

# Distributed leadership in HE: A scaffold for cultural cloning and implications for BME academic leaders

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## **Abstract**

While participatory models of distributed leadership have gained traction across the higher education sector in the UK (Bolden et al., 2009) it is also the case that forms of exclusion continue to defy aspirations for improving diversity in senior leadership across higher education. This paper contends that an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership has, in effect, provided a framework through which 'cultural cloning' can thrive and most importantly where the exclusion of black minority-ethnic academics can be camouflaged as normal business. This paper uses 'cultural cloning' as a methodological tool to analyze the implications for black ethnic-minority academics against the structures, processes and politics of this participatory model of distributed leadership in higher education. It concludes that in the interest of exclusion and uniformity, an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership in higher education has become a utilitarian scaffold that is both 'a means to an end' and 'an end in itself'.

## **Keywords**

Distributed leadership, cultural cloning, BME academics, higher education

## **Introduction**

Since the early 2000s, the higher education (HE) sector has been subject to calls for a shift from 'control' models of governance towards more inclusive styles of leadership, such as distributed leadership (Hartley, 2010; Bush, 2013). Distributed leadership comes in many forms (Spillane et al. 2004) and Dowling-Hetherington (2016: 271) describes current distributed leadership strategies as "the diffusion of power across an institution...in a collegial management approach". Gronn (2002) identified two types of distributed leadership. Firstly, aggregated leadership behaviour where leadership is the outcome of interconnecting initiatives by a variety of people. This paper is based on his second type which he identifies as concertive action from a process of individuals working together and where the leadership collectively generated is more than the sum of its parts. This paper recognizes this participatory model of distributed leadership as not providing agency of individuals but instead providing "structurally constrained conjoint agency or concerted labour performed by pluralities of interdependent members" (Gronn, 2002: 28). This paper is

based on a participatory model of distributed leadership defined as the structuring of formal leadership responsibilities (Hartley 2010) and as task distribution in a collegiate environment (Robinson, 2008; Spillane, 2006). In this paper, this participatory model is conceived as lateral structures of senior leadership positions with inherent democratic characteristics (Woods, 2004), such as the inclusion of difference and a variety of views. For example, in their case study research, Woods and Roberts (2016) found that “distributed leadership was felt to be real within the school, and is meaningful in a positive sense for many of the staff” (2016: 148). but also noted there was also an awareness of ways in which this was unequally spread across the school.

In this paper, democratic values align closely with liberal values such as equality of treatment and justice (Beecher, 2013). It is however necessary to distinguish this concertive action participatory model of distributed leadership from the concept of democratic leadership which as a form of leadership is dependent on initiative and influence being distributed throughout the organization and which recognizes both individual agency and decision-making. According to Woods (2004) decisional rationality is integral to democratic leadership, but not so distributed leadership. This participatory model is also distinctive from a collaborative model which is defined by Woods and Roberts (2018) as emerging from the perpetual process of complex interactions across the school involving not only school leaders but teachers, support staff, students and others.

In the emerging debate, the locus of democratic values within this model of distributed leadership in HE has been raised as cause for concern (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Woods, 2016; Lumby, 2016; Gronn, 2016). Writers (Bolden et al., 2009; Youngs, 2017) have expressed concerns about the realisation of key liberal values such as inclusivity and the promotion of equality of opportunity. Reflecting on the importance of democratic values in participatory models, Kezar (2001), in her study exploring leadership fit, suggests that although this model should, it does not always, assure that a diversity of voices are included. Kezar (2001: 92) argues that those who felt unaligned and excluded fall into four categories:

*‘(i) those with critical perspectives; (ii) people who have an entrepreneurial style and are very goal driven; (iii) people who are more introverted; and (iv) faculty who believed that administrative work should not be defined as leadership. An interesting finding is that women and minorities are disproportionately represented in the first and third groups’.*

This paper recognizes a participatory model based on concertive action, actively brokering, facilitating, and supporting the leadership capabilities of those who have been selected for these formal positions (Harris, 2013). Harris providing an analysis of evidence, argues that under the right conditions, these models of distributed leadership enable leaders to strategically utilize available talent to create new teams, essentially give individuals greater responsibility and thus positively influencing promotion and careers. Harris (2013: 551) suggests that “the issue is not one of increasing the numbers of leaders but rather one of increasing leadership quality and capability” in those selected to participate. This paper recognizes the importance of these potential professional benefits and this paper warns that a participatory model can equally shroud the use and misuse of power and prerogative (Bolton et al., 2009) – to prevent some groups from reaching their full leadership potential.

