



Reimagining leadership development for BME leaders: Harnessing peer learning to advance an environment–individual leadership development programme

Management Learning

1–24

© The Author(s) 2026



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/13505076261451141

journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq

Aparna Venugopal¹ , Edzia Carvalho² ,
Shai Danmole-Ellis³, Nawroz Kareem⁴
and Lovelin Obi⁵ 

Abstract

Past studies of leadership development programmes (LDPs) largely focus on how specific leadership knowledge outcomes can be secured, often treating leadership learning as a linear and environment-independent process. They overlook the longitudinal and situated nature of leadership knowledge construction as participants move through changing organisational, programme, and relational environments. This gap is particularly significant for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs), whose leadership learning is shaped by how they interpret—and are interpreted by—their environments over time. With a collective autoethnography, this study examines how five BME women working in UK HEIs construct leadership knowledge before, during, and after participating in a BME-specific LDP. Integrating situated learning theory with research on organisational texts, we conceptualise leadership development as an environmentally endogenous, textually mediated process rather than a linear transfer of skills. The analysis reveals a non-linear, U-shaped trajectory of leadership knowledge construction across three environment–individual nexuses: organisational constraints, LDP dissonance, and peer learning; transitions between nexuses are triggered by embedded agency and belonging paradoxes. The study shows how peer learning enables BME leaders to reframe these paradoxes as dilemmas, supporting exploration and exploitation of leadership knowledge and informing the design of inclusive, BME-specific LDPs.

Keywords

leadership development, situated learning, organisational texts, peer learning, leadership knowledge construction, higher education

¹University of Liverpool Management School, UK

²School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, University of Dundee, UK

³University of Roehampton, London, UK

⁴School of Life Sciences, Keele University, Newcastle-under-Lyme, UK

⁵Global Banking School, UK

Corresponding author:

Aparna Venugopal, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool L69 7ZH, UK.

Email: aparna.venugopal@liverpool.ac.uk

Preface

An illustrative composite case from collective reflections that inspired this article

Dr Ashima Patel joined an inclusive mid-sized UK university's humanities department after a decade of service and with a rich portfolio of teaching and early-career research. Despite her dedication, she consistently felt marginalised, often watching non-marginal colleagues receive opportunities that she had to fight for or was outright denied. Though formally embedded in the system, her belonging remained partial and constantly questioned.

Her first taste of programme leadership came during a chaotic departmental revamp. At the time, the institution was under pressure following disappointing Research Excellence Framework (REF) results, and leadership responsibilities were unevenly distributed. Ashima was offered a leadership role, seemingly as a convenient solution to fill the gap left by disengaged senior colleagues. She suspected her race and gender played a role in her perceived expendability. During the revamp, she faced overt undermining: a colleague constantly challenged her ideas and expertise in meetings, contributing to an atmosphere of microaggressions and professional insecurity.

Her head of discipline acted as her mentor, but the mentoring lacked depth and practical support. Her resistance to disempowerment was strategic: she answered censorious emails with researched and well-structured responses, she formally escalated issues and quietly reduced her engagement to preserve mental energy. But these acts were invisible to the organisation and had little systemic impact. Her sense of impostor syndrome deepened.

Ashima's turning point came when, seeking clarity on her leadership style and practical tools not offered by her institution, she joined a leadership development programme (ILDP). She embraced the concept of existing "leadership superpowers" and reframed her background—immigrant, single mother, outsider—as sources of strength. She began proactively seeking conversations with senior figures, including the Pro-Vice Chancellor, to better understand the institutional dynamics. Drawing on her innate curiosity and academic tenacity, she rebuilt her leadership identity. She leveraged what had once been seen as flaws (e.g. conducting research without networks) as evidence of her independence and strength. By immersing herself in leadership theory and higher education policy, she became more confident in handling her programme leadership role. She began to subtly influence change, bringing inclusive perspectives into curriculum development and mentoring junior staff informally. She thus transitioned from feeling like a placeholder leader to becoming a confident advocate for change. While systemic inequities remained, her active pursuit of new knowledge enabled her to create micro-environments of influence within a rigid structure, thereby transforming embedded limitations into new forms of situated agency.

Introduction

The composite case of Dr Ashima Patel, which is derived from the reflections of five marginal academic and professional staff middle managerial leaders in UK higher education institutions (HEIs), is by no means unique. Leadership development in UK HEIs is increasingly shaped by managerialist logics, to a greater extent than in comparable US or European contexts (Deem et al., 2007). Within this setting, leadership development programmes (LDPs) have become a central mechanism through which institutions seek to cultivate leadership capability. Leadership development is commonly defined as "expanding the collective capacity of organisational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes" (Day, 2000: 582), positioning leadership knowledge as the knowledge, skills, and competencies that enable leaders to

mobilise stakeholders, shape decision-making, and coordinate collective action (Day, 2000; Lacerenza et al., 2017; Leroy et al., 2022; Reyes et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2021).

Much of the LDP literature focuses on how leadership knowledge outcomes are achieved cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally during or immediately after programme participation (Kwok et al., 2021; Miscenko et al., 2017). In doing so, leadership development is often treated as a bounded and largely linear process, with limited attention to how participants' prior experiences, identities, and subjective engagement shape what and how they learn (Reyes et al., 2019). As a result, variation in leadership knowledge outcomes associated with gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation remains under-theorised, particularly for marginal academic and professional staff occupying middle management roles in UK HEIs.

Even where context is acknowledged, leadership development research tends to adopt a static view in which learning is assumed to begin at the point of entry into an LDP (Tcholakian et al., 2023). A smaller body of work draws on social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 2016) and the communicative constitution of organisations (Nathues et al., 2021) to conceptualise leadership development as emerging through engagement with organisational environments (Ford and Harding, 2007; Knudsen et al., 2024). In this literature, environments are constituted through organisational texts: concrete artefacts such as policies, documents, and spoken or written language in meetings and emails, alongside symbolic artefacts and abstract representations such as rituals, events, and celebrations that express what organisations value, legitimise, and imagine (Kuhn, 2008; Taylor et al., 1996). These studies distinguish between the employer environment, comprising organisational texts that define leadership roles and expectations, and the LDP environment, encompassing programme structures, facilitation choices, and the spatial and temporal conditions of delivery (Ford and Harding, 2007; Knudsen et al., 2024). However, environments are typically treated as exogenous influences that act upon leaders. Little attention is paid to how leaders' individual environments—including race, ethnicity, culture, education, organisational tenure, and immigration status—interact dynamically with organisational and programme texts. Although research shows that participants may interpret LDP content differently based on individual differences (Vongswasdi et al., 2024), and that organisational environments may position leaders unevenly according to social identity (Ely et al., 2011; Gallant, 2014; Rowlands et al., 2020; Stead and Elliott, 2013), these studies retain a conceptual separation between the individual and the environment.

This separation is increasingly at odds with situated learning perspectives, which conceptualise learning as emerging through participation in everyday organisational activity rather than through the transmission of abstract knowledge (Handley et al., 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Within this stream, peer learning has been positioned as a particularly powerful approach to leadership development, emphasising dialogue, reflection, and mutual engagement (Mabey, 2013). Situated learning research has significantly advanced debates in management learning by exploring learning as relational, contextual, and embedded in practice (Sutherland, 2013). However, organisational texts remain weakly theorised within much of this literature, often treated as background artefacts rather than as constitutive elements of the learning situation itself (e.g. Kakavelakis and Edwards, 2012). This omission is notable given evidence that organisational texts actively structure authority, participation, and action, and are drawn upon, negotiated, or resisted in leadership development practice (Carroll and Meier, 2024; Knudsen et al., 2024; Kuhn, 2008; Taylor et al., 1996).

This article addresses these gaps by conceptualising leadership development as a process of environmentally endogenous leadership knowledge construction. We ask: how do gendered and intersectional leaders construct leadership knowledge before, during, and after an LDP, and what role do their environments play in that construction? In this study, “endogenous” refers to processes originating from within a system rather than being imposed from outside it. We argue that

leadership knowledge is not an externally developed skill that individuals subsequently apply to their environments. Instead, it is generated from within and through continuous, recursive interactions between individuals and their specific environments—namely the organisation, the LDP, and the peer group. Leadership knowledge is therefore a property of the system itself and cannot be understood by examining either the individual or the environment in isolation.

Adopting an endogenous perspective allows us to move beyond directional models of leadership development. Prior studies tend to present either outward-in relationships, in which environments shape individuals' learning (Ciuk and Schedlitzki, 2022; Heizmann and Liu, 2018; Knudsen et al., 2024; Smolović Jones et al., 2015), or inward-out relationships, in which individuals' perceptions of the environment shape learning outcomes (Vongswasdi et al., 2024). Our approach rejects this separation and instead theorises leadership development as a dialectical process in which individuals and environments are mutually constitutive. Organisational texts are not merely external constraints or resources; they are the raw material that participants interpret, contest, and rework through situated interaction. Acts of resistance, for example, are not simply responses to organisational texts but generative moments that reshape participants' relationship to those texts and produce new leadership knowledge from within the system.

