Taking a Narrative as Social Practice Approach to the Romance of Leadership, What New (Critical) Insights Are There to Be Had?

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Abstract

Research that investigates the romance of leadership (ROL) neglects the real-world practice of romancing leadership. In order to address this lacuna, this paper investigates new (critical) insights that a narrative as social practice approach may bring to ROL. Using stories from a celebrity interview as data, this paper analyzes how the social practice of storytelling romances leadership. Reflexively considering the relationship between knowledge of leadership and the situated process of producing knowledge of leadership, findings add to prior work by making visible not only how organizational players romanticize leadership as part of in situ social practice, but they also demonstrate what romanticizing leadership 'does' as part of social practice. The paper closes with a discussion of the implications and new (critical) insights that taking a narrative as social practice approach to ROL can offer, and it argues for a more critical, and destabilizing, approach to teaching leadership in business schools and beyond.

Key words

critical leadership studies, discursive leadership, narratives as social practice, reflexivity, romance of leadership

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Introduction

Who leaders are and how they 'do' leaderships are fundamental questions of leadership research. Whilst leader-centric approaches which focus on the (presumed) leader and his/her behaviors and character traits dominate the field of leadership research, nevertheless a substantial body of research has shifted focus to consider the way in which leadership is in the eye of the beholder. A consequence of such an attributional view is that, on the one hand, leadership may be conceptualized as a (convenient) way of explaining organizational outcomes and, on the other hand, individual leaders are romanticized and attributed inflated abilities to affect organizational outcomes (Bligh, & Schyns, 2007; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Meindl, 1995).

To date most – though by no means all (e.g., Clifton, & Mueni, 2021) – research into the romance of leadership (ROL), as with most leadership research (on this point, see for example: Antonakis et al., 2004; Fairhurst, 2007; Klenke, 2016), has been firmly rooted in a psychological paradigm in which attributions are considered to be "a perceptually derived species of social cognition in which people assign causal explanations to events, situations and actions" (Edwards, & Potter, 1993, p. 23). Assuming that the words of the respondent constitute a clear and accurate reflection of these mental processes, the primary research method for making visible the romancing of leadership has been to elicit opinions through questionnaires, surveys, and interviews. The 'raw' data gleaned from such investigations are then often separated from their site of production and rearranged by the researcher through, for example, a process of coding to reveal descriptions from which central tendencies are then abstracted, quantified, and measured. Moreover, such research is generally unreflexive because it does not question the relationship between the researcher and any claims to knowledge that may be made by "'turning back' on knowledge, truth claims, language, and texts to make them more transparent" (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 985). Whilst research based on questionnaires, surveys, and interviews has no doubt added greatly to our understanding of leadership, nevertheless it often relies on data that is generated in circumstances that are far removed from everyday practice. Little ROL research has sought to investigate the attribution of leadership from alternative and more specifically discursive paradigms, using data that are based on direct observation of social practice – what organizational players actually do, rather than what they say they think and do when faced with researcher-designed prompts.

In order to redress such an over-emphasis on research procedures that are removed from in situ social practice, this paper takes a discursive approach to leadership (Fairhurst, 2007). More specifically, it takes a narrative as social practice approach (De Fina, & Georgakopoulou, 2015) to the process of romancing which moves away from focusing on narratives as decontextualized artefacts to considering them as sequentially organized constructions which are embedded in the local business of the storytellers and which perform social actions. Taking such an approach to the in situ practice of romanticizing leadership enables the researcher to make visible, and therefore analyzable, not only how storytelling[2] attributes leadership to either self or others, but it also opens up the potential to reflexively address how knowledge of leaders and leadership is constructed and to critically assess what this achieves as in situ social action. Such a discursive approach to ROL, therefore, allows researchers to respond to Collinson, Smolović and Grint (2018) observation that ROL studies are lacking a critical edge and their call for further studies that "explore how the language and discourses of leadership may reflect and reinforce romanticism" (p. 1640). More specifically, the research question this paper addresses is: what new (critical) insights are there to be had by taking a narrative as social practice approach to the romance of leadership?

In order to do this, after discussing prior research on the romance of leadership (ROL) and introducing a narrative as social practice approach to analyzing stories of leadership, this paper offers a single case analysis of naturally-occurring[3] storytelling in which leadership is romanticized and a causal relationship is established between the leader and organizational outcomes. Following the analysis which showcases and advocates a narrative as social practice approach to the analysis of romancing leadership, the paper then goes beyond the face-value of the narrative to reflexively consider how romancing leadership constructs knowledge of leadership and what this achieves. The paper concludes by arguing that such a critical and reflexive approach to narrative can unsettle the romancing of leadership and provide a critical edge to ROL that could have a practical payoff for teaching leadership.

The Romance of Leadership

[2] Whilst some researchers make a distinction between narratives and stories, for the purpose of this paper, we treat these terms as synonyms.

[3] The term naturally-occurring is used to refer to talk and text that, rather than being produced in experimental settings, is produced as part of in situ social practice.

In a nutshell, ROL posits that leadership is in "the eye of the beholder" (Meindl, 1995, p. 331). Leadership, from this perspective, is neither located in the leader's character traits nor in his/her behaviors and actions, rather it is located in the way in which one accounts for organizational outcomes. Leadership becomes romanticized to the extent that it is attributed to self or others and perceived to be, or even "glorified" as (Bligh, & Schyns, 2007, p. 343), the "*premiere force* in the scheme of organizational events and outcomes" (Meindl, & Ehrlich, 1987, p. 93 italics added).

