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Engaging with the Unknowable through Narratives of Personal Experience

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the potential function of narratives of personal experience in engaging with unknowable reality.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper draws on research on managers working with the unknown using narrative methods together with ancient and modern theories of knowing.

Findings: It is suggested that the unknowable is of importance to the leader of change and that narrative is a productive form of engagement with unknowable reality. Implications for leadership practice are identified.

Originality/value: The role of narrative alongside a largely forgotten form of understanding, intellectus, is considered.

Keywords Leadership, Narrative, Uncertainty, Contemplation, Research Method

Document type: Article

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Bertrand Russell (2001/1912) asks:

Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it? This question, which at first sight might not seem difficult, is really one of the most difficult that can be asked. (p.11)

This is the basis of the agnostic position (Greek: ‘a’ indicating ‘without’ and ‘gnōsis’, knowledge), which is of considerable importance in the leadership of change processes. The experience of uncertainty in the change process can be disabling for the manager if a sense of agency is only linked with a sense of knowing. Finding ways to engage constructively with not knowing is thus important.

This paper considers the role that narratives of personal experience might play in engaging with the unknowable. Not knowing can take two forms. The first is a lack of knowledge about something that will at some point be knowable, such as whether staff members will react positively or negatively when a change is introduced. If only at the level of observed behaviour, it is possible to develop knowledge about this sort of phenomenon that is of use to the manager. The second is a lack of knowledge concerning aspects of reality that will always be unknowable, such as the underlying motivations of staff members. It is the latter form of the agnostic position that will be considered here.

It will be argued that narratives of personal experience can make a contribution to a constructive form of engagement with the experience of the unknowable. For example, I once coached a leader who described a shocking experience in which one of his staff reacted negatively to a change process culminating in an outburst in a public meeting accompanied by personal threats. The narrative included reference to his surprise at the strength and nature of this reaction. It was a surprise because this was a manifestation of an unknowable unconscious process of this member of staff. The telling of this narrative in the coaching context was constructive because it helped the leader to retain a sense of agency in the face of uncertainty. It contributed to the process of sense making and the social construction of knowledge, which was then used in the next meeting with this group. This is the sense in which narratives of personal experience can generally make a constructive contribution to an engagement with the unknowable.

However, there is a caveat that must be clearly understood both about this illustration and, more generally, about the argument of this paper. Such socially constructed knowledge cannot be said to be ‘true’ in any sense other than that the leader believes it to have value. The argument here is determinedly agnostic in relation to the unknowable. We can through narratives of personal experience generate knowledge arising from encounters with unknowable reality. However, this knowledge may not be an accurate reflection of the reality experienced. It is argued that unknowable reality can be experienced – we sometimes ‘touch’ it or it ‘touch(es)’ us - but it cannot be known.

The Agnostic Position

Kupperman (1978, p. 99) suggests that the agnostic position can be understood through the consideration of two questions. The first concerns the use of words in the generation of knowledge, for example: “Q1: What collection of words is most appropriate in describing the table?” At this level meaningful knowledge might be ‘a table is a piece of furniture with legs and a flat upper surface’, which most people know is suitable, say, for safely and
conveniently resting a cup of coffee. A similar example in an organizational context might be, ‘what is the structure of this organization?’ Knowledge of a hierarchical structure has known implications for practice that have been tested in the experience of most managers. Organizational theory and practice has developed sophisticated discourses to explore such questions in a manner that may generate a range of implications for action.

However, there are potential problems in organizational practice when this is the only question that is asked about whether we truly know the reality of a situation. Organizational discourses can generate self-referential arguments. For example, working with a senior management team of a UK civil service organization who were involved in leading the culture change of an institution of thirty thousand employees, one manager commented strongly, ‘The problem is at the fourth tier of management’. I asked how he knew this to be the case. On further questioning, it became clear that a discourse had developed within the senior management group that made the fourth tier a scapegoat but without any attempt to determine ways in which this perceived reality might be tested. Language, particularly when expressed as propositional knowing, can obscure rather than illuminate.