Methodologically, capturing this endogenous process required a combination of autoethnography, collaborative reflection (Hibbert et al., 2017), and template analysis to surface recurring patterns within complex, dynamic data. Through composite cases, derived from the autoethnographic reflections of the five Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women who participated in a BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic)-specific LDP within UK HEIs, our study advances leadership development research by challenging linear models of leadership learning and conceptualising leadership knowledge as environmentally situated and non-linear. Our study shows that the BAME LDP participants' leadership knowledge construction follows a non-linear, U-shaped trajectory across three environment-individual nexuses. Paradoxes of belonging and embedded agency act as triggers for shifts between these nexuses, with peer learning playing a critical role in amplifying or dampening these transitions. Leadership knowledge emerges through feedback loops in which internal tensions, peer interactions, and organisational texts continuously reshape one another. Thus, our study contributes to management learning by bringing situated learning theory into closer dialogue with research on LDP environments, demonstrating how leadership development emerges through individual-environment nexuses rather than linear skill acquisition. Practically, it offers insights for UK HEI senior leadership teams seeking to design inclusive LDPs that recognise leadership development as a process of co-creation rather than transmission, and provides a foundation for examining learning contexts that challenge linear and static models of leadership development.

The role of the environment in leadership knowledge construction in past LDP studies

Drawing on Ford and Harding (2007) and Knudsen et al. (2024), we conceptualise the environment of LDPs through the lens of organisational texts. Two forms of organisational text are particularly salient. The first comprises the organisational texts circulating within the employer organisation, including role expectations, leadership discourses, performance criteria, and informal narratives that define how leadership is enacted and valued. The second comprises the organisational texts of the LDP itself, including programme content, leadership frameworks, pedagogical formats, and the spatial and temporal conditions of delivery shaped by facilitator

choices. Together, these texts constitute the environments through which leadership development is encountered and negotiated.

A theoretical lens that illuminates the significance of these environments is situated learning theory, which understands learning as a socially embedded, relational, and power-laden process rather than an individual cognitive achievement (Contu and Willmott, 2003). From this perspective, leadership knowledge is not transferred from programme to participant but is co-constructed through participation in specific social and material contexts. Organisational texts play a central role in this process by shaping what forms of participation are possible, what knowledge is legitimised, and whose experiences are rendered meaningful. This provides the conceptual foundation for what we describe as the environmentally endogenous construction of leadership knowledge, whereby leadership understanding emerges from within, and through, ongoing interactions between individuals and their environments.

Against this backdrop, prior LDP studies can be broadly distinguished by how they treat the role of environment in leadership knowledge construction. A large body of research adopts a functionalist orientation, focusing on whether leadership outcomes—such as leader identity, efficacy or skill acquisition—are achieved following programme participation, and how effectively learning is transferred into practice (Johnson et al., 2012; Kwok et al., 2021; Miscenko et al., 2017; Wallace et al., 2021). While such studies may control for demographic variables such as gender or ethnicity, they typically treat the environment as a neutral backdrop and do not examine how different individuals interpret, negotiate or are positioned by LDP environments. As a result, the social, discursive, and power-laden nature of learning remains under-theorised.

Studies that do acknowledge environmental influence tend to conceptualise it in directional terms. One stream foregrounds an outward-in influence, emphasising how organisational constraints, LDP design choices or leadership curricula shape participants' leadership development (Ciuk and Schedlitzki, 2022; Heizmann and Liu, 2018; Knudsen et al., 2024; Smolović Jones et al., 2015). While this aligns with situated learning's emphasis on context as a structuring force, a critical reading (Contu and Willmott, 2003) highlights that such environments are not neutral. Organisational texts embedded in LDPs and employer contexts are manifestations of power that legitimise certain forms of leadership knowledge while marginalising others—dynamics that are particularly consequential for gendered and intersectional leaders.

A second stream focuses on inward-out influence, examining how individuals' subjective interpretations of LDP environments shape leadership learning outcomes. For example, Vongswasdi et al. (2024) showed that participants may experience the same LDP as enabling, tokenistic or only partially useful. While such work recognises individual sensemaking, it still treats the environment and the individual as analytically separable, framing interpretation as a personal response rather than as part of an ongoing, reciprocal process of knowledge construction. What remains largely absent from the LDP literature is a holistic, dialectical account of how leadership knowledge is co-constructed through continuous interaction between individuals and their environments. Although some studies recognise that organisational environments may impose structural barriers for gendered and intersectional leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Gallant, 2014; Rowlands et al., 2020; Stead and Elliott, 2013; Tcholakian et al., 2023), and that interpretations of environmental constraints and affordances vary (Vongswasdi et al., 2024), they stop short of theorising leadership development as an endogenous, power-infused learning process.

In contrast, our study conceptualises leadership knowledge as emerging from within the system constituted by organisational texts, peer relations, and individual histories. Leadership development is not something that happens to individuals within an environment, nor something individuals simply extract from it. Rather, it is produced through environmentally endogenous processes in which organisational texts are interpreted, contested, and reworked through situated participation.

By throwing light on this two-way, recursive interaction, our study addresses a critical gap in the LDP literature and provides a foundation for understanding variation in leadership knowledge outcomes among gendered and intersectional leaders.

The (not-so) curious case of LDP for marginal academic leaders in HEI

Studies on the development opportunities of marginal academic (Bhopal et al., 2016) and non-academic (Ishaq and Hussain, 2022) staff members in HE institutions paint a comparatively bleak picture. A few studies (Gedro et al., 2020; Lander and Santoro, 2017) acknowledge that BAME and non-BAME members of HEI have unequal development opportunities. These studies adopt theoretical lenses similar to Acker's (2006) inequality regime framework or Dickens's (1999) three pillar framework to examine how inequality influences and is influenced by LDP. Acker (2006) urges organisational policy makers to explore complex intersectional inequalities at the interfaces of race, gender, and class in work situations related to power and control over resources, job and pay security, opportunities for promotion, organisation and enjoyment of work, and respect and work satisfaction when assessing the need and efficacy of marginal LDPs. The study shows that existing regulatory forces make some inequalities more visible and legitimate than others, thus warning institutions that neglecting the less visible and legitimate inequalities and intersectionalities can turn well-meaning equality-oriented LDPs into nominal efforts. Similarly, Dickens's (1999) three pillar framework suggests that equal opportunity for marginal leadership development may be raised (a) by highlighting the business case for doing so, (b) through the collective bargaining of unions, and (c) the legal pressures of legislation. However, this theoretical lens still allows organisations room to take a tokenistic approach to marginal leadership development. For instance, the UK's equality charter accreditations that require mentoring programmes for marginal employees place the onus on the mentees for finding and developing a rapport with a mentor, while also absolving the organisation of having to make substantial efforts to reduce other inequalities in BAME leadership development opportunities (Alexander, 2023; Bhopal, 2020b; Harris and Ogbonna, 2023). Similarly, regulative forces (e.g. the UK's Race Equality Charter; the Equality Act 2010) urge UK public organisations to ensure (inter alia) that marginal leaders are not disadvantaged in leadership opportunities (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; Ishaq and Hussain, 2022) but compliance may be reduced to impression management exercises to enhance the HEI's public image. Finally, Bhopal (2020a) observed that in the UK's HEIs, LDPs that aim to develop the leadership confidence of marginal leaders are nominal in action and do little more than build the HEI's business case. Despite acknowledging invisible and visible inequalities in LDPs (Stead and Elliott, 2013) and the need to approach LDPs as identity work, the LDP literature seldom goes beyond the identity issues around inequalities to explore theoretically how this impacts the construction of knowledge in an LDP. For instance, many of the identity issues identified by past studies on the LDP of marginal academic leaders in the United Kingdom are similar to the belonging tensions observed by paradox scholars in non-marginal contexts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Perhaps because studies on marginal employees have always (for obvious reasons) emphasised issues around equity, diversity, and inclusion, these studies have neglected to use the nomenclature and frameworks common to organisation studies. Similarly, a review of the extant literature on evidence from marginal LDPs in the HEI context reveals that studies focus on the lack of organisational support for equitable and inclusive leadership development rather than on if/how the nature of marginality impacts the nature of leadership knowledge construction itself. While LDP conversations about non-marginal leaders mostly focus on leadership knowledge construction, extant studies suggest that for marginal leaders, the conversation veers into pointing out the lack of organisational support. Thus, there is an urgent need for a study that both acknowledges the potential

effects of marginalisation on leadership knowledge construction in marginal leaders (Bhopal et al., 2016), while at the same time embracing the foci of extant LDP studies on leadership knowledge construction (Vongswasdi et al., 2024) and organisational studies' propositions for resolving identity tensions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

Method

Following similar reflective discourses on LDP (Goodall et al., 2020; Santiago et al., 2017; Selzer et al., 2017) and guided by the principles of autoethnography (Adams et al., 2016), this section first describes an inclusive leadership development programme (ILDP, a pseudonym) we attended. We then explain how our reflective notes are divided into three sections in which we outlined how we constructed leadership knowledge prior, during, and after ILDP.

