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From “clientilism” to transformational leadership? An autoethnographic journey from Soviet Georgia to the UK

Journey from
Soviet Georgia
to the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ethnographic tradition in the educational leadership literature through providing an autoethnographic critical analysis of the idiosyncrasies of leadership across two different socio-political environments: a Soviet educational establishment and a contemporary UK higher education institution.

Design/methodology/approach – In a previous issue, Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) argued that autoethnographic approach could help to uncover some experiences and voices that previously were silenced due to the discomfort they caused. In response to this claim and with consideration of three epistemological possibilities of autoethnography as suggested by Doloriert and Sambrook (2012), the author uses narrative accounts of personal experiences of leadership in Soviet Georgia and in the UK as the main source of data in the attempt to demonstrate how the three epistemological positions overlap and complement each other in the context of a critical autoethnography.

Findings – The paper argues that autoethnographic approach can provide a unique opportunity for a simultaneous analysis of the particularities of leadership practice across different socio-political environments, whereas the “three positions” approach could be used as an expedient template for further exploration of educational leadership. The paper also suggests there are some parallels between current leadership practice in the UK higher education and Soviet system of “clientilism”.

Originality/value – This paper is one of the first attempts to use autoethnography as an analytical tool for comparing leadership patterns in two contrasting socio-political structures.

Keywords Higher education, Soviet, Leadership, Autoethnography, Clientilism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Even a brief look into the current system of higher education in the UK enables an observer to witness a visible change from being a social field with a high degree of autonomy and the ability to operate more or less independently from the State to becoming the State’s social appendage, where it has been almost completely submerged in the values, constraints and priorities of economic and political forces associated with neo-liberalism. Though the influence of neo-liberalism in education is obvious, it is not confined just to the UK educational system, but has an immense global impact. As academics across the world continue their struggle against external pressures, researchers (Giroux, 2004; Shore, 2008; Nixon, 2011; Garratt and Forrester, 2012) encourage educational leaders to contest and push back the limits of neoliberal assault on education and continue to cultivate critical retort and collegial resistance to “the scourge of Neo-liberalism”, as Giroux (2004) put it.

Notwithstanding a vast richness of literature on educational leadership, very little work in this field seems to have engaged in comparative theoretical discussions about the perceptions and professional applications of leadership across different socio-political terrains. In a previous issue, Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) argued that autoethnographic approach could help to uncover some experiences and voices, which were distorted or silenced because of the discomfort they caused. The authors also identified three epistemological points of departure for an autoethnographic study to include: evocative interpretivist approach conveyed through the writing of emotional accounts, analytical



approach where conceptual frameworks support autoethnographic process and, finally, a radical approach, where power relations are examined. Using Doloriert and Sambrook's (2012) theoretical template and in response to their claim, this paper aims to contribute to the long-established ethnographic tradition in the educational leadership literature to advocate that an autoethnographic approach can provide a unique opportunity for a simultaneous analysis of the particularities of leadership work within two contrasting socio-political environments: a Soviet educational establishment and a contemporary UK higher education institution. The author's curiosity was also piqued by the ambition to use critical analysis of the embodied autobiographical accounts to detect some parallels between current "transformational" leadership within the UK higher education and a Soviet system of "clientilism".

Autoethnography as an analytical tool

The initial step for any researcher is to focus upon their ontological and epistemological perspectives as well as on the formulation of appropriate research methodology. Nevertheless, before discussing autoethnography as an analytical tool for dissecting my leadership experiences, it is useful at this point to highlight the complexity of the notion of leadership as such, starting with Meindle *et al.*'s (1985) view of educational leadership as an elusive and inscrutable concept, the standpoint that is supported by a vast number of studies in leadership (Bass and Stogdill, 1990; Rost, 1991; Bryman, 1992; Gronn and Ribbins, 1996; Mumford *et al.*, 2000; Barker, 2001; Yukl, 2010; Burns, 2010; Northouse, 2016). Due to a sheer number of studies dedicated to leadership, attempting even to define leadership as a concept can in itself become an everlasting discussion, so for the purpose of this study one of the more common definitions from Bass and Stogdill (1990, p. 20) will be considered, which seems to embrace the key aspects of leadership in more general terms by delineating effective leadership "as the interaction among members of a group that initiates and maintains improved expectations and the competence of the group to solve problems and to attain goals". Though one can contend that some of the motives that underline examples of leadership within this paper do not always correlate with the "improved expectations and the competence of the group", since a thorough inquiry into the moral and ethical aspects of leadership practice was not intended to be included in this paper, more emphasis has been given to the process of solving problems and attaining goals rather than looking into the motives behind any specific actions.