In 2007, Hartley (204) broached a question that remains unanswered.

*"If the emergence of distributed leadership is not supported by a powerful theoretical underpinning and evidence-base, then what might be the political considerations which are giving it prominence?"*

In recent years, new managerial priorities (e.g. the widening participation agenda, students as paying customers, growing influence of student voice and increased regulation) have resulted in the debate about the potential of participatory models of distributed leadership (Youngs, 2017; Floyd & Fung, 2017) to overcome persistent challenges in the sector. One such development has been the significant increase in the number of Black Minority-Ethnic (BME) students entering HE. While generally perceived as a positive step, the evidence also indicate that levels of achievement and employment for this group continue to lag behind those of other ethnic groups (Winston, 2014; Havegal, 2016). This new and complex environment has contributed to the perception that in seeking effective solutions to, e.g. improving outcomes for BME students and addressing the lack of diversity in HE leadership, there is a need to include more BME academics in senior leadership positions.

This paper uses the concept of 'cultural cloning' as a methodological tool to demonstrate how both the marginalisation of ethnicity and the justification for exclusion have been framed by an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership. In the absence of a strong theoretical base, this paper argues that, dependent upon who may be implementing this strategy, distributional leadership can be employed to propagate division and exclusion. This paper also advocates that participatory forms of distributional leadership, wherein diversity and empowerment are enabled, should be more than an aspiration in HE.

### **The problem of lack of diversity in senior leadership in HE**

The lack of representation of Black Minority Ethnic (BME) and Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) academics at the top levels of senior management in higher education institutions (HEIs) is a recognized problem. In this paper, these two common acronyms are used interchangeably and inclusively as crude cumulative groupings for people of colour. Coco Khan, writing in the Guardian on 17 November 2017, outlines the persistence of the problem in UK universities:

*"The statistics bear this out. Universities are seeing record numbers of BAME students in attendance but this diversity has not translated to staff, particularly at senior level. The Higher Education Statistics Agency has recorded no black staff as 'managers, directors and senior officials' in the last three years. A 2015 report from the Runnymede Trust showed just 0.5% of professors is black...At the highest level, there are just three BAME vice-chancellors in the UK's top 50 universities...None of them have worked their way up through the traditional academic pipeline. It begs the question: in UK universities, do we have a problem with promoting BAME staff?"*

Research confirms that barriers continue to hinder the progress of BME academics into senior management positions (ECU, 2011; 2012 & 2014) and some have linked barriers to notions of cultural deficit (Pilkington, 2013; Cramer & Harris, 2015), recognition of cultural differentiation (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013) and deficient procedures for managing diversity (Arday, 2015; Shilliam, 2015).

In 2002, Essed (9) suggested that in order for diversity management to transcend the level of managing difference among workers at the lower levels of the organisation, "management itself

must represent a diverse body of perspectives and people". Fast forward to 2016 (209), and Miller writes:

*"There is....a growing body of research literature which suggests that diversity in higher education has become 'primarily a matter of documentation, audits and bureaucratic paper trails' (Bhopal and Jackson, 2013:2)...The ECU (2011: 46-47) reports that some initiatives have failed due to 'the absence of resources and authority for the initiative, and sometimes fatigue and apathy towards new initiatives where previous staff experiences tend to be of unsuccessful initiatives that achieved neither substance nor sustainability'".*

In relation to the weight given to diversity policies as drivers for change, Ahmed (2007) suggests that the mere existence of policy documents is not necessarily an indication that race equality is being dealt with. By using a lens of cultural cloning to explore structural, procedural and political barriers arising from the implementation of an undemocratic participatory model of distributed leadership, this paper contributes a unique perspective to the ongoing debate about institutional racialized operandi and the exclusion of BME academics from senior leadership positions in HE.