Kupperman suggests that many people, when considering our capacity to know reality, fail to differentiate questions at the level of Q1 from the second level: “Q2: What extra-linguistic properties does the table, in fact, have?” This level of question is concerned with an engagement with reality that is not mediated through language. In the civil service organization my question might be reasonably rephrased as, ‘what are the extra-linguistic properties of fourth tier management that might constitute a problem for culture change?’ At first sight this might sound relatively straightforward. However, when taken seriously, following Bertrand Russell’s observation, this question is ‘really one of the most difficult that can be asked’. What we ‘know’ about the reality of ‘fourth tier management’ is questionable and requires an active agnostic process that is prepared to rigorously investigate it.

This paper is interested in questions at the level of Q2 and to use this as a spur to more intense exploration. The error of the senior manager described above was his certainty in ‘knowing’ the source of ‘the problem’. This had two negative consequences: closing down any meaningful exploration of the challenges of leading culture change and, to the extent that the statement was challenged, defending rather than inquiring into the status of this knowledge.

The practical benefit of a consideration of the unknowable is that it can facilitate a freer engagement with the challenges of complex organizational situations. It is, however, no guarantee of better decision making, which would presume the generation of provable knowledge.

The Touch of Reality

The argument here is broadly constructionist or interpretivist: ‘according to these paradigms, reality remains unknowable because it is impossible to reach it directly’ (Thietart 2001, p. 16). However, the position taken is one of moderate social construction in that it is assumed that reality exists, albeit unknowable, and knowledge pertaining to that reality is socially constructed through interactions and conversations within and between individuals and groups. Knowledge is constructed in the act of sense making that draws upon a combination of the experience of the present moment (Hadot 1998; Simpson and French, 2006) and the constructs, narratives and discourses that exist as building blocks for the construction process (Tsoukas 1997; Weick 1995).
More significantly, however, the approach taken here is only ‘broadly’ social constructionist because of a belief in the ability to engage directly, that is extra-linguistically, with the unknowable and, in Bion’s (1984/1970) terminology, for there to be a ‘transformation’ from the realm of unknowable reality into the realm of knowledge (see also Eigen, 1998).

There is a tradition, largely forgotten within academia, of another way of understanding reality that utilizes ‘nous’ or ‘intellectus’, which refers to a capacity to ‘see’ reality without the filters of language. There is a directness in this vision or ‘touch’ of reality that is separate from thought. Russell (1946) summarizes the views of Plotinus on the ‘touch’ of experience appreciated through the capacity of ‘nous’ or ‘intellectus’ when he says,

> At the moment of touch there is no power whatever to make any affirmation; there is no leisure; reasoning upon the vision is for afterwards. We may know we have had the vision when the Soul has suddenly taken light. (p. 314)

This is what Eckhart has called “a kind of unknowing knowing” (Smith 1987 p. 41) and is a direct engagement with experience that provides extra-linguistic answers to questions at the level of Kupperman’s Q2. Such an engagement with experience can be a powerful impetus for personal narrative. The surprise of the ‘touch’ energizes the soul to try to explain and explore why and how it ‘has suddenly taken light’.

Modernity is characterized by a lack of attention to unknowable reality and to things of the soul. The dual influences of the Age of Enlightenment and Utilitarianism led to a focus on knowledge that was amenable to reason, not dependent upon faith traditions and authority figures, and of a form that could be seen to relate to tangible, useful consequences. In his study of leisure and contemplation Pieper (1999/1952) contrasts work, the laborious construction of reality, with leisure, which is understood as a receptive attitude of mind, an acceptance that embraces creation and one’s place within it. Such ‘leisure’ – different to our modern conception of the term - is associated with intellectus whilst ‘work’ is associated with ratio, the form of understanding, based upon reason, with which modernity is more comfortable. The tone of such leisure is celebratory, concerned not with what one has done or could achieve but in who and that one is. He suggests that the modern world has lost the capacity to engage in life in this way and argues that the practice of leisure requires this largely forgotten form of understanding:

> The Middle Ages drew a distinction between the understanding as ratio and the understanding as intellectus. Ratio is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and of examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions. Intellectus, on the other hand, is the name for the understanding in so far as it is the capacity of simplex intuitus, of that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye. The faculty of mind, man’s knowledge, is both these things in one, according to antiquity and the Middle Ages, simultaneously ratio and intellectus; and the process of knowing is the action of the two together. The mode of discursive thought is accompanied and impregnated by an effortless awareness, the contemplative vision of the intellectus, which is not active but passive, or rather receptive, the activity of the soul in which it conceives that which it sees. (p.9)
Narratives of Personal Experience

