Having knowledge: How handbooks are shaping the way we think and work

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review of


When I started this book review of The SAGE Handbook of Leadership, I asked myself a question we often ask of texts in our field: what is useful about this book for scholars? This seems a benign question. So benign, particularly given that this is a highly useful handbook, that for quite some time I didn’t think I had much to say in this review. In short, this is a very ‘handy’ book that lives up to one of its purposes to be ‘a key point of reference for researchers’ (xi), and should be, as one of the endorsement blurbs says, ‘on every leadership scholar’s bookshelf’. So, I thought about all the ways I have used this handbook to help me in my work: as a reservoir of references, as an entry point to a given leadership topic, as a source of delight when reading the writers I admire. The more I thought about how I use this text, the more I started to wonder if there wasn’t something deeply problematic about how I was relating to it, which has led me to ask: what do these handbooks tell us about how we’re using and producing knowledge, particularly in leadership studies but perhaps also more broadly in management and organization studies? This short review essay will address this question, but first I’ll briefly outline the handbook’s contents and strengths.
Edited by five of the field’s most prominent leadership scholars, the handbook brings together 38 chapters written by 64 authors. One of the key editorial intentions was to capture the theoretical and methodological plurality of a highly fragmented field. Therefore, the text is divided into five main sections, beginning with historical and methodological overviews, moving to more macro and sociological perspectives, then on to political and philosophical approaches, followed by psychological and psychoanalytical perspectives, and finishing with a group of loosely-termed ‘emerging’ perspectives that range from followership and complexity leadership to relational and discursive perspectives. The table of contents reads as a ‘who’s who’ of leadership scholarship and the majority of contributors are professors (only five of the 64 authors are doctoral students).

Some chapters seem to fixate upon the difficult task of reviewing a whole field in 8,000 words, leaving the reader at times questioning how some of the chapters really offer something different to the many excellent review articles already available. Leadership studies does seem to be a field that likes to review itself. However, there are other writers who are aware of this tendency and proceed to skillfully review the field while offering new interpretations, arguments, or theoretical lenses, such as Dennis Tourish’s ‘Leadership and Cults’ chapter, Peter Case, Robert French, and Peter Simpson’s ‘Philosophy of Leadership’ chapter, and Amanda Sinclair’s ‘Being Leaders: Identities and Identity Work in Leadership’ chapter to name a few.

In order to consider what this handbook tells us about how leadership knowledge is produced, it is important to consider the case the editors make for why this book is ‘necessary’ (xi). Firstly, the rhetoric of diversity and heterogeneity is used to justify the necessity of this text. Leadership studies is ‘one of the most extensively researched topics in management studies’, and it is ‘changing rapidly as new perspectives and methodological styles proliferate’ (xi). This disciplinary diversity of the field is celebrated, not least because it also makes leadership a ‘highly relevant area of inter-disciplinary contemporary scholarship’ (ix). However, there’s a sense that this diversity is also risky as it could lead to an increasingly fragmented field riddled with a series of divisions and boundaries that become increasingly protected, to the success of some and the detriment of others. Therefore, a handbook like this that draws together a multitude of perspectives could be one attempt to consolidate the field and mitigate the negative effects of fragmentation.

The editors also allude to the ‘fertile’ and arguably frenetic publication rate of leadership scholarship that ‘continues to grow apace to the degree that current research can sustain’ three leadership journals (ix). Indeed, it is precisely because ‘it is such a productive field’ that ‘it is difficult for even specialist scholars to keep
up with its breadth and it is even more difficult for new scholars to break into it’ (ix). On the face of it, then, this handbook is necessary to retain and sustain scholars’ interest and to combat the exclusionary possibility of leadership scholarship. But this last quotation says so much about leadership scholarship. Why is leadership scholarship being produced and published at such a rate that even the ‘specialists’ themselves can’t keep up with it? How does a handbook in which chapters are written primarily by established professors really help new scholars ‘break into it’ – wouldn’t they be able to break into it more effectively if they had been invited to write a chapter for this edited collection? And why, when they acknowledge that it is difficult to keep up with the pace of publication, do the editors call for even more research and ‘reinforce the process of broadening out and stretching the theoretical and empirical agenda of leadership studies’ (xi)?

