An Ethnography of Leadership from the Perspective of an Introvert

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I am normally a very introverted and quiet person. Yet there I was during spring break, leading a group of 20 students on the St Andrews History Society trip to Portugal. Originally I saw my introversion as a hindrance to my fieldwork. However, as I began my analysis I discovered that it granted additional insight into leadership dynamics on both personal and group levels. This essay aims to demonstrate how leadership was enacted, discussed, represented and understood at different stages throughout the duration of the trip, drawing on my own anthropological analyses of time, space, symbolism and knowledge.

The majority of my encounters occurred in spaces Augé (1995) might categorise as 'non-places' such as airports, metro stations, foyers and side streets. These places were liminal regions between 'real' defined locations and spaces, and were bounded largely by the itinerary, but also by culturally constructed ideas of space and purpose. This essay is comprised from the complex glue of conversations, comments and behaviours occurring in these spaces, which held together the trip and made up most of its time. It is also worth noting that it is nothing like the trip that would be reflected in my photographs or in the stories which I told to my friends and family. This essay is only a small subjective portion of what happened and hence it is written from a reflexive standpoint, allowing an internal (yet still interpretative) analysis of factors such as identity and emotion. The discussion is presented as a chronological series of expanded fieldnotes that incorporates my

reflections on specific encounters from during and post study. I feel this mimics the structured temporality and mentality that existed during the trip, whilst also accounting for changes over time.

Day 1

It was 2.30 AM, and I was cold and sleep deprived. I had shown up early to the Union where we were catching our bus, and neither of the other two group leaders, Rebecca and Tom[1], had arrived. Since I was the only leader present I felt as though I ought to address the group, but instead I stood feeling the pressure of expected responsibility until I was forced to leave the crowd and search for Rebecca. My role as a leader and my naturally introverted character competed with one another, in a way that challenged conventional notions of both identities. It was as though I had two internal and culturally defined, templates of what it meant to be an introvert and what was required of a leader, yet neither template was compatible with the other. The act of removing myself from the group may have provided an alternative way to present my status. However, this may also have acted as a self-justification for being anti-social and escaping duty. The responsibility that I associated with the symbolic position of 'leader' played a large role in my identity from the start of the trip, regardless of whether the group were even aware I was leading at all. Golubovic's (2011) anthropological analysis of identity ties into this idea. She discusses how internal conflicts can occur when the identity and expectations of the group are different from those of the individual (Golubovic 2011: 27). This helps to explain my own belief in the incompatibility of being both an introvert and an effective leader.

After passing through airport security, I found myself the only leader in a small cluster of people, who appeared as though

they were waiting for something before they could go any further. Ironically, when someone eventually made a decision on behalf of the group, it was in the form of a question; "can we sit?". This did not even require an answer for immediate group action to be made. Even then, when we separated, the decision maker told me that she was "bad at making decisions" and that we needed "a leader". As Sunstein notes, individuals rarely have the ability to change social norms and social roles, even if their intentions are for the good of the majority (1996: 911). Perhaps she did not feel she had authority to address the group in a way that mimicked a leadership role, and so in diverging from this norm she felt she must have been doing something wrong. Later, I overheard a conversation where two people confirmed to each other that the two group leaders were Rebecca and Tom; clearly I had little or no power at this stage. The idea of what leadership should represent was already formulated in the imagination of the group and myself, yet it was still to show its face in my actions.

In the large and bustling Lisbon airport, Rebecca handed out itineraries and cash to Tom and me. This display of power was done in front of the group who gathered around, leaving us in our own separate space. Afterwards, I was asked by several group members about the itinerary and someone asked me if they could go to the bathroom. Through this one act, perceptions of my position began to alter, giving value to my knowledge and authority to permit the actions of others. The connection between ritual, symbolism and power is one that has been studied extensively in anthropology, and although no social theory can explain all contexts, Mach's point that "ritual provides ideological justifications of power structure and reinforces it through symbolic interpretation" (Mach 1993: 83) goes some way to explaining this course of events.