Whilst some researchers (e.g., Collinson, Smolović, & Grint, 2018) argue that the romance of leadership stretches back beyond Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich (1985) seminal paper, nevertheless it was this paper that initiated a flurry of research into the way in which leadership and individual leaders are romanticized. Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich (1985) study used both archival and experimental data. The archival research consisted of tracing the interest in leadership in the popular press, doctoral dissertations, and general business periodicals and linking this with economic performance. The experimental research consisted of asking undergraduate students to respond to a series of vignettes (i.e., researcher-authored short stories about hypothetical characters in imagined circumstances) with modified outcomes and to rate the extent to which they "considered the leader to be an important causal determinant of the performance outcome" (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985, p. 89). This research was followed by further studies, and has now developed into a well-known and accepted strand of leadership research (for reviews of this literature, see, for example: Bligh, & Schyns 2007; Bligh, Kohles, & Pillai, 2011; Collinson, Smolović, & Grint, 2018; Hammond et al. 2023).

Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985) initial research also led to the development of a Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS) which was used to measure respondents' perceptions of the role of leadership as the cause of organizational outcomes (Meindl, 1998, cited in Schyns, Meindl, & Croon, 2007). The RLS consisted of a survey-based questionnaire which included statements such as: "a company is only as good or as bad as its leaders"; "with a truly excellent leader, there is almost nothing that an organization can't do"; and "even in a bad economy, a good leader can prevent a company from doing poorly" (Schyns, Meindl, & Croon, 2007, p. 44). The scale became an integral part of further studies which often combined the use of vignettes, or similar, with the use of the RLS (see, e.g.: Bligh, Kohles, Pillai, 2005; Hino, & Aoki, 2013; Schyns, & Hansbrough, 2012).

A criticism of the use of such vignettes and questionnaires is that they do not "do justice to the complex social and rhetorical contexts of attributional accounting in natural discourse" (Edwards, & Potter, 1993, p. 25). Meindl and Ehrlich (1987) were aware of the limitation of using experimental data, and recommended that "future efforts might benefit from examining such processes *in real, ongoing events and evaluations*, using individuals and groups with both vested interests in veridical views of organization function and some expertise in judging relevant cause-effect linkages in organized systems" (pp. 106–107 – italics added). However, to date, little, if any, research has taken up this challenge. Through adopting a discursive approach to ROL, as discussed below, this lacuna is addressed by making the in situ practice of romancing leadership visible, and thus analyzable.

Narratives as Social Practice and Leadership

Narratives, as Rhodes and Brown (2005) pointed out, are increasingly being used as both sources of data and as a theoretical lens for investigating organizations and organizing. Above all, they are considered to be a locus for making sense of, and imposing coherence on, the chaotic flux of organizational events that would "otherwise [be] a flowing soup" (Weick, 1995, p. 128). However, at the same time as recognizing the crucial role of narratives in organizations and organizing, researchers also point out that narratives do not asocially index a reality, a truth, that is 'out there somewhere.' Rather, narratives are "sensemaking devices" (Gabriel, 2015, p. 277) which are not "reflections of organizational reality, but creators of organizational meaning and organizational realities" (Collins, 2007, p. 116). Such creation of reality can be achieved through what Gabriel (2000) calls the poetic qualities of stories such as motive, agency, and causal connection which can be variously combined into four board poetic modes which convey different meanings, notably the comic, the tragic, the epic, and the romantic. As will be seen, Welch's storytelling can be seen as an epic tale in which the hero's qualities and powers enable him to address, and triumph over, a problematic situation (Collins, & Rainwater, 2005). Consequently, since narratives are necessarily (re)creations, they are also political, favoring the interest of some to the detriment of others (Rhodes, & Brown, 2005; Gabriel, 2015). However, despite this observation, in the field of leadership research, leaders' stories and stories of leaders have rarely been considered as situated political practice that constructs, rather than reveals, particular versions of leadership and leader identity.

In order to change the lens of inquiry, and focus on the in situ practice of storytelling, this paper is situated within the discursive trend in leadership research which has been enjoying a wave of interest since the publication of Gail Fairhurst's (2007) seminal monograph – *Discursive Leadership. In Conversation with Leadership Psychology*. Whilst this monograph showcased various approaches to the discursive study of leadership, including that of narrative analysis, taken together these various discursive approaches to leadership can be summed up as an approach to leadership, using transcripts of naturally-occurring talk, that seeks to engage with the actual process of doing leadership and enacting leader identity as an in situ accomplishment. However, following Alvesson and Spicer (2011), leadership should not only be considered in terms of practice but also in terms of meaning-making and how practitioners attribute the label "leadership" to a range of actions and activities. Therefore, following Van De Mieroop and Schnurr (2025), this article uses transcripts of naturally-occurring talk and takes a discursive approach to analyzing how leader identity and leadership are romanced and understood as the cause of organizational outcomes in storytelling. In doing so, the paper responds to Fairhurst and Connaughton's (2014) call for more research in which "leadership is cast as attributional, context dependent, and grounded in social construction processes such as language games and discourse" (p. 17).