ILDP: a brief note

The ILDP is designed to support early-career academics and professional staff from BAME backgrounds, particularly those who are new to leadership roles or who find it challenging to progress within HEI. It focuses on strengthening leadership skills, increasing visibility, and tackling the specific obstacles encountered by underrepresented groups in the field. The 4-month programme combines online and in-person learning to cover five core modules, which include leadership development, navigating power dynamics, and building leadership visibility. Participants take part in workshops, action learning groups, and reflective activities, all aimed at equipping them with practical leadership competencies and strategies for effectively navigating institutional structures. A key aspect of the programme is the sponsorship component; each participant has to secure a senior sponsor from within their HEI to offer them guidance, career advice, and opportunities for involvement in key projects. The sponsorship is intended to support career advancement by providing advocacy and guidance within the workplace. Participants receive a certificate of completion and they can access a comprehensive set of learning resources for 6 months after the programme's conclusion. The programme aims to promote an inclusive leadership pipeline by helping BAME professionals overcome systemic barriers and advance their careers, thus building a more diverse leadership cohort within higher education through practical learning, reflection, and sponsorship (paraphrased from the ILDP webpage).

Data analysis

Our study follows the guidelines of Hibbert et al. (2017) in exploring three waves of reflections. The first wave consists of the reflective memos we wrote up immediately after conclusion of the ILDP in July 2024. The second wave emerged from our discussions about the reflections during three meetings between July and October 2024 (meeting notes transcribed for data analysis). The final wave came from another meeting in October 2024, during which we discussed the reflections in the light of common themes emanating from our data analysis. Following feedback from anonymous reviewers, we had two further meetings in 2025, when we co-developed composite cases from our reflections.

Like Larsson and Knudsen (2022), we treated each other as the experts of our own leadership praxis and did not critically question our ways of leadership knowledge construction. Our meetings reflected Cunliffe's (2002, 2008) ideas around the relational social construction of leadership knowledge through reflexive dialogical practices. Our individual memos ranged from 6 to 25 pages

in length and we had around 100 pages of reflections about our meetings, which we analysed to explore our leadership knowledge creation.

We followed past studies on the soft-skills career development of women (Bowyer et al., 2022; Fixsen et al., 2022) and other marginal employees (Harris and Ogbonna, 2023) in detailing the profiles of each study participant and their positioning in leadership, and employing thematic analysis to analyse our reflections. We followed the guidelines of King and Brooks (2016) for template analysis methodology. In line with abductive approaches (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010), we drew a priori themes (identified in advance of coding; King and Brooks, 2016: 29) from past LDP studies and from studies on BAME–LDP in HEI. This is appropriate when studies commence with an intention to focus on a specific phenomenon (in our case, leadership knowledge construction) in the data. We compiled a detailed literature review, which we then subjected to open theme coding to agree on the a priori themes for the template analysis. These themes are shared in Figure 1.

Like past retrospective ethnography studies (Wright, 2024), we carefully deliberated on the relational risks of our study. For instance, had our organisations been aware that we were potentially going to share and reflect on our common challenges, they may have wanted to engage with us. Therefore, the ethics we adopted for how we refer to ourselves, our organisations, and other individuals in our illustrative evidence are in line with contemporary guidelines on retrospective autoethnography (Edwards, 2021; Lapadat, 2017). To mitigate potential risks, we have presented our illustrative evidence as composite cases that depict themes from all reflections. Composite cases (Edwards, 2021) are commonly used in similar studies to reflect the personal voices of the participants but without involving them in additional risk (see Frost, 2015).

Identifying themes in our reflections. Some of the initial theme observations from our reflections aligned with our a priori themes from the literature review; namely, organisational constraints in leadership knowledge construction; influence from experience, dissonance between LDP and employer understandings, varied perceptions of LDP, and influence of LDP facilitator. However, two themes were new and driven by the data: attempts to resist and amend environmental influences, and a new environmental influence from peer learning. The new themes prompted us to return to the literature to identify and define themes previously observed in LDP and other streams of management literature, and to strengthen our a priori themes.

For instance, drawing on past studies (Ciuk and Schedlitzki, 2022; Heizmann and Liu, 2018; Knudsen et al., 2024) and our data, we defined the theme of *organisational constraints* as “the narrower discrete context—specific, situational (negative) influences such as the nature of the task and the social and physical aspects of the context” (Ciuk and Schedlitzki, 2022: 251). Constraints included a constant requirement to seek permission and approval, terrible bureaucracy, risk-averse and operationally inefficient procedures that limited the leader’s ability to engage in self-reflexivity, and organisational texts that undermined/disregarded leaders; these were evidenced in the ineffective/detrimental impact of socio-material relationships on leaders across the organisation. From our data and Carroll and Nicholson (2014), we observed that organisational constraints on the power and leadership agency of individual leaders were accompanied by oppositional influences from the leaders; we defined this theme broadly as *resistance*. In addition, leaning on past studies (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Case and Śliwa, 2020) and our data, we defined *leadership agency* as the leader’s ability to intentionally pursue their leadership role and associated responsibilities to have the desired positive impact in their organisation. We observed that the theme of *leadership agency* was always associated with *organisational constraints*. This echoed Battilana’s (2006) argument that when human agency is embedded in organisational influences, an *embedded agency paradox* may appear (a paradox being a persistent irresolvable tension between two interdependent and opposing poles; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Thus, like Battilana (2006), we defined *embedded*

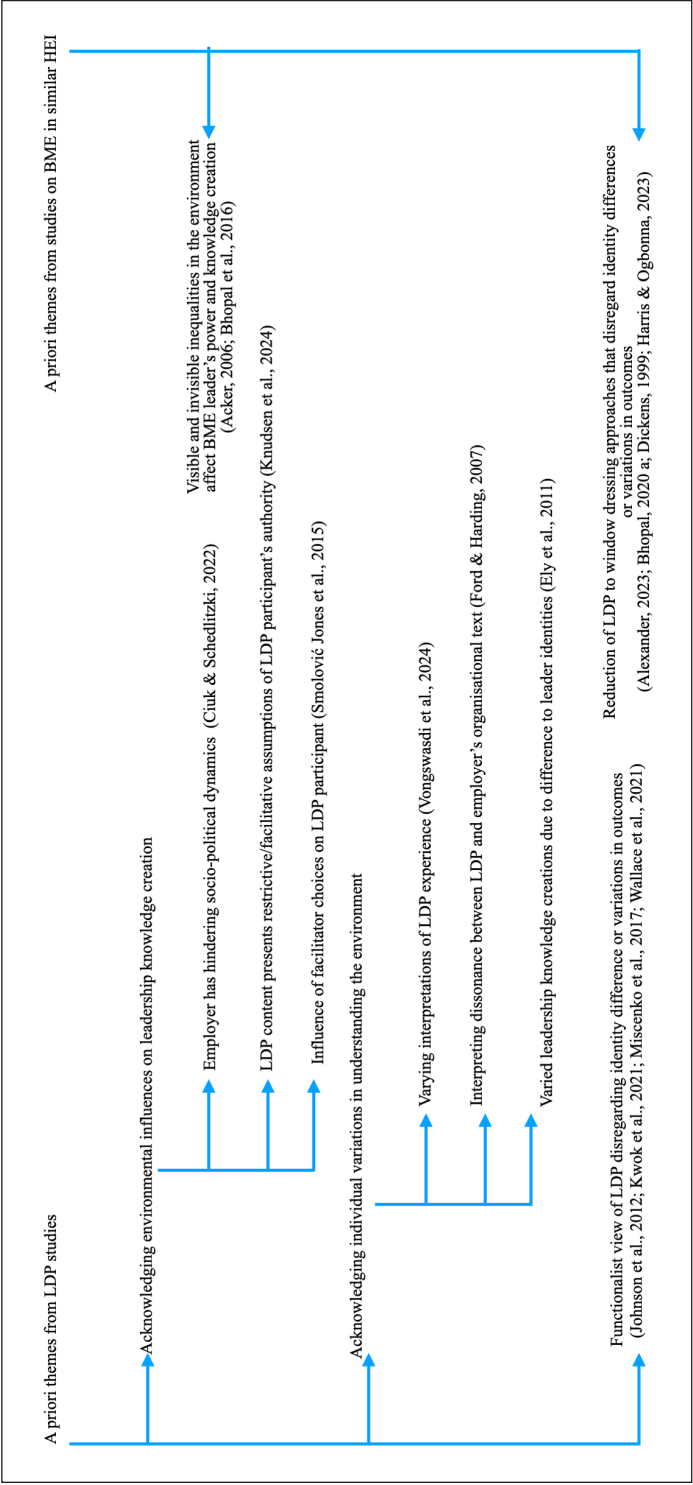


Figure 1. A priori themes for template analysis with illustrative past studies.