A further challenge related to defining the boundaries of my discussion of leadership in this paper is related to the multidimensional nature of the concept that is reflected in an on-going debate in the research circles on the approaches to leadership, cultures and constituent parts of leadership as well as on the differences between leadership and management (Kotter, 1990; Hofstede, 1997; Maccoby, 2000; Hull and Ozeroff, 2004; Burns, 2010; Northouse, 2016), and a seemingly particular interest in the taxonomies of leadership styles (Bass and Stogdill, 1990; Grint, 1997; Spillane, 2006; Zaccaro, 2007; Northouse, 2016). Notably, one of the very first studies in leadership styles (Lewin *et al.*, 1939) identified three main patterns in leaders' behaviour: authoritarian, participative and laissez-fair, whilst a more recent study by Yammarino *et al.* (2005) recognised 17 different leadership styles as presented in contemporary research literature, thus creating an immense complex historical and philosophical topography for consideration and/or exploration of leadership styles. It is helpful to mention here the model of situational leadership by Hersey and Blanchard (1988), who suggested that there is no single all-purpose leadership style, as leaders continuously adapt their behaviour to meet the demands of specific situations. Since a deeper analysis of the idiosyncrasies of each leadership style falls outside the scope of this paper, the focus of further discussion would be specifically on transformational leadership as the key value system presented to me during my leadership practice in the UK.

One of the first theoretical conceptualisation of transformational leadership belongs to Bass (1985), who saw the role of transformational leaders as the agents of change, capable of fundamentally transforming the vision of people and organisations, while clarifying the reasons behind those changes seen as permanent, self-perpetuating and momentum-building. From this position, transformational leadership can be perceived as interplay between the behaviour of leaders and followers, creating a contrast with a transactional leadership style with its specific focus on motivating followers' compliance with a leader's requests and organisational role requirements (Yammarino *et al.*, 2005). As explained by Bass and Avolio (1993), transformational leadership happens when leaders uphold the interests of the employees, while motivating them to prioritise the organisational goals over their self-interests. Burns (2010), however, suggested that the core of transformational leadership concerned leaders and followers working together towards a higher purpose, which in practice may not necessarily entail an organisational change. A number of studies also made a link between transformational leadership and leaders' charisma (Hunt *et al.*, 1999; Antonakis *et al.*, 2003; Yammarino *et al.*, 2005; Yukl, 2010), though, as pointed out by Antonakis and Day (2017, p. 75), "even though this research is mature, there is still much to be done; just like in the medical sciences, where researchers constantly update treatments for diseases, so too must we find better measures and better interventions". Indeed, deeper interventions into the theoretical foundations of transformational leadership seemed to have yielded a number of critical comments (Birnbaum, 1992; Bryman, 2007) in relation to its boundaries with other leadership styles, the main arguments in these studies suggesting that, despite the tendency to place a special value on transformational leadership in education, it would be wrong to infer that educational leaders should be purely "transformational" in their approach, as effective leaders do not exhibit one style of leadership exclusively. According to Bryman (2007, p. 15), "the inference that different situations call for a different leadership style, and the belief that approaches such as transformational leadership are likely not to be effective in some situations, are gaining increasing support in contemporary research". Against this theoretical background, and with consideration of the three epistemological positions of autoethnography as suggested by Doloriert and Sambrook (2012), I can now turn to the next point of my discussion: the application of the autoethnographic approach as an analytical tool.

It is important to state at this point that I did not expect my research to fit into a certain prescribed model within a currently existing disarray of philosophical opinions and approaches. Any attempt to provide a "clear-cut" differentiation has only been used for the purpose of providing a structure for the discussion and to help me, as a researcher, to illustrate roughly my position within the multiplicity of shades on the existing palette of methodological approaches. More importantly, my aim was to consciously undertake research that was honest and consistent with my values and beliefs. As Punch and Oancea (2014, p. 19) pointed out:

It can be very tempting to draw a neat line and "position" oneself on one side of the debate, with all the implications that the positioning may have for the process and purposes of research and for the way the researcher's identity is defined. But this neat positioning, carries the risk of foreclosing creative opportunities for research and of freezing identities into an artificial landscape of paradigmatic and disciplinary crevasses. In many cases, coherence and depth of thought, coupled with a degree of irreverence, may enable more fulfilling research experiences and more interesting contributions to research conversations than strict and deferential paradigmatic loyalty.

My study was based on qualitative data drawn from specific examples within a certain social and political contexts, therefore it had been socially constructed from multiple realities, in which people were the main actors. For that reason, positioning myself within the interpretivist methodological domain seemed to be more appropriate and theoretically justified.