Personal experience methods (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994, 2004) focus upon narratives and stories through the analysis of transcripts (Cortazzi 1993, Czarniawska 1998, Riessman 1993). The agnostic position has led some to argue that the difficulty in the analysis of experience suggests that texts are the only source of meaning. From this position the study of texts and the means by which they are constructed becomes the primary focus of analysis. However, Clandinin and Connelly suggest that narratives of personal experience provide a ‘middle ground’:

[The] case is made that when persons note something of their experience, either to themselves or to others, they do so not by the mere recording of experience over time, but in storied form. Story is, therefore, neither raw sensation nor cultural form; it is both and neither. In effect, stories are the closest we come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history.’ (1994, p415)

Narratives of personal experience are thus interpreted as a product of the creative interplay between raw experience and cultural discourse. ‘Raw experience’ is the experience of unknowable reality. However, engaging with this experience of unknowable reality, through narrative processes, will engender the social construction of knowledge.

In Figure 1 the social construction of reality is represented in the interplay of personal narratives and cultural discourse. Through ratio, narratives of personal experience are socially constructed in relation with others. This is a complex and emergent process that draws not only upon the personal history of the individual but also on available cultural discourses that provide a range of narrative material, including popular themes, understandable concepts and acceptable plotlines. Our stories are largely recognizable to others in both form and content. We follow accepted rules of storytelling, we use narrative devices, and we construct accounts with meanings that resonate with what is meaningful to others.

Figure 1: Narratives of Personal Experience socially constructed from personal history and cultural discourse
Within Western culture those who adopt a social constructionist position are predominantly socialized into this view of knowledge generation. However, this omits any consideration of the possibility of experiencing reality directly. If we accept that this is possible - which must be an act of faith, for it falls outside the realm of reason, ratio - then there will be a separate but linked process. Figure 2 provides a representation of such a process by which intellectus engages directly with the ‘raw experience’ of unknowable reality in the present moment.

**Figure 2:** Intellectus: the direct apprehension of reality

Figure 3 combines these two forms of knowing and demonstrates how the ‘direct apprehension of unknowable reality’ may then undergo a transformation from the realm of the unknowable into the realm of knowledge, adding to the material that may be used in the construction of narratives of personal experience.

**Figure 3:** Narratives of Personal Experience linking the unknowable and knowledge
This link between the apprehension of unknowable reality via *intellectus* and the social construction of meaning through *ratio* is articulated in Pieper’s (1999/1952, p.9) notion of ‘the activity of the soul in which it conceives that which it sees’. The contemplative vision or ‘touch’ of *intellectus* will be a stimulus for the construction of narrative of this encounter with ‘raw experience’. Narratives of personal experience may thus make a particular contribution to the process of engaging with unknowable reality. Such an apprehension of reality will, on occasion, have a significant impact upon the narrator; the ‘touch’ of reality perhaps surprising or enlightening. This will find its way into the narrative, at times even with ‘transformational’ consequences (Bion 1984/1970).

**Implications**

It has been argued that it can be fruitful to engage with the experience of not knowing. If there is merit in learning to attend to the unknowable reality of the present moment then there are some significant implications for leadership practice that require further exploration. Three aspects of the leadership of change have been highlighted in the discussion.

Firstly, change processes will inevitably have greater levels of uncertainty than the status quo. Uncertainty can be disabling, resulting in a diminished sense of agency. Conversely, it may provoke the unjustified application of ‘knowledge’ that is embodied within habitual managerial discourses. Narratives of personal experience engage with uncertainty in a manner that can be emotionally settling and support a reasoned consideration of possible courses of action.

Secondly, leaders tend to be seen as, or expected to be, the one’s who know. Embracing the agnostic position, not passively but receptively through *intellectus*, may free the leader from pretence to engage with the realities of the situation.

Finally, leaders may benefit from an appreciation of the largely forgotten source of understanding in *intellectus*. An awareness of the potential of this ‘unknowing knowing’ might encourage the leader to explore alternative sources of insight in their deliberations, perhaps through sharing with others their narratives of personal experience.
References