agency paradox in our data as a persistent tension between the opposing poles of *leadership agency* and *organisational influences*; agency would not exist without facilitative organisational influences and the expression of human agency will resist constraining organisational influences, causing an irresolvable persistent tension (note that one of us explicitly mentioned facilitative organisational influences as well). Extending the theme of paradoxes, towards the end of the ILDP we framed tensions that we had previously described as paradoxes as a new theme: *dilemmas*. We defined dilemmas as either/or choices in which the opposing poles of the underlying tension are not interdependent; dilemmas differ from paradoxes in that the tension can be resolved over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011). We also observed a *belonging paradox*, which describes the persistent tension between the competing identities of belonging to sentient community-based BME groups and task-based organisational groups (Smith and Lewis, 2011). The BME community in HEI is dependent on the HEI affiliation, and the HEI affiliation is impacted and influenced by the BME affiliation. Past LDP studies (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) observed similar tensions between sentient groups (groups that humans invest in, relate to and identify with, in both fantasy and practice) and task groups (communities of practice that emerge in organisations as humans engage in similar tasks and develop a shared identity around their joint enterprise's mutuality and shared repertoire of communal resources). Finally, drawing on March (1991), we observed in our data that *exploration of leadership knowledge* included "things captured by terms such as search, variation, risk taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, innovation," and that *exploitation of leadership knowledge* included "such things as refinement, choice, production, efficiency, selection, implementation, and execution" (March, 1991: 71). Although the embedded agency and belonging paradoxes, dilemmas and the exploration and exploitation of knowledge are well established in other streams of knowledge management and learning literatures, ours is one of the first studies to observe them in the context of an LDP and thus merge the management learning and LDP streams of literature.

In line with prior LDP studies (e.g. Ford and Harding, 2007), we observed dissonances between prior knowledge about leadership obtained from employers' organisational texts and the new knowledge gained from the LDP content; we named this theme *dissonance between the LDP and the employer*. Like Smolović Jones et al. (2015), we observed *influence from the LDP facilitator's choices* on our leadership knowledge construction, and like Tcholakian et al. (2023), we saw *influences from our past life experiences*. Our observation of *influence from peer learning* reflects numerous studies (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Case and Śliwa, 2020; Gainsford and Evans, 2021; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Pastor and Baruffaldi, 2021), but our study is one of the first to examine peer learning as an environmental influence on leadership knowledge construction in an LDP. Drawing on these studies and our data we define *peer learning* as learning from shared experiences through interaction with peers; the learning improves either the exploration or exploitation of knowledge. Finally, in line with Vongswasdi et al. (2024), when we reflected on our leadership knowledge construction during ILDP, we each expressed changing perceptions that were aligned with prior observations around cynicism about tokenism, pragmatic acknowledgement of tokenism while still seeking useful skills/tips, believing in the text of the LDP and being empirical in using the tools and frameworks provided by it. We called this theme *perception of influence from the LDP content*.

We clustered groups of similar themes together to produce higher order themes (King and Brooks, 2016). Not all the top-level themes were elaborated to the same extent with sub-themes, with more emphasis being placed on themes associated with the role of environment and leadership knowledge construction. For example, there were four sub-themes within the theme of LDP environment, but the newly observed data-driven theme of *perception of embedded agency and*

belonging paradoxes was not explored beyond its association with themes of *exploration and exploitation of leadership knowledge*. This is because taking this theme further would have been beyond the scope of this study. In keeping with the guidelines of King and Brooks (2016), we developed an initial template (see Figure 2) of the a priori themes and the emerging patterns derived from a subset of our data (three reflections and three meeting notes).

Initial template from the a priori (literature-informed) themes and data-driven themes. At this stage, the coding template was starting to reveal lateral relationships/patterns across thematic clusters. For example, variations in the perception of organisational constraints and dissonances within the LDP were always associated with variations in the acts of resistance to empower leadership agency, the sense of belonging, and the exploration and exploitation of leadership knowledge. Therefore, in our final template, the analysis focused on the question: “What are the changes in leadership knowledge construction over time and what triggers these changes?” In the findings section we share illustrative evidence from our collective reflections and meeting discussions about each of the observed themes, sub-themes and patterns (including those revealed in the final template) as composite cases to protect our anonymity.

Applying and developing the final template and interpretation. We went back to the data and applied the initial template to the remaining two reflections and the final meeting notes. We worked systematically through the data and marked relevant themes relating to the thematic categories in our template. We confirmed the patterns that had begun to emerge in the initial template by identifying supporting illustrative evidence in the remaining data. At this stage, we redefined two themes from the initial template (exploration of leadership knowledge and exploitation of leadership knowledge) to incorporate how these varied with different acts of resistance against organisational constraints, and in association with the perception of dissonance between the LDP and organisational texts. We twice rearranged the themes before agreeing on a final version of the template (see Figure 3). Both rearrangements were associated with a refinement in the focus of our study to understand how leadership knowledge was created over time. In line with our abductive approach, our final template had some overlaps with extant LDP literature but it offered significant new observations regarding the continuous development of leadership knowledge through three environment–individual nexuses of leadership knowledge creation, the role of perceived paradoxes in triggering shifts between the nexuses and the significant role of peer learning in reframing perceived paradoxes to boost leadership knowledge exploration and exploitation.

To provide additional quality checks for our analysis, we kept a clear audit trail (see Supplemental Appendix I) of how our analysis had developed and how we had made our analytical decisions (the complete audit trail is available upon request). Our audit trail documented how we used reflexive practices to examine our leadership development experiences. Supplemental Appendix II (available as online-only supplementary material) shows a composite summary of our leadership positions. Domain statements (available upon request) explain the three stages of our engagement with ILDP: the prologue (before ILDP), the interlude (during ILDP), and the epilogue (after ILDP). The domain statements draw on consistent themes across the five reflections, the three meeting notes on the reflections, and the final meeting in which the reflections were interpreted; the statements were co-prepared and shared by all five authors to ensure consistency of the overall theme understandings and patterns across stages. They show how our shared understandings shaped each of the observed nexuses and moved us towards the final stages of the analysis.

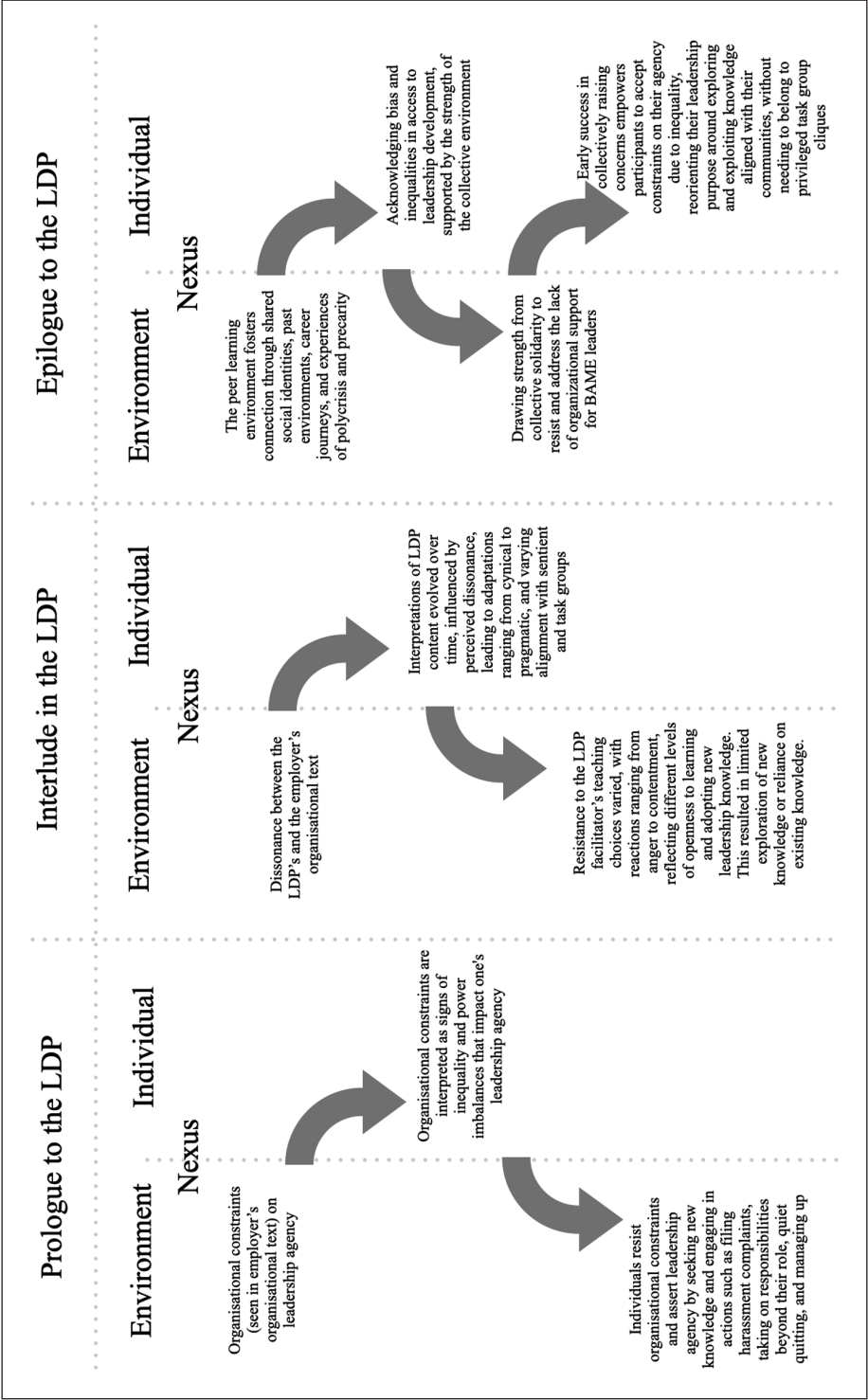


Figure 2. Initial template from a priori and data-driven themes from the three reflections.