The basic differences between positivism and interpretivism have been clearly explained by Henn *et al.* (2014, p. 3), who suggested that:

[...] the chief protagonists here are, on the one hand, social researchers who follow a broadly positivist approach in their work, claiming that the social world can be studied “scientifically”, where the aim is to uncover laws which explain human behaviour. On the other hand, a second interpretivist tradition suggests that we can only account for human behaviour if we are able to understand the motives and intentions that underpin human action.

Similarly, O’Donoghue (2007, p. 17) clarified that, as opposed to positivism, interpretivism “concentrates on the meanings people bring to situations and behaviour, and which they use to understand their world”. By confirming my ontological position as an interpretivist one, I accepted that different individuals experience and comprehend the same reality in very different ways and, in order to understand human action, we need to see the world through the eyes of the actors doing the acting. Since researchers’ ontological positions are a reflection of their philosophical perspective, the researcher’s methodological preferences are ultimately “framed” by those ontological commitments. As Crotty (1998) suggested, an interrelationship exists between the theoretical stance adopted by the researcher and the researcher’s choice of the methodology and methods used. As my research seemed to sit comfortably within the interpretivist tradition, my methodology and methods of collecting data had to conform with my commitment to that approach.

As the title of the paper suggests, my investigation was based on researching my personal journey as a leader with a particular emphasis on comparing and contrasting my leadership experiences, while living in Soviet Georgia and, later on, in the UK. So essentially, my methodology was built around “me researching myself”. My awareness of certain level of cynicism amongst researchers about the value of self-study has casted a shadow of doubt on the appropriateness of this approach. For example, Lunenberg *et al.* (2010) stressed the risk of self-studies becoming idiosyncratic and narcissistic, while Zeichner (2007, p. 37) pointed out that “this type of professional research appears to be problematic as it lacks credibility to our external audiences stemming from a lack of emphasis on the content of what has been learnt and its contribution to knowledge”. These opinions, however, seemed to disregard the fact that all research studies within an interpretivist paradigm are, to a certain degree, self-studies, as the researchers always interpret the data from the lens of their own theoretical position, and therefore, cannot expect the impact of their self-reflection to be completely excluded from their analysis and research findings. This reminded me of the philosophy behind the famous painting of Velazquez “Las Meninas”, which made it especially apparent how viewers interpreted the reality of the painting that was being interpreted by the painter himself, who was also a part of the painting’s composition. The actual question here is really how close the researchers can get to their participants and the data, as no interpretivist research, or any type of research for that matter, can be “sterile”. From this position, it seems impossible to argue against the fact that the closest proximity to the research data can be obtained through “researching oneself”. Addressing the position of the researchers to their research, Mooney (cited in Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13) wrote: “Research is a personal venture which, quite aside from its social benefits, is worth doing for its direct contribution to one’s own self-realization [...] Who a researcher is, is central to what the researcher does”.

Using self-study as the basis for my research brought me to the idea of using a methodological approach of autoethnography that is “an autobiographical genre of research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). As Reed-Danahay (1997) put it, autoethnography is a form of ethnography, which makes the researcher’s life and experiences the focus of the research. Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno- (the sociocultural

connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process). When applied specifically to the context of leadership, I consider it useful to mention here Gunter's (2001) taxonomy of the four main positions in leadership studies – critical, instrumental, scientific and humanistic, where the latter seems to be directly relevant to my methodological approach, as it “gathers and theorises from the experiences and biographies of those who are leaders and managers” (Gunter, 2001, p. 95). Similarly, Gronn and Ribbins (1996) argued that using the methodology of autoethnography helped to acknowledge the importance of context in the social construction of leaders and leadership systems as it provided a better way for dealing with followers' implicit theories than mainstream conceptions of leadership. Correspondingly, Kempster and Stewart (2010) highlighted the value of autoethnographic approach in researching leadership practice, seeing autoethnographic narratives and life as inextricably connected, since the former provided an intellectual space for conscious exploration of personal experiences with the purpose of illuminating the complex processes of leadership practice through a reflexive, episodic self-narrative. Indeed, as supported by Sambrook *et al.* (2014), autoethnography is particularly well suited to getting “at the depth” of workplace practices, weaving together participant and researcher experiences and accounts to yield greater insights.