More specifically, in order to investigate how knowledge of (romanced) leadership is created in and through language games, the paper takes a narrative as social practice approach to analysis as advocated by, for example, Clifton, Schnurr and Van De Mieroop (2019). A narrative as social practice approach can be summed up as an approach to narrative analysis which "involves combining a focus on local interaction as a starting point for analysis with an understanding of the embedding of narratives within discursive and sociocultural contexts (De Fina, & Georgakopoulou, 2015, p. 3). This approach, therefore, reverses the trend of considering stories as decontextualized texts and it encourages the researcher to focus on the emergent process of storytelling as a recipient designed, fragmented, co-constructed process that is enmeshed in local business so that it is necessarily designed to achieve some form of social action. Further, researchers taking a practice approach rely on the transcripts of naturally-occurring storytelling and on the fine-grained analyses of the emergent stories. This, of course, is not new: Gabriel (1998) used transcripts of stories elicited in interviews to illustrate his argument about the importance of stories in organization, and Boje (1991) worked from transcripts of stories in

everyday conversation to analyze storytelling in an office supply firm. However, neither Gabriel nor Boje provided fine-grained analyses of the turn-by-turn evolution of the storytelling as local practice as advocated by researchers taking social practice approach to narrative. To this extent, researchers taking a narrative as social practice approach broadly align with conversation analysts who emphasize the fine-grained analysis of the sequential properties of talk (Georgakopoulou, & De Fina, 2015). However, unlike conversation analysts, researchers who take a social practice approach to the analysis of storytelling are not shy of combining the 'micro' analysis of sequences of storytelling talk with 'macro' concerns. Staying within a narrative as social practice approach, in order to combine the 'micro' analysis of storytelling with the 'macro' concerns of ROL, this paper draws more specifically on positioning theory as method which Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin (2011) sum up as a referring "broadly to the close inspection of how speakers describe people and their actions in one way, rather than another, and, by doing so, perform discursive actions that result in acts of identity" (p. 182).

Following Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin (2011), storytellers navigate identity construction taking into account three dilemmas: sameness and difference; agency, or lack thereof; and change across time. Moreover, these acts of identity occur at three levels (Bamberg, 1997). Level one, refers to the way in which the characters are positioned in relation to one another in the there-and-then of the storyworld. Level two, refers to the way in which the participants (i.e., storytellers and recipients of the storytelling) position themselves relative to each other in the here-and-now of the storytelling world as the story is told. Level three refers to the way in which participants in both the storyworld and the storytelling world are positioned against wider social Discourses. Here Gee's (1999) distinction between Discourse big-D (i.e., historically and socially embedded understandings of the world – including, inter alia, theories and ideologies) and discourse little-d (i.e., text and talk) is drawn on. Discourses (little-d) and Discourse (big-D) are reflexively linked because when storytellers tell stories (discourse little-d) they make relevant, and draw on, Discourses (big-D) which reflexively provide resources and constraints, such as plotlines, for storytelling (discourse little-d). Thus, positioning analysis enables the researcher to make visible, and thus analyzable, both the 'macro' and the 'micro' and so it "allows for linking local talk and identities with sociocultural processes and relations that surround and have an impact on the local interaction in more or less direct ways" (De Fina, 2013, p. 58).

Data

The data for this paper come from a celebrity interview with Jack Welch which was held at the London Business School[4]. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the life and career of Jack Welch in detail. Suffice it to say that he was the CEO of General Electric from 1981 to 2001. He brought great financial success to the company, increasing share value by 1,155% between 1982 and 1997 (O'Boyle, 1998, p. 11). However, despite such success in increasing shareholder value, his management techniques were controversial and earned him the sobriquet Neutron Jack for his ability to take over companies, leave the buildings intact, but ruthlessly cut the workforce. For example, according to Hegele and Kieser (2001), Welch cut the workforce at GE from 402,000 employees to 270,000, closed 98 production sites in the USA, and cut hierarchic levels from nine to four. After his departure from General Electric, up to his death in 2020, Welch adopted the role of management guru, writing several bestselling books, setting up his own management institute, and giving lectures on management across the world. Consequently, his legacy has been so great that he still deserves attention because, as Gelles (2022) states, his:

> worldview continues to shape much of corporate America to this day. The methods he devised nearly half a century ago are still in use, the priorities he established still shape decision-making in boardrooms across the country, and some of his disciples are still in charge of major multinational corporations. (p. 8)

The 'celebrity' interview, on which the analyses are based, is a standard and widespread feature of many business schools. As Tourish (2013) observes, such interviews consist of "superstar CEO leaders" (p. 97) being brought in to answer questions about their life and experiences, and to offer words of wisdom to future leaders. In this case, one of the faculty-staff of the business school, acting as host, asks questions about Jack Welch's life and career – notably with reference to Welch's book *Winning*, a copy of which is on the table between the host and Welch. The host then hands the floor to the audience who ask questions. The audience, as the host says in his opening, is made up of "a room full of people going through our degree programs in one form or another." Interestingly, during the interview, they are referred to by Welch as

[4] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GrLO_bHoig

people who in their lifetime will be leading, organizing, and managing people ("in your lifetime you'll be organizing and leading people, you'll be exciting them, you'll be managing them leading them to new challenges").

As a pedagogic genre, celebrity interviews are quite literally a stage on which celebrity CEOs are set up as authoritative and legitimate sources of knowledge about the organizational world. They are thus part of a leadership industry which according to Pfeffer (2015) was estimated to be worth 20$ billion in the USA alone in 2011, and in which narratives play a key role in merchandising meaning which has become an important resource, as Gabriel (2015 observes, for "shaping hearts and minds" (p. 276) and so "legitimating various organizational regimes by establishing what is regarded as normal, truthful or, indeed, rational" (p. 280). However, whilst the extract analyzed is part of a generic practice in business schools, this paper remains a single case analysis which should be seen as saying something about some aspects of leadership that point to avenues for inquiry which can be later investigated for their quantitative prevalence.