Day 2

I was walking around the National Palace of Sintra, purposefully trying to look engaged, telling people how interesting I thought it all was, and taking photos whenever the group did. In reality, I felt the building had a sense of falsity and dullness, the endless photographs of menial things in special places stretching my enthusiasm thin. It felt wrong in my position, being aligned specifically with the discipline of history, to show any negative attitude towards the sites we visited, but it also felt acceptable as a leader, and as an anthropologist, to withhold my truthful opinions from the group. The fact that I never explicitly told anyone the details of my research gave an element of secrecy to my thoughts, somehow acting as a justification for withholding information. The group acted differently within the National Palace as well, separating from the leaders and each other and walking slowly. Being on the itinerary, this could be conceptualised as a 'real' place, as opposed to the unstructured non-places that were occupied when moving between locations and sites. Augé notes how non-places rely on a structured concept of time, which can only be lived out through the present (1995: 104). Since the National Palace was an itinerary-categorised "real" place, time had less of an immediacy, and granted temporary freedom from group norms and expectations within the physical limits of the building. Space was clearly important as a determinant of group behaviour, as well as a way for me to formulate my identity as a leader and anthropologist externally and internally.

That evening, Rebecca and I sat on the floor in the corridor of the hostel using a torch to review the itinerary for the following day. An air of secrecy to our task was created by kneeling in the dark, and as people passed us it felt as though our

roles granted us some sort of special access to otherwise classified information, the knowledge imbalance reinforcing a leader-group boundary. Our roles granted us the ability to control, manipulate and retain information as we saw fit, and in doing so, consolidated our authority within the group and to ourselves without feelings of guilt. That evening Rebecca assured the President of the History Society that things were running smoothly. Privately, I was told that even if we were having difficulty, she would not be informed. In this way, the constructed image of efficient leadership came to represent the success, stability and group enjoyment of the trip as a whole.

Day 3

While in the foyer of one of the sites we visited, I decided to test the limits of my authority. People were standing around waiting for the site to open and complaining about the lack of seating, so I decided to just sit down in the middle of the floor. People shared glances with each other briefly, and then one by one they joined me, until the whole group of 20 was sitting down in the large public space. Group mentality had increased the tendency to conform and view the leader's actions as established norms despite being enacted by a minority. It was as though a sub-culture had been constructed, one in which the leaders dictated what was expected of the group. In his book Organisational Culture and Leadership, Schein emphasises the leader's ability to create culture, as well as culture's ability, having been created in such a way, to shape relations between group members (Schein 2010: 408-414). Theoretical parallels can be drawn between this and my own study, since sub-cultural dynamics were made manifest both through purposeful leadership choices and internal leadership templates.

The division between leader and group member was bounded not only by different levels of influential ability, but by subtler behavioural changes. Whenever Rebecca addressed the group, a gap was left around her so that she was standing by herself, and I noticed that I became uncomfortable if I stood in this zone. Previous studies have indicated that spatial position can play a large role in communicating an impression of leadership, authority and status to a group (Knapp & Hall 2009: 154-156). This demonstrates how small changes in behaviour can have major impacts on how people conceptualise a leader. Additionally, Rebecca's words became important and were seen as group accessible knowledge. She once accidentally spoke too loudly in a private conversation and was asked by someone to repeat what she had said, as they thought she was addressing the group. When speaking in a hushed voice, information was deemed accessible only to those in leadership positions, and I would become alert if I heard her speaking in this way, reasoning it would be to do with the stability of the trip. The verbal differences and spatial positioning of leaders evidently helped to enforce leadership image and authority to the group and to ourselves.