There is no agreement within the research community on whether autoethnography should be defined as a methodology or a method, an argument that seems to cause some overall tension related to the differentiation between methodology and methods in general. A number of researchers (Ellis, 2004; Chang, 2008; Custer, 2014; Denzin, 2014) tend to refer to autobiography as a research method, while others (Parry and Boyle, 2009; Reed-Danahay, 1997) refer to it as “approach to a research study” or “research methodology”. If we agree to accept Kaplan's (cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2011) position that methods refer to techniques and procedures used in the process of data-gathering, and aim of methodology is to describe approaches to kinds and paradigms of research, this would help my intention to rationalise the definition of autoethnography as a methodology for my study, while my autobiographical narrative would serve as a method for data generation. When it comes to autoethnographic research, as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001, p. 15) highlighted, “what counts as data expands greatly, and researchers face the difficulty of representing, presenting, legitimating, analysing, and reporting one's own experience as data and of doing so in honest, not self-serving, ways”. A slightly different perspective on the subject is offered by Ellis and Bochner (2000), who suggested that in autoethnography, the researcher was the subject, and the researcher's interpretation of the experience was the data. Using this position from Ellis and Bochner (2000), my autobiographical narratives served as the main source of data in this enquiry. At this point it is worth acknowledging here the limitations related to this investigation, as the data presented for analysis contains only a brief snapshot of my leadership experiences. To interpret in full depth the correlation between my leadership practice in Soviet Georgia and, later on, in the UK, additional data would be required, which only an extensive systematic study of the subject could provide. Since broader data collection and analysis were unsuitable for the purpose of this small-scale investigation, my inquiry contains only a glimpse of the issues and dilemmas of leadership in two contrasting cultures.

So in terms of a “one size fits all” model for carrying out an autobiographical research, there does not seem to be a cookbook containing a single recipe that would help me produce a delicious dish to be equally appreciated by everybody. To rephrase a famous quote from W. Somerset Maugham, there are three rules to writing a good autoethnography. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are [...].

Nevertheless, just writing a personal story or a self-reflective narrative does not constitute a research study, yet, as Hamilton (1998) suggests, if a researcher can show that the acknowledged conventions of research have been followed with care, including

recognised methods of inquiry, then the researcher can assert the authority of his claims and produce good quality research. Feldman (2003) argued that in addition to criteria for the quality of research, researchers need to have ways to demonstrate its validity because of the moral and political aspects of educational research. In relation to my research, Feldman's point would have been true here, if the ultimate goal of my investigation was for it to have a direct impact on the university, students, and staff, as well as, perhaps, have implications for policies and policymakers. However, the purpose of my research is not necessarily to suggest practice improvements, as I do not intend to focus on the pragmatic aspect of my leadership practice. I am not seeking to find "truth" in which leadership style is right or wrong, a position that that is analogous to the one of Garratt's (2014, p. 343), who asserted:

My interpretive omnipotence is imbued in the fragmentary moments of fictive and corporeal reality, where meanings associated with, and attached to others' actions arise in an ethical context that initially promises, but ultimately defers "truth".

Instead, the intention of my research was to use autoethnographic approach as an analytical tool to dissect my leadership journey across two contrasting socio-political systems to gain further insight into how my experiences may have heralded internal transitions from one leadership style to another, and how these transitions have collided and/or intersected with each other.

Ethical considerations

Though the nature of an autoethnographic research limits the number of ethical issues that need to be considered within the process, the key message from BERA (2011, p. 4) applies to all aspects of such research, ensuring that educational researchers weigh up "all aspects of the process of conducting educational research within any given context (from student research projects to large-scale funded projects) and to reach an ethically acceptable position in which their actions are considered justifiable and sound". Following BERA Guidelines for Educational Research, all data within this small-scale investigation has been made anonymous, including personal names, specific locations and the names of educational settings.

Autoethnography as an emotional account: exploring the journey from Clientilism to transformational leadership (going beyond the self)

I was born in the 1960s in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Being an only child, I received a vast amount of parental attention and career advice, which – reflecting my own aspiration from an early age – was exclusively focussed on pursuing a teaching qualification. Following my graduation with a bachelor's degree in teaching English as a foreign language (TOEFL), I had several teaching jobs throughout my career, a few of which also involved different levels of leadership responsibilities. Inexplicably, the most vivid memories of my early leadership experiences are related to my work at one of the primary schools, where, alongside my teaching role, I was also offered a leadership position with line-managing responsibilities.

These experiences are associated with a picture of me entering the school principal's office clinging to a piece of paper, where my weekly achievements and failures were handwritten, and which I used as a script for my weekly reports. The principal, I will call him here "Moisei Moiseevich", was always sitting in the exact same position in his enormous leather armchair surrounded by a cloud of smoke coming from a cigarette "Kosmos" that was the most expensive brand in the late 80s in Georgia. He never acknowledged my presence immediately, but gave it a couple of minutes before lazily waving his hand towards a seat at the far end of the table without taking eyes of the paperwork in front of him.