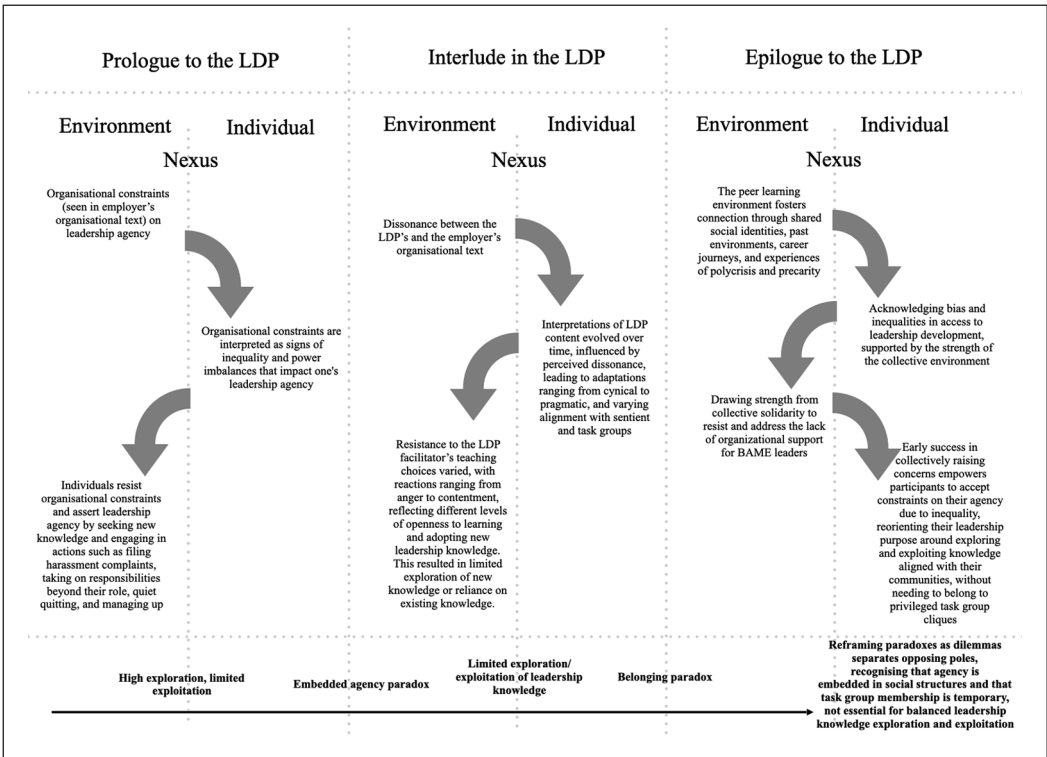


Figure 3. Final template with interpretation of themes and patterns.

Findings

At the outset of our study, we wanted to explore how gendered and intersectional leaders construct leadership knowledge before, during, and after an LDP, and what role (if any) the leaders' environments play in that construction. Having analysed our autoethnography data, we observed three critical environment–individual nexuses in gendered/intersectional leaders' construction of leadership knowledge. These are: organisational constraints–individual resistances, in which frequent explorations of new knowledge help overcome the limits of the embedded agency paradox; dissonances in the LDP environment–individual resistances, which limit the exploration and exploitation of knowledge and shape understandings of belonging; and peer learning–individual strength, where the frequent exploration and exploitation of knowledge is balanced with collective co-construction and the reframing of paradoxes as dilemmas. In addition, our study shows how the embedded agency and belonging paradoxes limit the marginal leaders' knowledge construction at various LDP environment–individual nexuses, and that that these two paradoxes trigger the transition from one nexus to the other. We next list each of these findings with relevant definitions and supporting illustrative evidence as composite cases.

Organisational constraints–individual resistances with frequent exploration of new knowledge to overcome limits of embedded agency

Composite case 1: Dr Rehan Das—reframing marginalisation as a source of leadership strength. Dr Rehan Das, an early-career academic, faced structural exclusion despite years of commitment to

her institution. Her transition from research to a scholarship track—encouraged through informal suggestions during probation reviews—shook her identity because it shifted how she saw herself and how the system valued her. Her efforts were often invisible, and her leadership assignments seemed more about institutional convenience than capacity building. This was exacerbated by poor institutional communication, especially when her discipline was threatened with closure. As the department reeled, the newly appointed Dean employed what Rehan described as bullying tactics. Coupled with her own probationary stress and lack of clarity around her career path, Rehan's mental health spiralled and she eventually sought counselling. She was diagnosed as having long-term depression.

Her initial forms of resistance were inward and pragmatic. She limited her engagement (“quiet quitting”) while fulfilling basic expectations. Yet even this disengagement was emotionally taxing—she could not bring herself to underperform. She described a sense of precarity, as though her presence in leadership was conditional and always up for scrutiny. Her leadership decisions were regularly criticised, and feedback lacked constructive purpose.

Despite organisational neglect, Rehan exhibited resilience in her frequent exploration of new knowledge as a coping and re-empowerment strategy. She actively sought conversations with senior leaders outside her team. She voluntarily took on additional administrative roles to understand the institutional ecosystem. She approached these roles with a learner's mindset—methodical, analytical, and with a deep sense of reflection. She reframed her marginal position as a vantage point, allowing her to see cracks in the system that others ignored. She began to subtly question assumptions in leadership meetings and championed equitable workload distribution.

Although her knowledge-seeking and critical self-reflection was transforming her resistance into a learning process, she was becoming aware that she was seeking validation from a system that ought to have been her support and enabler. She felt that her ability to perform as a good leader was paradoxically contingent on her performing as a good leader: her agency was embedded in the structure. She therefore proactively decided to try something new: participation in ILDP.

As detailed in this composite case, which reflects elements from each of our reflections, we observed that we often met organisational constraints (including lack of organisational support) with resistance, as we sought to implement/expand our leadership roles and associated responsibilities, and have the desired positive impact in our organisations. All five of us had engaged with a variety of activities to explore new knowledge: searching for new information/knowledge, seeking variation in existing role, risk taking/experimentation with current leadership role, and attempting to discover ways of successfully fulfilling the existing role despite the constraints.

We noticed that once we had understood that our leadership agency was embedded within organisational constraints that were supposed to facilitate it, our understanding became a trigger for us to cease our resistance (the frequent exploration of new knowledge) and seek a more standard form of support: a BME-specific LDP. Hence, our transition to ILDP was inspired by a clear understanding of how our agency was embedded.

Dissonances in the LDP environment—individual resistance that limit exploration and exploitation of knowledge, and shape understandings of belonging

Composite case 2: Dr Naila Khan—a leader at odds with the system. Dr Naila Khan had high hopes when she was nominated by her department to join the ILDP. After years of feeling sidelined

despite her tenure and contributions, she hoped the programme would provide her with practical tools to lead more confidently and navigate internal politics more effectively. But her optimism began to fade as the programme unfolded.

The format of the ILDP (each session starting with sharing personal wins and developing SMART goals) struck her as yet another layer of neoliberal expectation. “We were being asked to take full ownership of our development,” she reflected, “while the institutions that created our struggles were left unexamined.” The programme felt like a rebranding of the same meritocratic ideals that had always failed her.

Naila struggled with this contradiction. The ILDP asked her to be hopeful, to focus on personal agency, to treat her experiences as a platform for growth. But her actual workplace experiences told a different story. “The stories we heard in the ILDP weren’t the ones we hear at work,” she said. While some of her peers thrived under the ILDP structure, Naila began to emotionally disengage. Her critical reflections deepened. She questioned whether the programme’s purpose was in fact development, or simply a performance of diversity to serve the HEI business logic.