In the late afternoon Rebecca had to leave the party, and so I became the only leader in our sub-group. We walked the streets idly, and when people asked me what we should do, I asked them what they wanted to do. They were clearly not used to this, and the group became indecisive, backtracking and changing objectives several times. The most extroverted person in the group appeared to be doing most of the decision making, yet still seemed unsure. In an attempt to fulfil my duties as a leader in the absence of Rebecca I loudly addressed the group, enquiring about everyone's dinner plans. This made me uncomfortable, yet I felt it would have been less authoritative to be quiet in this instance. The group split, half coming out for dinner with me and the other

half returning to the hostel. When deciding where to go for dinner everyone put forward suggestions. Someone asked me what I thought we should do, and I quietly replied "we could maybe try that way", pointing hesitantly to an alleyway which appeared not to have any restaurants. To my surprise, people instantly and without question, followed my suggestion despite better and more confident proposals by the extroverts of the party. This was an unexpected demonstration of the power my title held, even if my personality was not one which matched it perfectly. Despite voice and space playing into the leadership role, my introversion appeared not to influence the amount of authority I held when no other leaders were present.

Day 4

I sat next to Tom on the long train journey from Lisbon to Coimbra. About halfway through he started talking anxiously and pacing the carriage. I felt it was my duty to know what was happening, even if I could do nothing to assist him. Apparently, someone had lost their passport, but had phoned the hostel in Lisbon and was sorting it themselves. Tom advised me not to inform Rebecca as it would stress her. So far, the division of knowledge had been between the leaders and the group. Being asked this made me feel uncomfortable as it challenged this norm by creating intragroup secrecy. If the system was hierarchical, Rebecca would have been the one with the most important, most 'classified' information, and so it felt wrong being a 'secondary' leader and knowing something she did not. Additionally, it may have been the fact that a group member was taking responsibility into their own hands, removing authority from those in leadership positions.

The group were given some free time that afternoon, and since we were temporarily exempt from 'itinerary-time' I could feel the amount of authority Rebecca and I had drop slightly. One individual chose to go to a particular coffee shop, and with the rest of group following suit she stated "it's faster if someone just decides". It's possible that, after becoming accustomed to having someone steer their decisions, the group were inclined to follow anyone who voiced clear cut plans in a familiar format. This individual's temporary transformation into a leader may have also been to do with the fact that this event occurred in a moment of suspension from structured time.

Day 5

Rebecca went into a church to purchase tickets while Tom and I waited with the group. Standing by myself felt less out of place as a leader, as though I was not being anti-social but instead was looking after the group, watching where they were and what they were doing. I feel that my identity as an anthropologist probably justified this isolationist behaviour, as well as distinguishing the difference in power levels through a spatial divide. It is also possible that this manipulation of the leadership template just acted as a pretext for being anti-social.

In the evening, we went out for karaoke at a bar with pink neon lighting and a DJ who smoked the whole time. I was left sitting with the bags and drinks by myself; the draw of responsibility holding me in my place, while I also felt a joint responsibility to socialise. Someone asked me to join them, but I replied that I could not because I was looking after people's belongings. Was this a display of my responsibility? A visible sacrifice of my social life to demonstrate that even in a relaxed environment I was still in control? Or was this merely an excuse to be anti-social again? Perhaps it was a combination. The karaoke bar was the exact opposite of the historical sites of the day, and so structured time and its associated

leadership dynamics functioned differently too. Rebecca and Tom danced and assumed a less authoritative role, people left as they pleased, some only returning to the hostel in the early hours the next day. Perhaps this was why I felt more out of place standing by myself here; in the daytime, I was a leader in control of the group, whereas in a new space and time dynamic I became a social outcast.

Day 6

In an ill-fated turn of events, we accidentally spent the hostel deposit which we were meant to return to group members. We decided not to inform people, but gave Rebecca's close friends vague details so they could guess for themselves. When someone replied that they would ask their mother for advice, Rebecca responded loudly that we were "totally on top of everything, it's all sorted and not a problem". Later, she privately told me that she did not want people contacting their parents. There was a clear awareness that how people perceived the organisation of the trip was more important than how it was actually organised, and that authority would be weakened if parents were called. Additionally, information about this incident could only be shared by using vague and inexplicit details. It was as though we had to keep up some pretence, not just for the sake of the leadership image, but for the sake of the knowledge divide itself. The boundary was a norm which created our behaviour, as well as something we added to ourselves.