Moisei Moiseevich's behaviour was a remarkable exhibition of a typical Soviet leader who had a grandiose sense of self-importance and was preoccupied with the idea of his unlimited power. This kind of behaviour was exhibited by the majority of leaders, who were members

of the Communist Party, which at that time was considered almost a *carte blanche*. It was only those with the Communist Party ticket who were allowed into the high leadership positions and further promotions. Bass and Stogdill (1990) describe with an incredible precision socio-political facets of the Soviet regime with its focus on economic determination of the course of history coupled with the dictatorship of the proletariat, which laid out strong messages about “who shall lead and what is expected of the leadership” (Bass and Stogdill, 1990, p. 42). These facets moulded the leadership identity of our school principal as well as thousands of others working in high positions across all business, educational and cultural establishments of the USSR. Consequently, these facets also shaped my behaviour as a leader and a subordinate of the “big boss”:

The next stage of the meeting was always the same [...] It involved me telling Moisei Moiseevich which of the planned targets had been achieved and which ones had been failed. He listened to me intently with his eyes half-closed leaning back in his chair and never making any comments. The end of the conversation was also rarely different: he would clear his throat and speak slowly and firmly only raising his voice gradually to ask me whose fault it was in relation to the failed tasks. There was no point hiding the truth by saying that we worked as a team, as it was always an individual who was at fault and who deserved to be punished in some way or another. Being a new Head of department, I had no skills or stamina to resist or challenge Moisei Moiseevich, so the next question for me was always the same: how to bring the news to the team without causing anybody a major emotional distress.

This extract from my autobiographical narrative exemplifies the most fundamental aspect of my early leadership practice based on “patron-client” relations, also known as “clientilism”. With respect to the operation of patron-client relations as they existed in the Soviet Union, Clark (1993, p. 151) argued that the main three conditions for clientilism were “(a) promotion of one’s interests as a continuing member of the leadership; (b) promotion of one’s factional interests; (c) promotion of interests associated with one’s general policy sympathies”. The dominance of these clientelist practices made it easier for Moisei Moiseevich and, to a lesser degree, for myself, to use powers of our leadership positions to cultivate loyalties among those below us in the hierarchical order. Moisei Moiseevich (my patron) supported my interests as his client in return for my support in promoting his interests amongst staff (my clients). This scenario was representative of the Soviet power structure in general, which essentially consisted of groups of clients attached to their patrons. As Gill (1980, p. 181) noted:

The significance of the development of such informal political machines based on patron-client relationships can be substantial for both patron and client alike; reciprocity is the key, although this may not be equal. For the client, the informal machine can represent both security and promotion. [...] For the patron too the possible benefits are great. For people in responsible positions at many levels of the party, excessive criticism from below can be not only embarrassing but also politically dangerous. If this can be short-circuited through the creation of a personal following, a leader’s position is thus rendered more secure.

Another reality of my leadership practice in the Soviet time was a widespread corruption and bribery:

Things just got worse, when our school entered a regional competition for the best results in four subjects: Russian Language and Literacy, Mathematics, History and English. As always, unrealistic targets were set, but this time we had no escape route whatsoever – we had to meet the targets no matter what. The competition involved selecting 10 best pupils who will then have to take a written test and an oral examination. The exam panel consisted in our school teachers in relevant subjects and two representatives from the Georgian Ministry for Education. The team realised that the bar was set too high, and our chances to win were infinitesimal. Following a team discussion we agreed to provide several intense support sessions for the selected pupils, however we knew that it was not enough [...] Then an unexpected order came from Moisei Moiseevich to

find out who the external examiners were and take them out for a dinner before the day of the competition. This was not an uncommon strategy in Soviet times, where most of business decisions and deals used to be agreed in restaurants!

Interestingly, corruption and bribery that I witnessed (or, at times, initiated), while working in the Soviet school, were not related to gaining any material or financial profit by the school principal or any of the school staff. On the contrary, it was directed at raising the school status in the public sphere – ironically, via the betrayal of public trust. Nevertheless, the motives of those who accepted the bribe were, obviously, quite opposite. As Pomorski (1989, p. 113) confirms, “bribery in itself is major perversion of administration, since it always involves a betrayal of public trust. Moreover, it exerts a powerful ripple effect on administrative practices, since it often causes public officers to deviate from the officially expected courses of action in order to serve the interests of bribe givers (or those on whose behalf the bribe givers act)”. In these circumstances, uncertain and dubious leadership practices created opportunities for organisational rent seeking and other types of parasitic behaviours (i.e. blat – the use of personal contacts to gain certain benefits):

Collegiality was not a popular concept in Soviet times, so I always felt I could make my own decisions as a leader and then tell my team just to follow my instructions. Actually, I was well-known in school for that exact phrase – “just do it!” – which my staff threw back at me in a teasing way now and then.