This paper analyzes one particular extract of the celebrity interview. This extract was chosen because the questioner makes the theme of leadership explicit in his question, so ensuring that Welch's response to it is also framed as leadership. Leadership is therefore seen to be a participants' concern; not something that the researcher imposes upon the data. The reliability and robustness of such a single case analysis is achieved through the transparency of the transcript which renders it open to analysis by fellow researchers. Consequently, not only do the analyses become replicable and repeatable, but the warrant for any claims that an analyst may make can be challenged if needs be. Further, the validity of the analyses does not rely on seeking statistical confirmation/quantification, rather the validity of (single case) narrative as social practice research lies in rendering the phenomenon of research interest compatible with a capacity to address the details of the phenomenon as in situ practice. After all, whatever concerns for leadership theory the researcher entertains, his/her research has, arguably, more credibility if it is able to address single episodes of action in which this or that theory is made relevant in the actual practices of organizational players in the real world.

In order to follow the flow of the storytelling and for ease of reading, the analyses have been broken down into fragments which have been labelled to draw the reader's attention to the key elements of the storytelling.

Analysis

The Question

In lines 1–13, a member of the audience asks a question. This not only sets up a space for a narrative of personal experience about leadership but it also makes relevant the book *Winning* and the Discourse of management/leadership that the book vehicles.

1. Audience: Mr. Welch thank you very much for coming and not stopping at your first
2. book straight from the gut[5] and going on to this one I think it'll be a good
3. reference for all of us er my question is more on leadership in general so
4. if you take us back to 1980 when you were appointed CEO
5. Welch: yes
6. Audience: when I know in Connecticut where the corporate headquarters was there
7. were one of your colleagues heard somebody overtalking[6] and saying
8. you weren't the right guy for the job and there were a lot of naysayers
9. saying erm they should have picked somebody else for CEO looking back
10. historically on your life you seem to be a fighter and you were very
11. competitive when you were in Massachusetts er in sports and you
12. overcome a lot of objectives so my question is when they said you
13. couldn't make it how did that make you feel and in turn did you use
14. that to make yourself a better leader?

First, it is noteworthy that the question makes Welch's books, notably *Winning*, relevant to the interaction and states that "it will be a good reference for all of us" (lines 2–3), i.e., the students at the business school. In the here-and-now of the storytelling world, this makes relevant Welch's identity as teacher, conveyor of knowledge, and reflexively the audience's identity as students who can learn from Welch. After this preface, the questioner announces the question which he frames as being about "leadership in general" (line 3) and more specifically, to gloss lines 7–14, about how Welch felt about opposition to his appointment as CEO of GE in 1980 and whether he used that to make himself "a better leader" (line 14). Significant here is the fact that the student attributes leader identity to Welch, aligning it with the hierarchical position of CEO. Such an attribution enacts, and reflexively, is enacted by the widely held assumption that leadership is

[5] Welch, J. (2001) *Straight from the Gut.* New York: Warner Books.
[6] No doubt the student intended to say: "colleagues overheard somebody talking."

synonymous with position. This assumption is reflected in many of the questionnaires and vignettes that are used to elicit data in ROL. For example, Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich (1985) original vignette conflates the director of sales with leader identity and the RLS conflates leader identity with position by talking explicitly about top-level leaders.

The Predicament

After having set up the slot for telling a part of Welch's life story, framed as leadership, Welch is normatively obliged to provide a relevant reply, which he does.

15. Welch No I faced reality I would say that that fellow had about 65% of the people
16. on his side who felt that I was the wrong person I was I came from an
17. entrepreneurial side of the company I was the first employee in plastics I
18. hired the second employee and the third employee we built a rebellious
19. group up there we built a several billion-dollar business we brought in kegs
20. of beer on Friday we partied like hell and every celebration we possibly
21. could the corporation didn't know much about us because it was called
22. General Electrics didn't know anything about plastics they didn't bother us
23. er I then got other divisions medical and they were added one by one and I
24. never left Pittsfield Mas I stayed out of headquarters for my entire career
25. till the last two years I erm so I had a cadre a band of probably 35% of the
26. people who had dealt with me who th-thought it was great that I got the job
27. that I had 65% of old GE who was scared to death about me getting the job
28. and so I had to develop and I brought with me the methods that worked for
29. me (.5)

First Welch replies to the question, accepting the narrative that there were naysayers (line 15: "about 65% of people") and he refutes the narrative that such opposition made him a better leader. He then goes on to account for this evaluation. First, lines 15 ff., Welch sets the scene and recounts his arrival at GE: he was from an entrepreneurial side of the company, in plastics, and geographically distanced from head office. The predicament, which Welch has to overcome, is the people in the there-and-then of the storyworld were against him, they were different from him. These people are revealed to be the "old GE who were scared to death about me getting the job." The 'naysayers' are contrasted with the fact that he "had a cadre a band of probably 35% of

the people who had dealt with me who th-thought it was great that I got the job." In the there-and-then of the storyworld, this sets up a 'for or against Welch' dichotomy, the heroes and villains of an epic tale. Those against Welch are attributed the characteristics of being 'old GE' and of being "scared to death." Implicitly, the cadre that supported him is the 'new' GE and, explicitly, those who thought it was great that Welch got the job (line 26).

Resolution of the Difficulties

The upshot of this complication (i.e., the opposition to Welch) is marked by the discourse marker 'so' which announces its resolution.