### **Cultural cloning**

Cloning is most often recognised as a biological process of reproduction and the notion of cultural cloning follow a similar definition - 'the reproduction of sameness'. Essed & Goldberg (2002: 1067) argue that this is a "phenomenon deeply engrained in the organisation of contemporary culture, in social life generally, and in the racial, gendered and class structures of society". While biological cloning has been constrained in its progress, in contrast, cultural cloning - same-kind preference reproducing privilege in terms of race, gender and ethnicity (Essed, 2002) - has not been subjected to the same scrutiny or indignation. The recognition of cultural cloning as established practice in different kinds of organisations have been explored by a number of writers (Gantrel, 2002; Kendall, 2006; Essed & Schwab, 2012) and since 2003, there has been a consensus that an accepted normative preference for sameness should be problematised, whether this may occur as a result of explicit choice or hegemonic consensus.

By utilising this concept, this paper does not seek to dismiss the fact that today's leadership across the HE sector is more diverse than it was when Essed published her 2004 classic paper on cultural cloning among the academic elite. Whilst recognising that educational leadership today is more inclusive of e.g. women, racial-ethnic minorities, and disabled people, this paper argues that diversity lightly scattered across the sector is far from statistically representative. A premise of this paper is that such limited progress does not preclude nor negate the influence and impact of homogenising pressures at a deeper level.

This paper argues that a model of distributed leadership with anti-democratic features facilitates a deceptive narrative and provides structures and processes that have sustained 'a politics of sameness' across the top flight of HE leadership. Cultural cloning and the politics of sameness in HE is examined through (i) an exploration of practice that embed loyalty as a feature of vertical and horizontal structures, (ii) an examination of processes that reproduce and present cultural sameness as normal and (iii) a discussion of how aversion to difference has been normalised as part of a fabric of illiberal values. This analysis of cultural cloning is founded on the assumption that equal treatment and equal opportunity form part of the minimum conditions required for organisational probity in contemporary society (Seward, 2009).

### **Structure: scaffold for loyalty using vertical and horizontal structures**

Ideally, participatory models of distributed leadership would be strategically designed as horizontal structures that are by and large accepted as democratic (Harris, 2013). Given that formal positions within a participatory model of distributed leadership can signal recognition of professional talent, bestow valuable professional development opportunity and confer authority (Diamond & Spillane, 2016), these roles have become coveted positions across the sector. As a consequence, the democratic nature of these models must be subject to scrutiny (Jones, 2014).

Whilst we recognize the increased use of participatory models of distributed leadership it is crucial to also recognize that, in HE as with schools, the traditional hierarchical nature of leader authority continues to enjoy recognition and respect across the sector (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Thus, in spite of the impetus to move away from 'control' models of governance (Jones, 2014), the continued presence of hierarchical authority in HE has the potential to disrupt the democratic

nature of a participatory model by instilling lines of authority and decision-making that are in effect contrary to a concertive participatory model of distributed leadership.

This paper argues that, a participatory model of distributional leadership with a carry-forward of traditional hierarchical authority can result in the coalescing of power – around two anti-democratic features of governance (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017; Jones & Harvey, 2017) (i) irregular power given to the leader at the very center of this model and (ii) lines of loyalty to the leader's views, biases, preferences and decisions by those appointed to these formal positions. According to Berger & Luckman (1966: 111), legitimacy enables leaders to dictate "why things are the way they are". Beckman (2017) argues that loyalty within an authority-driven model of distributed leadership is established by creating conditions wherein leaders can expect that the meanings, biases and preferences they wish to promote will be upheld by others within this leadership structure.

In other words, when hierarchical authority is retained within participatory structures, this can, in effect, create opportunities for the corruption of the pluralistic characteristics of participatory models of distributed leadership (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017; Youngs, 2017). With strong elements of hierarchical authority there is the potential for leader's priorities, preferences and prejudices to be adopted as policy at the expense of policies based on democracy and pluralism (Youngs, 2017). Therefore for hierarchical leaders, participatory models of distributed leadership can be attractive - providing a structure of disseminating voices able to re-affirm leader's priorities as stable, and importantly, presented as unquestionable collegiate priorities (Youngs, 2017; Beckman, 2017).