The interaction between patrons and clients within the Soviet leadership structure were not multi-faceted. The two main leadership styles, as defined by Paraschiv (2013) - describing how leaders exercise their authority: democratic leadership (leaders want to obtain consensus among followers and value their input) and authoritarian leadership (leaders seek out and consider only minimum input from their followers and consult with them less) – were almost completely replaced by, what I would call, a manipulative clientilism, where the power of patron was unlimited and where the few existing rules were interpreted and manipulated in the ways that suited the patrons. Meanwhile, the clients were always at fault of either not showing enough initiative or showing too much initiative that tended to be considered disobedience and, even, rebelliousness.

So essentially, the Soviet system that boasted democratic approach to all aspects of Soviet reality, in fact, lacked the most important and absolute condition for democracy, which Robinson (2007) described as freedom from personalised power. According to Robinson (2007), democracy had to be free of personalised power because that is what made the contest to represent popular sovereignty a contest. Popular sovereignty could not be truly represented in its totality, so it is “an empty space, impossible to occupy”; the result is that democracy “is the power of nobody” (Robinson, 2007, p. 1217).

Being stuck in this kind of professional and ethical cul-de-sac for a number of years, I was looking forward to a fresh start in my teaching and leadership career in the UK, as a senior lecturer and a programme leader:

“Why are you still working? Come to bed!” – this is one of my earliest UK leadership memories, as I seemed to be constantly answering endless e-mails and writing reflections on numerous staff development events, something that I did not have to do in my previous “Soviet life”! I also remember how different my very first meeting with my line manager was compared to my experiences of working under the leadership of Moisei Moiseevich. A very smiley and slightly over cheerful secretary politely asked me to wait in the reception, where I was immediately offered a hot drink and a couple of magazines to keep me entertained, while I was waiting. Shortly after that I was invited into my new manager’s office, and there I was instantly conscious of the striking differences in the behaviour of my new manager compared to my previous Soviet experiences: a smile, a handshake and a comfort of an armchair immediately created a relaxed and encouraging atmosphere, taking away my anxieties and concerns. There was no toxicity, no humiliation, and no cigarette smoke fumes [...] And soon after that there was another novelty in my experiences

[...] Transformations [...] Transforming [...] Transformational [...] These words seemed to have dominated almost every staff development event that I was invited to attend within my new leadership role.

The key messages that I have received at this stage of my leadership journey were mainly related to transformational leadership, which was presented to me as the main tool to be employed by the leaders within HEIs to help them respond to the demands of continuous government reforms to achieve the highest levels of students' achievement and satisfaction. Continuous references were made to such aspects of transformational leadership as motivating the teams and leading by example. These messages seemed to have been in line with the ideas from Bass (1985), who claimed that transformational leaders displayed four main behaviours: inspirational motivation, idealised influence (serving as role models), intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration.

So, in terms of my previous leadership practice, I felt, originally, that I had to make a complete U-turn from my previous position to become a transformational leader within my new leadership role. Moreover, I was also faced with further dilemmas in terms of what exact goals will I be leading my teams towards using my new transformational leadership "toolbox". As defined by Bush (2011), transformational leadership rests under the umbrella of collegial models of leadership, where organisations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion, and where power is shared among the members of the organisation who are thought to have a shared understanding about the aims of the institution. The aspects of "sharing power" and "having a shared understanding", however, did not fit as neatly into my day-to-day leadership practice, as I encountered multiple instances of top-down non-negotiable decisions supplemented by unenthusiastic responses to such decisions from my teams. Nevertheless, alongside the process of becoming a transformational leader, I also experienced a very personal transformation from the world of Soviet leadership to a much more democratic system of an open decision-making and, as noted by Sisk (2003), in many ways, a system of conflict management that provided predictable procedures in which collective decisions could be taken without the risk that undermining the opinion of the leader would mean grave misfortune. Indisputably, moving to the new transformational style of leadership allowed me to move away from the underlying principle of the Soviet approach to education and leadership that was embedded in the psychology of behaviourism, where the process of learning was seen as a system of behavioural responses to physical stimuli driven by reinforcement (Beattie, 2015). At the same time, my journey from the Soviet system to the new experiences of leadership in the UK has encouraged my deeper self-reflexion on personal professional practice as a senior leader within the field of higher education institution, making me look more intensely into the interrelations of leaders and followers, as well as to examine critically the principles of leadership, where the systems of governance in higher education institutions in the UK, though much more collegiate than the Soviet system, still appeared far from being ideal, as I struggled to find a perfect synergy of leadership and power in a volatile climate of tensions between the sought after academic autonomy and the increased pressures of accountability. (Beattie, 2017). Using Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) analogy, these critical self-reflections gave me an additional chance of re-examining not only my leadership practice but the ways in which the system of education has been manipulated by the current social, political and economic forces. This takes me to the next point of my discussion – using autoethnography as a tool for exploring power conflicts, as suggested by Doloriert and Sambrook (2012).