28. Welch: and so I had to develop and I brought with me the methods that worked for
29. me (.5) fun candid evaluations celebration erm look work you've got to
30. make work fun or some of these people were=I mean I think any one of
31. you that goes out to work and becomes a manager and who is a bore
32. should slap yourself right in front of the mirror I mean it's-it's nothing's
33. worse than boring managers (.) dullards who sit there and give people
34. orders and tell people what to do

In order to overcome the opposition, Welch had to develop and so he brought with him the methods that worked for him: fun, candid evaluations, and celebration (lines 29–30). In the here-and-now of the interview, these three methods make relevant wider Discourses of leadership i.e., that leadership is enacted through fun, candid evaluation, and celebration which are the (leadership) methods that worked for Welch. These Discourses are present in Welch's books – notably *Winning* (Welch, & Welch, 2005) which has been made relevant to the interaction through the student's question (lines 1–3), the host's introduction at the beginning of the interview, and the physical presence of the book on a table between the host and Welch. This, thus, sets up a potential for the intertextual presence and juxtaposing of the Discourses conveyed in his books with the here-and-now of storytelling talk. In other words, the storytelling talk of Welch borrows from his book *Winning* and embeds the themes of the book in the here-and-now of the storytelling. Consequently, Welch makes the Discourse vehicled in his books relevant to the here-and-now of the storytelling.

In this case, fun is a key Discourse that runs throughout the book *Winning* and which is often linked to the notion of winning and the celebrating winning. As Welch and Welch (2005) says: "celebrating success makes people feel like winners and creates an atmosphere of recognition and positive energy" (p. 79) and "Yes have fun. Business is a game, and winning the game is a total blast" (p. 7). However, such statements could be seen to encourage the unacceptable face of capitalism whereby winning, understood as increasing shareholder value at all costs, is promoted to the detriment of any form of social responsibility vis-à-vis the workforce (see O'Boyle's 1998 scathing biography of Welch and his business practices). Similarly, candor in evaluations is a constant theme in *Winning*. Indeed, it is explicitly linked with Welch's controversial use of the so-called rank and yank system of personnel management which requires evaluators to place employees into three performance categories (low, moderate, and high) which are based on a predetermined percentage of employees being nominated for each category. The top performers are given financial rewards, the moderate performers are coached to improve, and the poor performers are summarily fired. This system, whilst perhaps generating profit, nevertheless, promotes a highly destructive, toxic, and competitive culture that undermines teamwork, facilitates political maneuvering, and engenders a lack of trust, or as O'Boyle (1998) succinctly puts it: GE was a company "managed by threat and intimidation" (p. 15). In sum, the leadership methods that Welch brought with him and that worked for him (fun, candid evaluations, and celebration) can be seen to invoke a Discourse of winning at all costs and a lauding of ethically contentious business practices that promote increasing shareholder value above any form of social responsibility.

The Coda

After setting out the methods of leadership that worked for him, using the discourse marker 'look,' Welch then transitions to the coda of the story (i.e., the relevance of the story in the here-and-now of the storytelling world). In this case, the coda comes in the imperative: "you've got to make work fun." This is normative advice concerning what the audience should do makes relevant the identities of business guru/teacher and student as future managers/leaders. Welch adds that if "any one of you that goes out to work and becomes a manager and who is a bore should slap yourself right in front of the mirror I mean it's-it's nothing's worse than boring managers (.) dullards who sit there and give people orders and tell people what to do" (lines 30–

34). In this coda to his story of leadership at GE, managers are positioned as being boring dullards who sit there and tell people what to do. This invokes a Discourse of leadership that is commensurate with transformational leadership theories that distinguish between managers and leaders. Leaders enact change, align people with a vision, and motivate and inspire them, whereas managers perform more mundane organizational activities such as planning budgeting, organizing staffing, and so on (Kotter, 1990).

Romancing Leadership

So far, there is little in these analyses that romances leadership. However, in lines 35 following, Welch returns to his life story and what he did at GE.

35. Welch we had lots of that we had lots of bureaucracy we had tons I was number
36. I literally had a number my layer was 27 there was 26s 25s 24s 23s all the
37. way down to 1s I changed that to 5 bands so we=people weren't moving
38. across the country to go from 12 to 13 disrupting their families tearing up
39. their lives er so I had a really wonderful group of supporters that grad-we
40. gradually got to convince the company after several years that this was
41. the way to go by the time I left we had a survey saying that 92% of the
42. people loved the management loved the direction of the company when we
43. started it was below 50 so I mean it was a long road it was 21 years and it
44. wasn't overnight you know you don't make these changes overnight I'd
45. say it was 7 or 8 years before we really had full buy in er these things
46. aren't easy

The complication that Welch had to overcome has already been defined as old GE and opposition to him – the villains of the epic tale. Old GE is now described as having had "lots of bureaucracy" but Welch changed this to five bands (line 37). Significant here is the use of the pronoun "I." Welch therefore attributes agency for the changes to himself, and, bearing in mind that the question has been framed as leadership, Welch therefore romanticizes leadership by attributing this change to himself as leader. He therefore draws on the Discourse of leaders being agentive in enacting change (Kotter, 1990). Moreover, this action is presented in explicitly positive moral terms: it stopped people "moving across the country to go from [layer] 12 to 13" which had the effect of "disrupting their families [and] tearing up their lives."

In lines 39 ff., marked by the discourse marker 'so,' Welch summarizes his prior talk. Significant here is that, through the use of the inclusive pronoun 'we,' to some extent he moves away from the individual hierarchic leader as agent of change to the group of supporters and Welch as being change master (line 39: "we gradually got to convince the company after several years that this was the way to go"). However, the collective aspect of leadership is mitigated, because he also positions the supporters as 'his' supporters (line 39: "I had a really wonderful group of supporters"). Nevertheless, Welch's storytelling opens up the possibility of a collective form of romantic leadership in which the collective (Welch + supporters) was responsible for bringing about organizational outcomes by convincing the company that this was the way to go and that "by the time I left we had a survey saying that 92% of the people loved the management loved the direction of the company when we started it was below 50." In this part of the story, at least, leadership and leaders are collective and the collective 'we' is agentive – an idea that was not envisaged in the researcher-led ROL questionnaires and surveys which to date have focused on the individual as leader rather than the collective. This observation concurs with Hammond et al.'s (2023) finding that a lacuna of prior ROL research is that it neglected any possibility of collective leadership.