Day 7

A group of us were on a tram heading to the Lisbon suburb Belem when we suddenly came to a halt, the tram driver making an announcement in Portuguese before vacating the vehicle with a crowbar in hand. The group were not particularly fazed by this, and continued chatting. I, on the other hand, felt unsettled due to the uncertainty of our situation. My role was one heavily intertwined with the itinerary-structured version of time, where I constantly had to know what was happening and when. It was because of this that any element of the unknown did not simply result in a logistical problem, but also threatened the stability and accepted dynamics of the group. Ultimately, my worry was unwarranted, since the tram continued on its way after a few minutes, yet I still felt a lingering concern about the timings of our schedule.

On the tram, I found out that some of the women in our group had been harassed by a large group of men outside the hostel. When we returned later that evening, we told the one male member of our group to walk at the front and "look angry" should the men still be outside. It is upsetting that a group of seven women, including two group leaders, felt as though having a man at the front of the party would make us more threatening and less likely to be harassed. It is also interesting that the presence of a male group member was insufficient for protection. His positioning at the front of the group, in a place where Rebecca or I would usually stand, amplified his perceived authority. Stereotypes which typify males as self-sufficient and assertive also tent to be associated with strong leadership (Eagly & Johnson 1990: 236). Hence, these wider cultural beliefs about men as dominant figures infringed upon the accepted dynamics of our female-led group. Nevertheless, research has found that authoritative status has more of an impact on the behaviour of sub-ordinates than gender roles when in an organisational setting (Eagly & Johnson 1990: 249). This explains why, in our own sub-culture, it was normal and unquestioningly accepted for two women to be leaders, yet in a wider societal context our power was weakened.

Day 8

Rebecca and I informed the group that once we landed in Edinburgh we would no longer be in control, yet I did not realise how disjointed this would feel until we arrived. Despite not flying through any literal time zones, there was a massive shift in the properties of time which left us feeling unsettled. The leaders especially had become accustomed to itinerary-structured time, where past and future were known, and the actions of all were accounted for. We asked on the group chat for people to meet us and say goodbye, yet most had already split apart or left. Tom and a few others passed us, but only momentarily before shedding their roles as group members or leaders and becoming fully autonomous individuals again. Rebecca left me with a small group, and instead of feeling like I had more duty in her absence I felt my role fade away completely, becoming part of a group of friends travelling on their own personal schedules. With the itinerary, time was built around the historical sites we visited, but without this structure it felt much less formal. Since the only specific goal was to return home, all time felt as though it occurred in non-place. Augé describes how movement through non-place creates a form of identity loss, which is only restored upon reaching the next real location (1995: 103). This certainly applies to my experience of the journey home. As I sat on the train by myself, I tried to shake off the unsettling feeling that came with leaving a partially self-created temporal sub-culture, while also feeling relieved (although sad) at shedding the identity conflicts that accompanied it.

The symbolic category of 'leader' on the history trip to Portugal was represented by both purposeful, self-aware constructions as well as subtler dynamics enforcing the leader and group divide. As leaders, image was critical in sustaining the stability of the group, even if deceit was used to maintain this image. The representative boundary between leader and group member was formed through a symbolic and actual knowledge imbalance, as well as spatial positioning, voice and time. In this way, and as the trip progressed, the leaders both created the rules and boundaries of their own sub-culture, while also working to a pre-defined mental template of how a leader should act. The temporality of the trip changed in relation to place and non-place, adding a dynamic which affected perceptions of leadership as well as collective group behaviours. Ultimately, I discovered that the paradox of the introverted leader can work, since the dynamics of leadership extend beyond the nature of any one individual.

NOTES

1. These are pseudonyms for the two others leading the trip; Rebecca held the title of Trip Co-ordinator whereas Tom and myself held the positions of sub-committee members. Although we agreed that there would be no hierarchy in our responsibilities on the trip, as key organiser, Rebecca was still considered to have the most authority.

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