Her sense of alienation extended to the action learning sets. In her group, a dominant member repeatedly offered unsolicited advice, derailing the reflection process, and the facilitator failed to intervene. “That wasn’t learning,” Naila said. “That was just another person telling us what we should do.” The facilitator’s silence “said a lot.”

She found moments of insight: the “circle of control” exercise helped her reframe some challenges; the vision-setting activity, surprisingly, restored a bit of her confidence. “That part, at least, was universal. It reminded me that some leadership tools apply regardless of who you are.” But even then, she could not shake the feeling that her experience as a BAME woman was not really being acknowledged in the core programme design. She felt caught between identities—the marginal leader she was and the normative ideal the LDP seemed to expect.

Her resistance became a quiet refusal to fully participate. She stopped contributing wins. She disengaged from planning exercises. She began dressing in ways that reflected her cultural self only when she knew she would not have to interact with the public—wearing her kurtas only on days she did not take public transport. “My authentic self,” she realised, “was constantly negotiated in fragments.”

The programme had expected transformation but Naila, feeling more like an outsider by the day, found herself protecting rather than exploring her identity. “I came hoping to learn,” she said, “but left more aware of what the system refused to see.”

As detailed in this composite case, we observed a second environment–individual nexus occurring within/towards the end of ILDP, in which we limited our exploration of new knowledge and our exploitation of existing knowledge because we had been reminded in the ILDP about our shared struggles as marginal HEI employees. We were confronted with the competing demands of belonging. These demands were layered on the already evident embedded agency concern. This is the first instance of detachment from the organisational messaging around our leadership. We had engaged in resistance by exploring new knowledge but our participation in the ILDP sparked the realisation that our struggles were shared. The ILDP content provided us with an ideal-world version of how our leadership should progress, which often contrasted with the actual practices in our respective organisations. We experienced some months of paralysis, when we reduced our exploration of new knowledge and exploitation of existing competencies so we could take stock of our embedded agency concerns, the visible dissonance between the LDP environment (content and facilitator choices), the messages we perceived in our organisations, and the increasingly evident belonging tension. Like Vongswasdi et al. (2024), over time, we distinctly perceived the LDP content as believers or cynics, as empiricist trusters who vouched for the relationship between the

antecedents and outcomes, or as pragmatists who chose to pick a few elements of the programme. Our changing perceptions were directly linked with the perceived level of dissonance between the LDP and employer texts. In instances when each of us were most cynical of the LDP content, the dissonance between the texts was most visible.

Peer learning—individual strength to reframe the agency and belonging paradoxes to balance frequent exploration and exploitation of knowledge in the LDP epilogue

Composite case 3: Dr Amina Clarke—belonging without permission. For Dr Amina Clarke, a marginal academic with years of unrecognised leadership effort, the LDP marked a threshold moment. Before the programme, her relationship with institutional leadership was ambivalent at best. She had long felt that her competence was either under question or overburdened by tokenism. Her attempts to belong within her department via committee service, initiative building, and collegial collaboration often ended with disappointment and distrust.

Yet, within the LDP's peer learning environment, Amina encountered a different kind of belonging, one not mediated by organisational gatekeeping. She described it as "a temporary, fragile sanctuary where being a Black woman in leadership wasn't a burden to hide, but a strength to share." The peer learning gave her a safety net that allowed Amina to begin naming the belonging paradox that had shaped her career: the constant pull between needing institutional approval and knowing she might never fully receive it.

The programme's relational moments—storytelling, listening circles, and unstructured group reflections—helped her see that many of her peers across institutions and disciplines lived this same paradox. It was both devastating and galvanising. "We weren't failing to belong," she reflected. "We were trying to fit into something that was never designed with us in mind." This realisation became the turning point in her sense of agency. She stopped trying to "earn" belonging through additional service or softened self-presentation. Instead, she began asserting her belonging as a fact, not a request. With this shift, Amina grew bolder in exploiting her existing leadership capital—applying for roles she previously disqualified herself from, citing her "lack of fit." She also explored new frameworks of leadership, inspired by peer discussions around adaptive leadership and values-based influence.

One particularly resonant metaphor from the programme—about choosing to light bonfires outside the house rather than waiting to be invited in—became her anchor. "I stopped knocking," she said. "And I started building." She began to mentor junior BAME colleagues, using her story as both caution and hope, and reframed impact beyond formal titles.

Post-LDP, Amina remains engaged in a peer learning community—a WhatsApp group turned mutual coaching circle—where exploratory ideas meet lived wisdom. The space balances exploration of new strategies with exploitation of hard-won insights. This community keeps her grounded in a truth that has reshaped her leadership practice: authenticity is not what you seek after permission is granted—it is what you lead with, whether the system recognises it or not.

Composite case 4: Moremi Oduduwa—reframing agency through collective insight. In the months following the LDP, Moremi reflected on how her approach to leadership had changed—one she had not anticipated when she first joined the programme. For years, she had navigated leadership roles and duties within her institution with a sense of constrained agency in her professional service managerial role—as though her attempts to lead were constantly filtered through a lens of racialised scrutiny. Her identity had often felt like a quiet disqualifier, particularly in spaces dominated by performative meritocracy and opaque politics.

The LDP initially presented itself as a familiar narrative of SMART goals, strategic planning, and “owning” one’s leadership journey, but Moremi found that the most impactful moments emerged in the margins of the ILDP’s formal curriculum—within the peer learning groups, where silenced truths found articulation. “What began as polite professional sharing,” she noted, “soon became a space of emotional clarity and strategic awakening.”

Hearing other BAME women reflect similar struggles—often unvoiced within their home institutions—liberated Moremi from internalising institutional gaslighting. She began to see how the systemic pressures she faced were not personal shortcomings but structural impediments. “Through our shared stories, I began to separate what was mine from what belonged to the institution,” she wrote in her final journal entry.

This critical reframing transformed Moremi’s approach to leadership. Rather than interpreting resistance as failure, she began exploiting her existing credibility within select spheres of influence—areas where her voice was already trusted—to champion alternative pathways. She simultaneously explored new leadership approaches, drawing from the LDP’s emphasis on “circles of concern and control” to set boundaries around what she could—and could not—change.

Importantly, she no longer sought to become what the institution wanted of a leader. “I realised I could bring change not in spite of who I am, but because of it.” In doing so, Moremi balanced the exploitation of her lived knowledge and relationships, with a renewed capacity to explore future leadership opportunities not as validation, but as expansion of her self-defined impact.

Her LDP peer group, which evolved into a post-programme network, became a community of inquiry and resistance. Together, they shared strategies, vented frustrations, celebrated wins, and offered emotional scaffolding in ways their departments never had. “We lit our own bonfires,” Moremi said, “and that warmth continues to carry me.”

The strengths from peer learning had started to come through during the ILDP itself, but it was after the programme had ended that we reflected on how, in addition to the existing LDP environment, we saw peer learning as a strong environmental influence. Peer learning inspired each of us to convincingly reframe our agency and belonging paradoxes as dilemmas, and to make specific choices we could implement.

Discussion

This study contributes to leadership development and management learning scholarship by reconceptualising leadership development as a process of environmentally endogenous situated learning. Rather than treating leadership knowledge as a linear outcome of programme participation, our analysis demonstrates how leadership knowledge is co-constructed through recursive interactions between individuals and their organisational, programme and peer-learning environments. We advance this contribution in three interrelated ways.

Environment–individual nexuses and the situated construction of leadership knowledge

Our study highlights the situated and socially mediated nature of leadership learning by demonstrating how BME leaders construct leadership knowledge through shifting interactions with multiple LDP environments. Echoing Contu and Willmott’s (2003) argument that learning is always embedded in relations of power and shaped by socio-material context, we show that leadership learning emerges through three distinct environment–individual nexuses—organisational

constraints, LDP dissonance, and peer learning—each carrying power effects that direct, disrupt, or enable leadership knowledge exploration and exploitation. Leadership learning is therefore environmentally endogenous and relational rather than linear or individualised.

Empirically, the study is among the first to demonstrate the non-linear, environmentally endogenous construction of leadership knowledge within an LDP. Our findings show that leadership knowledge follows a U-shaped developmental trajectory across the three environment–individual nexuses, shaped by participants’ shifting engagements with organisational texts, programme structures, and peer-learning spaces. Leadership development does not progress sequentially from learning to application; instead, it emerges through feedback loops in which organisational texts, peer interactions, and individual sensemaking continuously reshape one another.

Within the organisational-constraint nexus, paradox perception heightens awareness of systemic limitations, briefly stimulating leadership knowledge exploration as individuals search for alternative understandings of leadership (Useem et al., 2005). In the LDP–organisation dissonance nexus, perceived contradictions between organisational expectations and LDP ideals immobilise both exploration and exploitation of leadership knowledge, reflecting the inhibiting effects of misaligned learning environments (Kwok et al., 2021; Miscenko et al., 2017). By contrast, the peer-learning nexus redistributes power through shared experience and collective identity work. As participants recognise common histories of marginalisation and organisational constraint (Case and Śliwa, 2020; Gainsford and Evans, 2021; Tcholakian et al., 2023), leadership knowledge construction is reactivated and becomes more balanced.