Using 'so' (line 43), and addressing the audience with a generic 'you' (line 44: "you know"), Welch then shifts to the coda and the relevance of his story to his audience in the here-and-now. The upshot is that it was a long road and it was not easy, and the teaching point is "that you do not make these changes overnight" (line 44). In the here-and-now of the storytelling world, this, as discussed before, makes relevant the identities teacher/guru and student/future leader. However, significant here is that despite the difficulties and time it took, Welch, as leader, had agency and affected organizational outcomes by changing the mentality of the GE employees. However, his storytelling talk skates around any issues that may challenge "the idea that leaders can unproblematically shape followers' attitudes, identities, and behaviors, and secure their compliance with centrally sanctioned goals" (Collinson, & Tourish, 2015, p. 589). In the world according to Welch, the leader is thus seen as having the agency and power to reframe the private beliefs of the GE employees and to mold their behavior, and effect change, so that they are consistent with Welch's vision of GE.

Romancing of Leadership (continued)

To complete his story, Welch makes a transition (line 47: "but") to recapitulate the story of change at GE in metaphorical terms.

47. Welch but I wanted GE to be-to have them use its size (.8) act with the muscles of
48. a big company but the speed of a speedboat my predecessor who was a
49. terrific guy had the guts to pick me he said he was picking me to shake the
50. place up because he didn't want to-used to give speeches about how GE
51. was the Queen Mary it could handle heavy waters I wanted GE to be a tiny
52. little speedboat and I used that metaphor all the time I didn't want to be the
53. Queen Mary I didn't want to be this lumbering thing I want you all to think
54. you're driving Ferraris running=racing through the street that's how I want
55. us to think I don't want to think you're a big lumbering tank powerful
56. etcetera but not fast

In line 47, Welch shifts back to the personal pronoun "I" thus stressing his agency and he concludes the story in metaphoric terms. In short, Welch, having agency, shook up the company (line 49) so that, rather than being the Queen Mary[7] which was a 'big lumbering thing" that could handle heavy waters (line 51) or a big lumbering powerful tank, GE was transformed into a fast speedboat or a racing Ferrari. The metaphor is his vision of GE and of the change he enacted. He thus attributes these changes to himself as leader and so romances his own leadership: he, as leader, was responsible for these organizational outcomes.

The End of the Story

In line 57, there is a 0.9 second pause, which the host orients to as the end of Welch's turn. In the following extract the host closes the story and moves the celebrity interview forward.

57. (0.9)
58. Host there's=there's an interesting if I may just before we er come to more
59. questions erm is (name of student) here is he near a microphone here he is
60. I'll let him ask the question himself it's kind of connected to something
61. you've just been saying (name of student)…

After slight pause, the host orients to this as the end of Welch's turn and the host self-selects to take the next turn. In this case, without offering any evaluation of the story, the host selects the

[7] A famous cruise liner.

next speaker who has a question which is "kind of connected to something you've been saying." Connecting Welch's prior turn at talk with the upcoming question, the host moves the interview forward to a question about candor and closes down Welch's reply to the leadership question.

Observations and Discussions

Returning to underlying proposition of this paper that a narrative as social practice approach to ROL may be able to bring new (critical) insights: what new insights have been brought? Prior research which has focused on the attribution of organizational outcomes to leaders and leadership has concentrated on the cognitive world that is 'in there somewhere' and which is invisible unless elicited by surveys and questionnaires. Conversely, in taking a narrative as social practice approach, this paper focusses on romanticizing leadership in the 'world out there' which is observable through, *inter alia*, discursive analyses of storytelling which can make available to analysts not only how leadership is romanticized as in situ social practice but also what this achieves as social action. Moreover, approaching the analyses reflexively, by investigating the knowledge claims that Welch makes vis-à-vis leadership in relation to the in situ practice of romancing leadership, the relation between language and knowledge production and the political context of the storytelling can also be critically addressed (Alvesson, & Sköldberg, 2008).

Advocating Narrative as Social Practice and Destabilizing ROL

First, in the there-and-then of storyworld, Welch often romances his own leadership capacities and leader identity by attributing agency for organizational outcomes at GE to himself and so the narrator becomes the hero of his own story. Moreover, following Gabriel (2000), the story takes the form of an epic tale, similar to those that Collins (2007) located in his analysis of the storytelling of the management guru Tom Peters. First, Welch's talk has a plot line with a clear beginning (Welch is appointed CEO), middle (Welch deals with problems at GE) and end (Welch successfully brings about change) and this plotline meaningfully connects events and actions with the character of the heroic leader who is romanced and attributed agency for success. Further, Welch's storytelling draws upon some of poetic tropes that Gabriel (2000) argues constitute stories. For example, Welch draws on the trope of hero and villains (i.e., Welch vis-à-vis the naysayers and old GE); agency and passivity (Welch vis-à-vis the employees); and causal connections (Welch's attribution the course of events to his action, and so the romancing his own

leadership). The latter observation not only concurs with the much prior work on ROL, but it also mirrors the assumption in the questionnaires and vignettes that outcomes are individual accomplishments which are brought about by leaders as hierarchical superiors. However, significantly, at one point in his narrative Welch shifts from attributing agency to himself to attributing it to himself and his supporters who collectively and gradually convinced GE to change (lines 40 ff.). Unlike most prior ROL work, the collective becomes romanticized as agentive in enacting change – something that, to date, despite interest in collective and shared notions of leadership, has not been factored in to the researcher-designed questionnaires and surveys (Hammond et al. 2023).