Loyalty is a common feature of hierarchical models of governance and in order to craft loyalty across a participatory model of distributed leadership this paper argues that HEIs have fallen foul of two constitutive errors:

- (i) 'Loyalty to the leader' is often considered synonymous with 'loyalty to the organisation'. As a consequence, personalised loyalty (as opposed to a collective of talents) becomes the value that holds this leadership structure together - to the detriment of diversity and democracy.
- (ii) 'Loyalty to a single message' is often considered synonymous with 'an absence of differing voices'. As a consequence, securing membership of a participatory structure

becomes erroneously linked to securing sympathetic voices - to the detriment of diversity and democracy.

This paper argues that in relation to the lack of progress of BME academics into participatory leadership positions, a carry-forward of hierarchical authority amidst participatory models of distributed leadership have, in effect, provided the means for HEIs to systematically operate an (undemocratic) inclusion and exclusion policy. In seeking and prioritizing loyalty within leadership structures, many HEIs have sought to structure leadership positions so as to secure sympathetic voices rather than seek diversity and pluralism.

### **Process: presenting relational sameness as normal**

An authentic model of participatory model encompasses discussion, debate, sharing of ideas and collegiate team working focused on finding creative and effective ways of overcoming specific problems or achieving pre-defined goals (Jones, 2014). In order to achieve this, Jones suggests that it is necessary to build the conditions for enabling and facilitating wider participation through democratic processes.

However, research studies as far back as Davidson (1997) and as recently as Cramer & Harris (2015) show that BME employees often find it necessary to downplay aspects of their cultural identity in order to assimilate themselves into intra-organisational environments. Both Ragins (2010) and Wyatt & Silvester (2015), suggests that there is considerable evidence that BME employees are less likely to find powerful or influential mentors and that as a consequence they have less opportunity to establish the required cultural friendships and interactions with individuals who are able and willing to support their promotion to higher level positions (Miller 2016).

In effect, they are, due to social and racial differences, less likely to be seen as a 'good fit' into participatory models which are designed to operate through a white cultural lens. The evidence suggests that an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership provides a vehicle for preserving certain comfortable relationships to the exclusion of relationships that may be perceived as more probing.

According to Croce (2014: 307), difference is an existence condition for sameness. He suggests:

*“Something different to explain and capture.....and enable the members of a given group or community to recognise each other”.*

For both Bourdieu (1998: 9) and Croce (2014: 307), sameness is conditional upon difference.

While, Bourdieu’s (1998) classic work was focused on the issues of class, his well-articulated views on the notion of a ‘force of sameness’ provides an opportunity to apply this well-established concept to a contemporary view of racial exclusion. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept, the argument here is that a ‘force of sameness’ can act as the glue to bind the members of a participatory model of distributed leadership and enables them to routinely exclude certain individuals on the basis of perceived ‘fit’.

In contemporary HE, an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributional leadership can provide, according to Bourdieu (1998: 9) *“units based on excluding those groups likely to jeopardise the sameness of their social and political community”*. These undemocratic processes (e.g. undemocratic selection) which actively censure difference, are designed to build a community of sameness and recognise those who do not belong to it (Croce, 2014).

Croce's exploration of how meaning first becomes the exception and then becomes normal can help us to understand how undemocratic interpretations of participatory processes have been able to promote relational hegemonic consensus as ‘normal’. He suggests that organisational structures and processes are all about taking care of the ‘normality’ and the argument here is that a model presented as a participatory model of distributed leadership can give the impression to the workforce that these processes are representative, normal and acceptable. In effect, the emphasis is on designing and implementing processes that can both uphold hegemonic consensus and also be presented as normal and acceptable. In this way, it becomes possible for the (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership to normalise exclusion and celebrate sameness. Schmitt (2005: 13) suggests that:

*“normality’ and ‘sameness’ can be conflated into a cognate phenomenon, as ‘the same’ emerges out of ‘the normal’, while ‘the normal’ is what it is only insofar as it succeeds in indicating what is ‘the same’”.*