By bringing situated learning theory into dialogue with research on LDP environments and specifically organisational texts, the study shows that leadership learning is neither purely social nor purely individual. Organisational texts—such as leadership frameworks, written and spoken words about leadership within organisations, and conceptual tools—are not background artefacts but structuring resources that orient participation, define legitimacy, and shape learning trajectories. Leadership development thus emerges through environment–individual two-way interactions, extending situated learning perspectives by emphasising the constitutive role of varied environments including organisational texts in leadership learning.

Paradox, agency, and variation in leadership learning outcomes

Across the three environment–individual nexuses, perceptions of embedded agency, and the belonging paradox play a critical temporal and developmental role in leadership knowledge construction. Paradox perception functions as a trigger that shifts individuals between nexuses over time. In the organisational-constraint nexus, paradox prompts initial exploration of alternative leadership identities, while in the LDP dissonance nexus it intensifies identity conflict and suppresses leadership learning. Within the peer-learning nexus, however, where power is redistributed through community validation, participants gain the relational resources necessary to reinterpret paradoxes. Through collective sensemaking, paradoxes are reframed as dilemmas, marking a developmental shift from immobilisation to agency and enabling intentional decision-making about leadership identity, agency, and knowledge pursuit.

These dynamics help explain variation in leadership knowledge outcomes across individuals and contexts. Leaders who do not perceive dissonance may not reduce exploration, while those who do not experience sustained peer-learning engagement may not regain momentum in knowledge construction. By theorising paradox as a dynamic mechanism within environmentally endogenous learning processes, rather than as a static condition to be managed through a “both/and” logic, this study extends LDP scholarship (Vongswasdi et al., 2024). It shows how leadership knowledge is co-constructed through reciprocal interactions between individuals and their

environments, highlighting the role of power, paradox perception, and peer learning in shaping leadership learning trajectories and challenging linear and universalistic models of leadership development.

Peer learning, power, and implications for inclusive leadership development

Third, and most significantly, the study highlights peer learning as a critical site of power redistribution and agency restoration in leadership development. Our findings show that peer-learning environments enable participants to collectively interrogate organisational texts, legitimise marginalised experiences, and reframe paradoxes of belonging and embedded agency as dilemmas that can be acted upon. Through this process, leadership knowledge exploration and exploitation are rebalanced, even where other LDP environments exert constraining effects.

For LDP designers and senior leadership teams (SLTs) in UK HEIs, these findings translate into several concrete design implications. First, peer learning should be treated as a core structural element of LDPs rather than as an informal or supplementary activity. This involves allocating protected time and space for peer interaction, ensuring continuity of peer groups across the programme, and legitimising peer learning as a recognised form of leadership development rather than an optional add-on. Second, LDPs should be designed to make organisational texts explicit and discussable within peer-learning spaces. Prior research highlights the value of shared experiences in identity co-construction (Case and Śliwa, 2020) and the reflexive potential of cultural histories (Gainsford and Evans, 2021; Tcholakian et al., 2023). Our study adds to these studies and suggest that leadership frameworks, programme narratives, and institutional expectations should not be presented as neutral or universally applicable models but as texts that can be collectively examined, questioned, and reinterpreted. Such design choices enable participants to surface tensions between idealised leadership discourses and lived organisational realities, supporting more reflexive and context-sensitive leadership learning. Third, programme designers should intentionally compose peer-learning groups in ways that enable shared recognition of structural marginalisation, particularly in BME-specific or intersectionally informed LDPs. Like past studies (e.g. see Mabey, 2013), our findings suggest that peer learning is most effective when participants encounter others with comparable organisational histories, enabling collective sensemaking, identity validation, and the redistribution of power within the learning environment. This does not imply homogeneity of experience but rather sufficient commonality to support psychological safety and meaningful dialogue. Finally, SLTs should recognise that the effectiveness of LDPs is shaped not only by programme design but also by the broader organisational texts circulating within the institution. Aligning promotion criteria, leadership role expectations and narratives of merit with the values articulated in LDPs is critical to sustaining leadership learning beyond the programme. Without such alignment, LDPs risk reproducing the very paradoxes of agency and belonging they seek to address.

Taken together, these implications reposition leadership development as a process of co-creation rather than transmission, in which peer learning functions as a key mechanism for enabling agency, belonging, and sustainable leadership capability. While grounded in the experiences of BME leaders in UK HEIs, these insights also offer pathways for transforming mainstream LDPs by positioning peer learning as a central driver of inclusive and contextually grounded leadership development. These contributions are synthesised in Figure 4, which conceptualises leadership development as a recursive process of situated learning through multiple environment–individual nexuses. The figure positions organisational texts of the employer organisation and the leadership development programme as structuring resources that orient leadership knowledge development

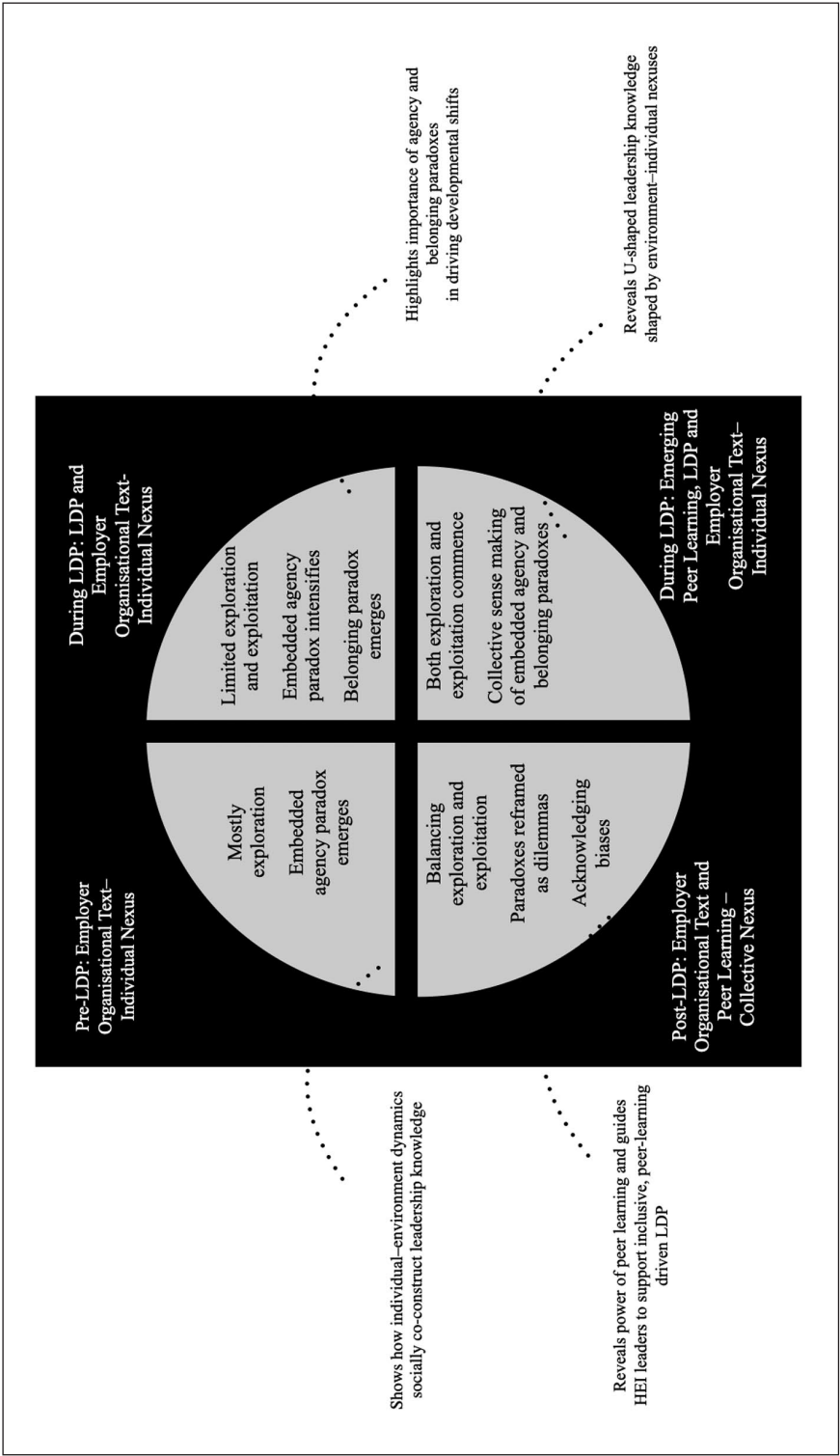


Figure 4. Peer-learning based model of leadership knowledge construction: from structural paradox to agentic dilemma.

and visually captures leadership learning as an environmentally endogenous process emerging from within the system of relations between individuals, peers, and organisational texts.