The handbook therefore hopes to contribute to the production of more leadership scholarship. Whilst this idea of production and progression is on the one hand understandable, it is also problematic. Many of the chapters are infused with the assumption that constant progress is necessary and therefore they follow a pattern similar to: ‘here’s what has been done, here’s how we’ve progressed over the years, and here’s how we can further develop, address, and advance research’. Aside from the very few chapters that suggest alternative movements like critique, questioning, or deconstruction, the overall tenor is to ‘generate new lines of inquiry’ (xi), despite the fact that what’s pitched as new and innovative in leadership writing often has a sense of déjà vu (Hunt and Dodge, 2002).

This reification of progress is problematic as it impacts on how we as readers and scholars relate to the text. There’s something sadly instrumental about approaching each chapter with the attitude of a) what knowledge can I get from this to use for my publication (or, as one of the chapter’s authors said to me, ‘people read these chapters so they don’t need to read anything else’), and/or b) how can I use this chapter to generate a new publication? This orientation to the text has many similarities to Erich Fromm’s ‘having’ mode of existence, in which people’s relationship to the world ‘is one of possessing and owning’ (1979: 33). We have come to believe that ‘I am more the more I have’ (1979: 15; emphasis in original). Fromm outlines the impact this having mode of existence has on how we learn, read, converse and know. In brief, we quickly consume texts or ideas by asking what we can use from them, what we can ‘have’ from them, in order to bolster the knowledge we have. As a result, we remain ‘strangers’ to the content, forgoing the opportunity to deepen our connection, insight, and understanding of human nature (1979: 37). Given the proliferation of leadership handbooks that are currently available (and more are on the way – Oxford University Press are soon to release The Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organizations), it could be
argued that the handbook business is simultaneously appeasing, responding to and sustaining this ‘having’ orientation to knowledge.

The question thus arises: what are some of the consequences for knowledge if we approach handbooks with this ‘having’ orientation? Firstly, it raises questions about how leadership scholars create new ideas. I am reminded of a comment I heard from an American-based leadership professor, in which she described that all one needs to do to create a popular leadership concept (and in doing so secure one’s career) is to choose an adjective that hasn’t yet been claimed and place it in front of the word leadership – just what has been done with charismatic, strategic, authentic, spiritual, team, transformational, political, cross-cultural, ethical, virtual, relational, hybrid and so on (these are all terms used in the chapter titles of the handbook). It is perhaps no surprise that given how densely populated the field is, one needs to employ rhetorical or branding manoeuvres like this in order to have an impact. But it does raise questions about our relation to consuming knowledge (‘if it doesn’t grab me with a fancy concept, I’ll overlook it’) and our relation to producing knowledge (‘I need to invest more time in the “packaging” of my idea’). It’s no wonder, then, that a recent discussion on the leadership list-erv, entitled ‘leadership thinking needs a drastic overhaul’ (Rausch, 2012), where the author argued that we need a ‘new’ and ‘practical’ theory of leadership that consolidates leadership theory to produce a criteria that could apply to all leaders, was forwarded to the CMS list-serv and responded to by a scholar who describes leadership as ‘the pornography of the B-School – a titillating group of fantasies that are seldom relevant to the average workday of the average B-school graduate’ (Jacques, 2012). Another scholar agreed that ‘it is time to be more vocal in challenging colleagues who peddle this stuff and engage in healthy debate, that is tell them most of it is bollocks’ (Thomas, 2012). Given these sharp critiques, one could argue that leadership handbooks engage in legitimization work on behalf of those scholars who invest much of their careers in producing leadership scholarship, but who may be all too aware of their colleagues who describe their work as ‘bollocks’.

So, I round this essay off by returning to Fromm and his hope that we may live with a ‘being’ mode of existence instead, one which asks us to consider how we can relate to knowing, learning, loving, reading and conversing differently. Where rather than reading to have knowledge, to use it in quite narrow and constrained ways, to get by on the bare minimum we need to know, we consider how we relate to the texts we encounter and create with a spirit of spontaneity, aliveness, joy and deep connection. However, as Fromm (1979: 38) quite rightly points out, this orientation, where the ‘student has been affected and has changed’, can only prevail if the text offers stimulating material – a warning future handbook editors may wish to remember.
references

Fromm, E. (1979) *To have or to be?* London: Sphere’s books.

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