

## Developing volunteer leadership

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Student to be based in the Department of People and Organisations

### Project description:

This project aims to learn more about how practices of leadership are developed within a voluntary sector context (Citizens UK – OU partners) through a rich and embedded ethnographic study. Focusing on the experiences of leadership development participants, the researcher will track selected Citizens UK members as they undergo leadership development, through a formal programme, and then later as they pursue their work in the field.

To date, the limited research that focuses on the development of leadership within the voluntary sector has not considered what might be unique about this environment. Instead, research focuses on the need for, and limited availability of, leadership development programmes in this sector. Furthermore, research of leadership development usually focuses on training programmes and tends to overlook the broader processes and practices where leadership is developed, including but also beyond, training. Some pertinent issues for the study, rooted in current leadership development research and practice concerns, might include, but are not be restricted to:

- How volunteer ‘leaders’ (the term adopted by Citizens) engage with one another and work with one another – and how they engage with and work with professional ‘organisers’.
- If one removes career incentive and financial reward for performance, what does this tell us about the nature of the leadership developed?
- How the identities enacted by participants in a programme might be driven by claims of social justice and ethics and might be enacted in inclusive and participatory ways (Smolović Jones et al, 2016). Or how the programme and/or participants challenge prescribed or socially conditioned identities, assumptions and practices in confrontational ways (ibid; Mouffe, 2013; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013).
- How participants learn to navigate the political aspects of their work (Mouffe, 2005): how they interact and seek to lead formal institutions and how they practice leadership within the internal political dynamics of their organisations and communities.
- How participants engage with leadership and leadership development in aesthetic ways (Carroll and Smolović Jones, 2017).

Citizens UK is posited as a valuable research site, as the organisation is renowned for its development work and, specifically, its organising training scheme, which prepares ‘leaders’ for their fieldwork. The organisation is a grassroots, bottom-up and democratic one, which is driven by the needs and

democratic decisions of its non-salaried members. Issues chosen to be addressed by the organisation are often highly complex and contested ones, such as alleviating the refugee crisis, making it an interesting place to study how leadership is developed within a highly charged political and ethical milieu.

### **Project aims**

The aims of the project are as follows:

- To learn from the rich experiences of volunteer participants as they develop leadership practices.
- To learn about practices developed in a training environment and then later in the field.
- To start building theory that may be insightful for future studies of leadership development in a voluntary sector context.
- To feed into the practical practices and policies of Citizens UK, enabling more effective leadership development in the future.
- To contribute to the ongoing work of both CKOP and CVSL, particularly in terms of practitioner engagement and knowledge dissemination.

### **Theoretical perspective**

The study will seek to build on, but also extend, current poststructuralist work in the field of leadership development (e.g. Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; Smolović Jones et al, 2016). Such work foregrounds the identities constructed by participants as they develop leadership and also engages with the political and power-laden dimensions of development. More recently, a stream of research that accounts for the aesthetic experiences and constructions of participants has emerged, offering important insight into the less tangible and more sensual experience of developing a collective practice of leadership (Carroll and Smolović Jones et al, 2017; Hawkins and Edwards, 2015).

The study will seek to build on these broadly poststructuralist contributions through seeking to understand how participants experience and develop leadership: over a longer period of time, in community work, as well as in the training room; as volunteer, rather than salaried, leaders; as participants enmeshed in certain political and ethical environments; as actors with sophisticated and nuanced aesthetic awareness. Although the starting point for the research is poststructuralist, we are open to the researcher pursuing a more critical discursive approach (e.g. Fairclough, 2003 and 2010), a research strategy that could equally contribute to understanding of the topic. Indeed, such an approach may foreground and make more apparent the power structures and materiality at work in the field.

### **Proposed methodology**

The proposed methodology is ethnographic and discursive (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Smolović Jones et al, 2015). We would prefer the researcher to come from a background of activism, albeit an extensive track history is not essential, enabling a present and practice-informed engagement with the scene of study. It is envisaged that the researcher will be able to engage with the training as a participant and therefore have a context of activism with which to relate. An emphasis on auto-ethnography, or an approach with significant critically reflexive aspects would be welcomed.

In methodological terms, the researcher will pay particular attention to how participants construct a sense of leadership and develop leadership through language and imagery. Potentially following a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach (Machin and Mayr, 2012), or other suitable and broadly critical form of visual/discourse analysis, the researcher will focus on the interleaving qualities of image and language in the development of leadership. Imagery and aesthetics are foregrounded in the study, as the notion of leadership, not to mention the issues addressed by Citizens leaders, are affectively potent, conveying meaning and drawing attachments beyond what can be understood through more traditional linguistic forms of analysis.

The field research will proceed iteratively over the duration of the first two years of the project, with the researcher encouraged to enter the field as soon as is practically possible, working abductively and weaving experiences from the field with insights from the literature. The initial site will be the Citizens training programme for organisers. Having completed the programme as a participant-observer, the researcher will select a handful of graduates and shadow them through their activism and leadership work, again as a participant-observer.

Candidates with one or more of the following attributes are strongly encouraged to apply:

- Interest and/or experience of the voluntary sector and/or activism.
- Interest and/or experience of leadership and leadership development theory.
- Interest and/or experience of ethnographic and/or discourse methodologies.

## References:

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