Second, in the here-and-now of the storytelling world, Welch not only positions himself, and is positioned by the questioner, as the leader who (sometimes with his supporters) affected organizational outcomes by bringing about change in GE, but he is also positioned as the guru teaching about leadership and disseminating knowledge of leadership. This is seen especially in the way in which the student/questioner sets up the 'student' identity for the audience who will use Welch's book as a reference (line 2) and who therefore have something to learn from Welch. Welch aligns with this teacher/guru identity and his subsequent portrayal of what leadership is and how it is to be achieved. However, storytelling does not occur in a social vacuum: it is a form of social action. In this case, the storytelling should be understood in terms of normative advice concerning how aspiring leaders should 'do' leadership. From this perspective, the student audience is positioned as aspiring heroic change masters and future transformational leaders who if they become boring managers deserve a slap (line 32). Through positioning the audience as something different from, and better than, 'dullard' managers, Welch flatters them – and himself as a former CEO/leader. However, as various researchers note (e.g., Collinson, & Tourish, 2015; Sadler-Smith, & Cojuharenco, 2021; Tourish, 2013) such flattering identity work may encourage hubris and narcissism which are symptomatic of a darker side of leadership that can lead to destructive outcomes for individuals, organizations, and entire industries as demonstrated by the numerous business scandals in recent years such as the collapse of Enron in 2001, the banking crisis of 2008, Donald Trump's alleged fraudulent behavior, and the convictions of fraudulent business leaders such as Bankman-Fried at FTX and Elizabeth Holmes at Theranos.

Moreover, it is important to note that Welch's storytelling is not an apolitical and neutral rendering of organizational reality that, on account of his guru status, he has privileged access to

and simply reports – the world as it is. Rather, narrating is an exercise in sense-making in which Welch is given a privileged platform from which he creates organizational meaning and realities. However, this act of creation is not innocent, it is, as Boje (1994) points out, an "in situ practice of power and discipline" (p. 434) which conveys norms of how the organizational landscape should be which, *inter alia*, in the case of Welch's story, is that the heroic leader is romanced as the cause of organizational outcomes and that he/she has the right to lead a passive workforce.

Third, at the level of Discourse (big-D), romancing leadership invokes a heroic and transformational Discourse of leadership which, as Collinson, Smolović, and Grint (2018) note, is frequently a key element of ROL. Discourse – such as that of the heroic transformational leader as change master – is more than an abstract way of understanding the world. It is a system of understanding, including theories and ideologies, that prefigures which practices are available to organizational players as they go about their everyday workplace activities and which delimits which practices and beliefs are acceptable in a given context and which are not. In this case, the practices of delayering, providing candid evaluations (rank and yank), celebrating, and having fun are promoted as acceptable leadership practice which will lead to identifiable organizational outcomes such as metaphorically changing a company from a lumbering tank to a fast sports car. Yet, such practices are not necessarily as innocuous as Welch presents them. They may present the unacceptable face of capitalism that promotes shareholder value at all costs to the detriment of accepting any social responsibility for one's employees.

Further, regardless of the extent to which Welch shifts between attributing organizational outcomes to himself alone and himself and his supporters, it is significant that the change in GE, despite being a long journey, is glossed as a shift from 50% to 92% of the people loving the management and direction of the company. The stories of the 'naysayers' are excluded and no mention is made of any opposition to these changes, nor are any issues raised concerning the ability, and right, of the romanticized leader to shape the beliefs of the employees at GE and to delayer and transform the company from (metaphorically speaking) a big lumbering tank to a fast (and presumably efficient) sports car. Indeed, this outcome is presented as being explicitly for the benefit of the employees whose lives were being ruined by excessive layering. In short, Welch assumes that a leader – as change master – has the right and power to reframe the beliefs and practices of GE's employees in a way that is consistent with his vision of what the company

should be. Any questions concerning power dynamics, resistance, or the right to impose change are sidestepped.

Implications for Business Schools and Beyond

Because the celebrity interview is a generic practice within business schools it is important to emphasize that narratives within such practices are neither innocuous, nor do they present the world as it is. Rather, as Boje (1994) points out, storytellings are "discursive practices [that] construct our knowledge and power relationships" (p. 435). Therefore, stories are not undisputed and unproblematic sources of knowledge of organizational realities – the organization as it is. Rather, they are ideological re-imaginings of how the organization should be according to the storyteller. In the case of the narrative of Welch, it is noticeable that he romanticizes leadership by attributing agency for organizational outcomes to himself, therefore giving power to the CEO *qua* leader who tolerates little opposition and has the right to manage change as he sees fit. Such an uncritical romanticizing of leadership is perhaps surprising in an academic environment whose primary aim should perhaps be to develop the student's capacity for critical reflection. That business schools favor a Discourse of heroic transformational leaders that is flattering to its public has been observed by various scholars (e.g., Collinson, & Tourish, 2015; Tourish, Craig, & Amernic 2010). Yet, uncritically attributing organizational outcomes to leaders is more than a question of recipient-designing the romancing of leadership so that it appeals to the student-as-aspiring-leader audience. As Freire (1998) notes: pedagogy "is never neutral, but rather is inherently political in all its aspects" (p. 91). Promoting the uncritical acceptance of Discourses of romanticized transformational leadership legitimizes existing power relations that Welch had and to which the audience aspires, and it confirms the 'right' of the leader to change organizational behaviors and employee beliefs. Moreover, it is also favorable to practices that enact, and are enacted by, the Discourse of winning in terms of increasing shareholder value at all costs. Considering such an uncritical romancing of leadership in which organizational outcomes are attributed to the leader and in which any discussion of power dynamics is sidestepped, this paper joins calls by various researchers (e.g., Collinson, & Tourish, 2015; Petriglieri, & Petriglieri, 2015; Sinclair, 2007) who argue that business schools should adopt approaches to leadership education that that are more critical and questioning.

