values and behaviors of the followers that align with the leader are allowed for, but in which other ways of be(hav)ing are proscribed (cf. Orwell, 1949/2000). Thus, Discourses of transformational leadership in which the follower must align his or her values with those of the leader can give rise to totalizing, cultic organizations in which dissent is eliminated (Tourish, 2013; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). As Tourish and Vatcha (2005) point out, the consequences of this are as follows:

the accumulation of power at the centre, a failure to sufficiently consider alternative courses of action when they appear to conflict with centrally ordained and inspirational vision; and a growing belief on the part of the leader that, other evidence notwithstanding, he or she is indispensable to the organization's success. (p. 459)

This therefore potentially enacts the darker side of leadership (Conger, 1990; Tourish, 2013) in which a leader's exaggerated belief in his or her vision, failure to accept (constructive) criticism, and narcissism have the potential to stifle opposition and so lead to disaster as seen at Enron and during the banking crisis of 2008. However, we stop short of claiming that there is a one-to-one relationship between what management gurus say and what is actually done in practice. Nevertheless, we do argue that gurus' stories of leadership, as normative exemplars of what good leadership should be, condone or marginalize certain practices and so provide a field of action for organizational players in which some actions (such as coercing the work force to accept company values) are judged acceptable, justifiable, and laudable when measured up to Discourses of leadership, while other practices are not.

Responding to Alvesson's (2017) call to get beneath the surface of accounts of leadership and to dig at underlying meanings, through carrying out a discursive analysis of the in situ attribution of meaning to the empty signifier of leadership one can get beyond the bright side of leadership to explore some of the contradictions and problems within leadership Discourse. This is important because, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2016) and Alvesson (2017) point out, much research that uses interviews to access the "just whatness" of leadership often assumes that what is said is a pre-discursive version of leadership as it exists beyond the interview. This has significant consequences for how leadership is understood and taught since stories about leadership, elicited in both popular and research interviews, form much of our knowledge of leadership and this knowledge is used to offer aspirational identity material to managers and other wannabe leaders such as business students (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016). But, rather than considering interview talk as an asocial neutral conduit that impartially diffuses the way the leadership is, researchers, students, and practitioners should consider how and under what circumstances the stories are constructed and so be aware of issues of power and vested interest that may lurk behind exemplars of good leadership. Such a critical stance is all the more important since the dominance of transformational and heroic models of leadership, as evidenced in the stories of Jack and Suzy Welch, "have legitimised the overconcentration of power, encouraged hubris,

rather than humility, helped to disempower employees, and played a significant part in business scandals. Neither society nor its organisations have benefitted. It is time to rethink” (Collinson & Tourish, 2015, p. 591).

Finally, while we recognize that this article is a single case example, we also argue that “the very point of qualitative research is the insightful example” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003, p. 1456). Thus, through providing a fine-grained analysis of the leadership stories of Jack and Suzy Welch, we make visible: (a) how the interactional context of a story’s production makes relevant the interviewer’s neutral stance which constrains criticism and obliges the Welches’ to talk into being a positive version of leadership, (b) how leadership (itself an empty signifier) is constructed in management gurus’ stories of leadership as something transformational and positive, and (c) how master narratives made relevant in the stories invoke Discourses of leadership which when looked at critically may be far from positive. The discursive resources made visible in this article, we argue, may be used in other similar storytelling contexts and so we call for more work on (management gurus’) leadership stories as in situ social practice. We also align this call with calls (e.g., Tourish, 2013) for more critical work which seeks to challenge the assumptions that leadership is necessarily a force for good.

Appendix

Transcription Symbols Used

((looks at book))	description of nonverbal activity
=	words latched together
(.)	micro-pause
↑↓	rising or falling intonation
°word°	word spoken more softly than surrounding talk
word	word spoken with stress
[overlapping talk
()	untranscribable talk

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Notes

1. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP-vmK27UdY>
2. “Many top leaders had to be asked to move on—more than half the top 100” (Welch & Welch, 2015, p. 13).

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