Autoethnography as a tool for exploring power conflicts

My early experiences of leadership in HE were related to working within and with turbulent teams, where strong personalities and unrestrained emotions featured at the top of my

list of challenges. That was not a completely new encounter for me, as my previous “Soviet” experiences taught me a lesson or two about dealing with uncontrolled emotions. The main task for me as a leader was to create a positive working environment, which could not have been achieved without the ability to handle my own emotions as well as understanding the emotions of my colleagues. That was the time when I started learning about the concept of “emotional intelligence”. At the same time, I tried to make connections with my previous experiences and see whether there are any lines of correlation and whether any of my previously used strategies can be of any use.

From the very beginning of my leadership career in the UK, I realised that providing genuine “inspirational motivation” and “idealised influence” was proving to be a mammoth task, as I felt that my good intentions as a mid-leader were being squashed by both the pressure from above - i.e. the demand to reach certain performance targets, and beneath – pacifying my turbulent teams, who were getting increasingly dissatisfied with the changing patterns of their academic work “in the process of forging a new, fragmented professional self: ‘researcher’, ‘administrator’, ‘teacher’ and more recently ‘entrepreneur’” (Morley, 2003). My self-reflections at that time were very much in line with the ideas of Sotirakou (2004), who stressed that mid-level leaders acted as a vital buffer between the academy, the market and the State, mediating between the demands of the central university administration and the desires of their fellow academic team members. Some relief was found via the exploration of the concept of emotional intelligence that was originally popularised to a bestseller level by Daniel Goleman. All models of emotional intelligence, including the one of Goleman (1995), seemed to have contained references to more or less similar sets of dimensions, focussing mainly on understanding and managing self as well as understanding and managing others. Looking back at my previous leadership experiences, I could see the evidence of my ability of being in-tune with my teams and being an empathetic communicator within both Soviet and UK environments, however these reflections have also made me realise that exercising this kind of emotional intelligence at any level could not yield adequate results unless the leader himself felt comfortable within the vista of his educational establishment and a wider educational context:

When I accepted a promotion into a higher leadership position in 2007, HEIs were already experiencing a climate of financial austerity that involved harsh budget cuts, growing competition for markets, obsession with student satisfaction as well as blossoming of the audit culture. This was a big disappointment for me, as I was hoping to see a dramatic difference between the deteriorated integrity of the Soviet educational systems and the thriving culture of democracy and creativity within the UK university ethos. Having worked in leadership roles in the UK for almost 10 years, I have started to fear that these trends were going to continue to distort the objectivity and collegial nature of HE education system. As my understanding of leadership has continued to broaden, I reflected more critically on my own leadership skills and styles and could see how social and political changes have been affecting the trajectory of my development as a leader. It is more and more often I feel that, just like in Soviet times, my key role is to produce good results and to keep everybody happy no matter what. The Universities’ obsession with the National Student Survey and student satisfaction, as well as consumer-oriented criteria of quality have reduced my role as a leader in teaching, learning and research to a position of a “reports writer”, where I have to produce weekly reports (just like in those good Soviet times!) on the progress of our department towards the main targets [...].

Researchers (Boud and Walker, 1998; Cunliffe, 2004; Busher, 2006) agree that the development of self is a reflective process in which person’s leadership skills are shaped through the reflected-upon interactions within a variety of educational settings, where people constantly seem to struggle with tensions between their adopted ideas and the vision dictated to them by their institutions. As Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher (2009) explained, the collision of the academic (and private selves) with the intrusion of markets, bureaucracy and auditing mechanisms as well as the culture of accountability and managerialism

challenged the intellectual space and freedoms of academics, creating a frame for re-professionalisation and de-professionalisation, where existence as subordination is preferable to not existing at all (Morley, 2003). These ideas closely resemble my leadership experiences during Soviet times (clientilism), where all educational structures had umbilical connections to the dominant party ideology (namely, the Communist Party, which was the only legitimate party at that time) and were characterised by three main features: uniformity, top-down administration and one-man management (Kuraev, 2016).