A way to deliver on desiderata for a more critical approach to teaching leadership in business schools and to the uncritical use of the celebrity CEO interview in business schools would be to encourage students not to accept the stories of leaders and their leadership recipes at face value, however flattering they may be, but to critically assess them. This would call for some form of reflexivity or turning back on the knowledge and truth claims that celebrity CEOs make and the language they use, so that the audience can problematize both how taken-for-granted meanings and knowledge are created in local contexts and what this achieves. Such reflexivity could thus set up a potential for critically analyzing and unsettling the romancing of leadership – something that, by ignoring the local context, the predilection for questionnaires and scales in contemporary ROL research fails to do. This potential for destabilizing the romancing of leadership could be realized by analyzing the in situ construction of knowledge of leaders and leadership as I have done in my analyses above. For example, various researchers, such as Darics (2019) and Mautner (2016), have argued that an awareness of how language works may help practitioners and business students better understand how their organizational landscape is talked into being. More specifically, Darics and Clifton (2019) argued that positioning analysis can be taught to practitioners so as to enable them to carry out their own analyses of organizational stories. In this case, we suggest that rather than, in Tourish's (2013) words, "slavishly reworking the claimed accomplishments of top business leaders such as Jack Welch" (p. 96), business students should be encouraged to do their own positioning analyses of narratives that romanticize leadership. This would allow them to analyze how knowledge of leaders and leadership is constructed and romanced and what such romancing achieves as a political act. Taking such a reflexive approach to knowledge construction necessarily implies a *tu quoque* argument, in which my own account in this paper is acknowledged as an in situ construction of knowledge and so could be turned back on itself. Whilst I have not, in this paper, turned back on my own work to analyze how the knowledge claims are made, nevertheless presenting the method and transcripts makes my knowledge claims transparent and allows fellow researchers to challenge any claims that I have made so validating, or not, my analyses.

Such a reflexive approach to the way in which knowledge of leadership is constructed could also be complemented by allowing alternative sources of organizational knowledge to be heard, as Boje does in his analyses of Disney (Boje, 1995) and Nike (Boje, 2008). For example, in the case of Welch, the stories of marginalized populations such as the dullards and the naysayers

could be given voice. Similarly, unsettling the romancing of leadership could also be achieved by paying more attention to stories that are critical of Welch, such as those provided in less flattering biographies such as, for example, Hegele and Kieser (2001) or O'Boyle (1998). Thus, as Collins (2024) reveals, many of the so-called examples of excellence discussed by the management gurus Peters and Waterman (1982) had a darker side involving "serious misconduct including bribery, corruption, racism, sexism and anti-Semitism" (p. 425).

Further, the stories of celebrity CEOs such as Welch could be re-storied. In other words, as Collins and Rainwater (2005) do in their analysis of epic tales of change at Sears, narratives can be re-storied taking into account the perspectives of those normally excluded from such tales (e.g., the dullards and naysayers) so as to render the stories as either comic or tragic, rather than epic, tales of transformation. If such critical practices were introduced to business schools, they would promote a move away from single-voiced stories that are essentially monological and top down (Collins, & Rainwater, 2005) towards legitimatizing a plurality of narratives in which marginalized stories could be treated as equally important and legitimate as those of the celebrity CEO.

Moreover, acting reflexively could also allow the audience to deconstruct, or expose contradictions by delving below the surface meaning of Welch's, and other gurus, discursive construction of knowledge to open up the possibility of enacting other, alternative, Discourses (big-D) of leadership. For example, Calás and Smircich (1991) displace and destabilize taken-for-granted (masculine) meanings of leadership to be found in classic management texts by juxtaposing them with the unvoiced notion of seduction to provide a feminist perspective on leadership.

In sum, reflexively turning back on how knowledge of leadership is produced in situ, and juxtaposing celebrity CEO stories of leadership with those of the marginalized could be a way of giving voice to the marginalized narratives and problematizing the conditions and consequences of narrative constructions of romantic leadership. Such a process may reveal different stories which challenge and destabilize romantic accounts of leadership to reveal a darker side of romancing leadership – something that business schools often fail to do. And, of course, whilst the focus of this paper has been on business schools, the same observations would hold true for much leadership development more generally.

Conclusion

In sum, a narrative as social practice approach to ROL has the advantage of treating romancing leadership as something that is 'out there somewhere' as a social process rather than 'in there somewhere' as an asocial cognitive process. Observation of actual practice reveals how organizational players themselves construct ROL and what this achieves as social action. Moreover, taking a reflexive approach to the in situ production of knowledge about leadership, as with any storytelling, Welch's account of his leadership at GE is not seen to be a simple, disinterested representation of leadership, rather it is a politically motivated production of a certain way of understanding, and doing, leadership which privileges certain interests over others. Taking a narrative as social practice approach therefore is one way of opening up ROL for critical analyses. In short: traditional approaches to researching ROL based on the application of decontextualized surveys, questionnaires, and scales have tended to overlook reflexive analysis of the relation between knowledge of leadership and the in situ production of such knowledge. Taking a narrative as social practice approach to romancing leadership can destabilize ROL by considering how and why romancing leadership establishes forms of knowing that reproduce and reinforce the vested interests of the *status quo* so that leadership becomes a regulative ideal that legitimizes asymmetric social roles. Such a critical approach to leadership is something that business schools should aspire to, rather than accepting celebrity CEO narratives at face value.

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