Despite opportunistically conflating hegemonic sameness with normality, (undemocratic) participatory models of distributive leadership, are commonly viewed by the HE workforce with some cynicism (Ahmed, 2007; Bhopal & Jackson 2013) . However, it is also secured by shades of defeatism among the workforce (Bhopal et al., 2015). This is a persistent problem for BME academics - Bhopal (2018: 166) states, "...and I'm not going to shy away from saying it, at these appointment panels - within these processes - there are covert, sometimes overt, nuances of racism". -

### **Social fabric: an aversion to difference**

A common view of liberal values is that it is a feature of democratic settings that seek to accommodate inclusivity and a plurality of views (Salazar, 2016; McSwiney & Cottle, 2017). Processes that promote liberal values are those designed to open up bordered spaces to plural interactions where everyone can contribute and co-exist as members of a democratic political community and according to Woods and Roberts (2016) and Harris (2007) describes authentic distributed leadership .

According to Woods, democracy is a key element of distributed leadership wherein democracy is itself “dependent on initiatives and influence distributed throughout the organization” (2004: 23). In this way distributed leadership practice including participatory models, if democratically implemented, can signal clear liberal and pluralistic principles across the organization (Floyd & Fung, 2017). In addition, Floyd and Fung suggest that inclusive goals and pluralist values of the institution become more apparent and established when leadership practice is itself democratic.

Thus, when features of an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership are present, this in effect, signals a filtering out of liberal goals from institutional values. In 2003 (87), Knight et al. with reference to institutional values argued that "embedded social and

organisational factors often mitigate against even the most well-qualified BME leaders" and, they suggested that future research should examine ways to reduce 'aversion racism' in the workplace. Knight et al. (2003: 87-88) focuses on the notion of 'aversion racism' which they define as:

*"A subtle but insidious form of prejudice that emerges when people can justify their negative and prejudicious feelings towards BME individuals based on factors other than race".*

For example, Bhopal (2018) argues that BME academics feel the goal posts are often moved when they apply for jobs or promotion. More recently, Wyatt & Silvester (2015) and Showunmi et al (2015) show that BME academics experience more difficulty reaching senior leadership positions than do their white counterparts.

This paper argues that an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership inspires an organisational scaffold that, in effect, give legitimacy to the acceptance of illiberal practices - most prominently - the rejection of diversity, pluralism and collective decision making (Bhopal et al., 2015; Festekjian et al., 2013). This suggests, that an (undemocratic) participatory model can both stem from and at the same time proliferate illiberal values across the organization – securing a social fabric soaked not in the liberal rules that confer recognition of difference and inclusion but one in which the rules prescribe a rejection of difference and an embrace of sameness.

This paper warns that undemocratic interpretations of participatory models of distributed leadership in HE can be seen to both inspire and sustain an institutional fabric of illiberal values. It argues that distortion and or neglect of liberal values across the fabric of any university must be a cause for concern and that the link between (undemocratic) participatory models of distributed leadership, discrimination in leadership practice and general diffusion of illiberal values across universities demand further investigation.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored aspects of an (undemocratic) participatory model of distributed leadership and argues that cultural cloning is achieved through three anti-distributed leadership

features: (i) vertical and horizontal structures that build regime loyalty through an absence of differing voices, (ii) the use of organisational processes to normalize hegemonic sameness as routine leadership practice and (iii) to inspire a social fabric soaked in an aversion to difference cascaded to all levels of the organisation. Most importantly, this scaffold is entirely flexible and these three anti-distributed leadership features may be manipulated at a different pace and at different times, as necessary in order to determine clonal outcomes.

Finally, if we consider Hartley's (2007; 204) question "*If the emergence of distributed leadership is not supported by a powerful theoretical underpinning and evidence-base, then what might be the political considerations which are giving it prominence?*" It is argued that (undemocratic) participatory models of distributed leadership are, in effect, utilitarian scaffolds that can legitimise inclusion and exclusion policies, normalise hegemonic sameness and re-produce discrimination. This paper concludes that in relation to exclusion and uniformity, (undemocratic) participatory models of distributed leadership in HE has become both 'a means to an end' and 'an end in itself'.

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