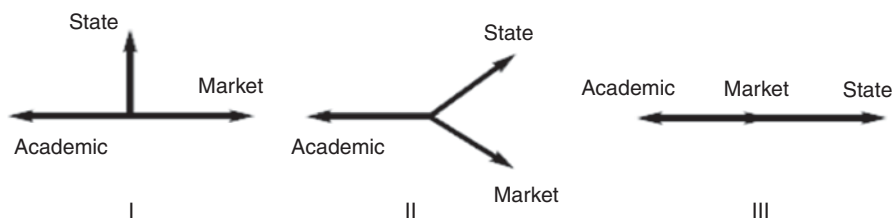
A useful, though, perhaps, a slightly simplistic, pictorial interpretation of the changes within the role of the state in relation to the UK Higher education is provided by Williams (cited in Sotirakou, 2004).

The diagram (Figure 1) shows the move of HEIs from being neutral self-governing institutions pre-1980s to a position, where the state has begun to underpin the market, leading to the current situation, when the state tries to promote managerial values above those of the academic community, which management is meant to serve. Williams (cited in Sotirakou, 2004) clarified that in particular, there has been a shift from input-based budgeting, where the state supplies educational services, towards output and performance-based budgeting in which institutions receive resources by selling their services to various customers. These processes contribute to the development of academic capitalism that is defined by Munch (2016) as a unique hybrid, which turned universities into enterprises competing for capital accumulation, and businesses - into knowledge producers looking for new findings that can be turned into patents and profitable commodities. According to Jessop (2017), this adaptation of educational institutions is mediated through the hegemony of discourses around the “knowledge-based economy” as opposed to the knowledge society. Indeed, this economic and social imaginary seems to be guiding the structural reform and strategic reorientation of education, contributing to the emergence of “an already posited, but still incomplete, transition towards knowledge-based economies” (p. 854).

Final thoughts

So far this small-scale research investigation attempted to use autoethnographic approach to provide a brief critical reflection on the key aspects of my role as a leader within my current occupation and explicate my leadership styles based on autobiographical narrative of my “journey” from a Soviet school to a higher education institution in the UK. As previously mentioned, the analysis of selected examples from my leadership practice was not intended to serve as a tool for a discovery of best practice or unveiling truth with any level of certainty.

Nevertheless, using autoethnographic approach allowed me to make a couple of tentative observations that have implications for both leadership practice and further research into the subject. First, there seem to be a number of similarities in the way leadership relationships have been balanced within the Soviet system of education and that of the UK. We can see that the agenda for education is always constructed by those in power, which, in



Source: Williams cited in Sotirakou (2004, p. 347)

Figure 1.
The three forces
in the higher
education system

a way, explains the nature of these similarities. Within both systems educational structures have been controlled and regulated by those who have been in political power aimed at promoting and sustaining a particular version of educational system and the purpose of education, as such. This, consequently, contributed to the process of shaping the leadership traditions within both cultures. As Gunter (2001, p. 8) observed, “leadership can be seen as the process and product by which powerful groups are able to control and sustain their interests”. In taking inspiration from Gunter’s argument, I deduce that what was presented to me as “transformational leadership” at staff development events, is not necessarily what I have encountered (as well as exercised) in practice, being compelled to follow the “clientilism” model under the pressure from more “powerful groups”. This position creates an additional opportunity for a further investigation into the construct of leadership as a realm of power encounters within the UK educational system alongside the associated forms of knowledge that regulate leadership practices by defining and “normalising” modern educational institutions.

Second, this study allowed me to perceive the investigative potential of critical autoethnography not only as a methodological vehicle for self-reflection on personal practice but as an expedient point of departure for a deeper investigation of the existing state and the future possibilities of educational leadership under the neo-liberalising regime of academic governance. As argued by Tierney (1998), educational leaders’ engagement with autoethnography can allow them to go beyond the study of self towards confronting dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim marginalised representational spaces. So essentially, I hope that this piece of work will promote the use of autoethnography as both an “emancipatory discourse” (Richards, 2008) and a medium for enquiry and self-reflection.

And finally, I argue that using three epistemological possibilities of autoethnography as suggested by Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) could be used as an expedient framework for further exploration of educational leadership. There is no doubt that the process of critical autoethnographic reflection on personal professional practice as well as on the current political agendas is gaining more attention amongst academics in their aspiration to find a stronger voice and presence within these agendas, policies and powers that operate above educational establishments. This is insightfully summarised by Wall (2008, p. 38), who asserted that “autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding”. In line with this aspiration, the “three positions” approach have provided me with a useful template for a critical reflection on personal experiences of leadership practice across different socio-political terrains, allowing me to blend evocative writing technique with analytical approach and exploration of power conflicts.

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