ORCID iDs

Aparna Venugopal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6349-7750>

Edzia Carvalho  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9441-5829>

Lovelin Obi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0325-0091>

Ethical considerations

The study followed ethical norms typical of collective autoethnographic research, as reflected in existing literature and comparable methodological approaches.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participant autoethnographers involved in the study prior to participation. All references to organisations and individuals were fully anonymised to protect identities and ensure confidentiality throughout the research process.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

An anonymised version of the complete reflective notes is available from the corresponding author upon request, provided that the request does not contravene any ethical guidelines.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

- Acker J (2006) Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society* 20(4): 441–464.
- Adams TE, Jones SH and Ellis C (2016) *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Routledge.
- Alexander BK (2023) Onboarding, orientation, and mentoring as culture-crafting processes: A racial autoethnography of resistance in higher education administration. *Qualitative Inquiry* 29(7): 825–839.
- Bass BM and Steidlmeier P (1999) Ethics, character, and authentic transformational leadership behavior. *Leadership Quarterly* 10(2): 181.
- Batilana J (2006) Agency and institutions: The enabling role of individuals' social position. *Organization* 13(5): 653–676.
- Berger P and Luckmann T (2016) The social construction of reality. In: Longhofer W and Winchester D (eds) *Social Theory Re-wired*. Routledge, pp.110–122.
- Bhopal K (2020a) For whose benefit? Black and Minority Ethnic training programmes in higher education institutions in England, UK. *British Educational Research Journal* 46(3): 500–515.
- Bhopal K (2020b) Success against the odds: The effect of mentoring on the careers of senior Black and Minority Ethnic academics in the UK. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 68(1): 79–95.

- Bhopal K and Pitkin C (2020) 'Same old story, just a different policy': Race and policy making in higher education in the UK. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 23(4): 530–547.
- Bhopal K, Brown H and Jackson J (2016) BME academic flight from UK to overseas higher education: Aspects of marginalisation and exclusion. *British Educational Research Journal* 42(2): 240–257.
- Bowyer D, Deitz M, Jamison A, et al. (2022) Academic mothers, professional identity and COVID-19: Feminist reflections on career cycles, progression and practice. *Gender, Work & Organization* 29(1): 309–341.
- Carroll B and Levy L (2010) Leadership development as identity construction. *Management Communication Quarterly* 24(2): 211–231.
- Carroll B and Meier F (2024) From container to concerns: On the criticality of the communicative constitution of leadership development research. In: Knights D, Liu H, Smolović-Jones O, et al. (eds) *The Routledge Critical Companion to Leadership Studies*. Routledge, pp.227–240.
- Carroll B and Nicholson H (2014) Resistance and struggle in leadership development. *Human Relations* 67(11): 1413–1436.
- Case P and Śliwa M (2020) Leadership learning, power and practice in Laos: A leadership-as-practice perspective. *Management Learning* 51(5): 537–558.
- Ciuk S and Schedlitzki D (2022) Developing and spreading leadership across levels: The facilitating and constraining role of context. *Management Learning* 53(2): 249–268.
- Contu A and Willmott H (2003) Re-embedding situatedness: The importance of power relations in learning theory. *Organization Science* 14(3): 283–296.
- Cunliffe AL (2002) Reflexive dialogical practice in management learning. *Management Learning* 33(1): 35–61.
- Cunliffe AL (2008) Orientations to social constructionism: Relationally responsive social constructionism and its implications for knowledge and learning. *Management Learning* 39(2): 123–139.
- Day DV (2000) Leadership development: A review in context. *The Leadership Quarterly* 11(4): 581–613.
- Deem R, Hillyard S, Reed M, et al. (2007) *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism: The Changing Management of UK Universities*. Oxford University Press.
- Dickens L (1999) Beyond the business case: A three-pronged approach to equality action. *Human Resource Management Journal* 9(1): 9.
- Edwards J (2021) Ethical autoethnography: Is it possible? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20: 1609406921995306.
- Ely RJ, Ibarra H and Kolb DM (2011) Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women's leadership development programs. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 10(3): 474–493.
- Fixsen A, Ridge D and Porter A (2022) Arachne, self-care and 'power-nets' on women's self-development programmes. *Gender and Education* 34(7): 770–786.
- Ford J and Harding N (2007) Move over management: We are all leaders now. *Management Learning* 38(5): 475–493.
- Frost D (2015) Considering improvisation: Play, transitional space, and discovery. *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 85(2): 176–193.
- Gainsford A and Evans M (2021) Integrating andragogical philosophy with Indigenous teaching and learning. *Management Learning* 52(5): 559–580.
- Gallant A (2014) Symbolic interactions and the development of women leaders in higher education. *Gender, Work & Organization* 21(3): 203–216.
- Gedro J, Allain NM, De-Souza D, et al. (2020) Flattening the learning curve of leadership development: Reflections of five women higher education leaders during the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. *Human Resource Development International* 23(4): 395–405.
- Goodall H, Khalil H, Ismail ZA, et al. (2020) Bridging cultures: A programme of academic development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. *Studies in Higher Education* 45(6): 1064–1074.
- Handley K, Clark T, Fincham R, et al. (2007) Researching situated learning: Participation, identity and practices in client–consultant relationships. *Management Learning* 38(2): 173–191.
- Harris LC and Ogbonna E (2023) Equal opportunities but unequal mentoring? The perceptions of mentoring by Black and minority ethnic academics in the UK university sector. *Human Resource Management Journal* 33(4): 940–956.

- Heizmann H and Liu H (2018) Becoming green, becoming leaders: Identity narratives in sustainability leadership development. *Management Learning* 49(1): 40–58.
- Hibbert P, Beech N and Siedlok F (2017) Leadership formation: Interpreting experience. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 16(4): 603–622.
- Ishaq M and Hussain AM (2022) BAME employees' work experience in the UK public sector: An empirical study of academic and research libraries. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 35(3): 334–348.
- Jarzabkowski P, Lê JK and Van de Ven AH (2013) Responding to competing strategic demands: How organizing, belonging, and performing paradoxes coevolve. *Strategic Organization* 11(3): 245–280.
- Johnson SK, Garrison LL, Hernez-Broome G, et al. (2012) Go for the goal (s): Relationship between goal setting and transfer of training following leadership development. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 11(4): 555–569.
- Kakavelakis K and Edwards T (2012) Situated learning theory and agentic orientation: A relational sociology approach. *Management Learning* 43(5): 475–494.
- Ketokivi M and Mantere S (2010) Two strategies for inductive reasoning in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review* 35(2): 315–333.
- King N and Brooks J (2016) *Template Analysis for Business and Management Students*. Sage.
- Knudsen M, Larsson M and Mogensen M (2024) Authorising managers in management development? *Management Learning* 55(2): 215–236.
- Kuhn T (2008) A communicative theory of the firm: Developing an alternative perspective on intra-organizational power and stakeholder relationships. *Organization Studies* 29(8–9): 1227–1254.
- Kwok N, Shen W and Brown DJ (2021) I can, I am: Differential predictors of leader efficacy and identity trajectories in leader development. *The Leadership Quarterly* 32(5): 101422.
- Lacerenza CN, Reyes DL, Marlow SL, et al. (2017) Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 102: 1686–1718.
- Lander V and Santoro N (2017) Invisible and hypervisible academics: The experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic teacher educators. *Teaching in Higher Education* 22(8): 1008–1021.
- Lapadat JC (2017) Ethics in autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry* 23(8): 589–603.
- Larsson M and Knudsen M (2022) Conditions for reflexive practices in leadership learning: The regulating role of a socio-moral order of peer interactions. *Management Learning* 53(2): 291–309.
- Lave J and Wenger E (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leroy H, Anisman-Razin M, Avolio B, et al. (2022) Walking our evidence-based talk: The case of leadership development in business schools. *Journal of Leadership and Organization Studies* 29: 5–32.
- Mabey C (2013) Leadership development in organizations: Multiple discourses and diverse practice. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 15(4): 359–380.
- March JG (1991) Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science* 2(1): 71–87.
- Miscenko D, Guenter H and Day DV (2017) Am I a leader? Examining leader identity development over time. *The Leadership Quarterly* 28(5): 605–620.
- Nathues E, van Vuuren M and Cooren F (2021) Speaking about vision, talking in the name of so much more: A methodological framework for ventriloquial analyses in organization studies. *Organization Studies* 42(9): 1457–1476.
- Nicholson H and Carroll B (2013) Identity undoing and power relations in leadership development. *Human Relations* 66(9): 1225–1248.
- Pastor JC and Baruffaldi L (2021) The role of regulatory focus on a peer-feedback process: A longitudinal study with MBA students. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 20(4): 539–561.
- Petriglieri G and Petriglieri JL (2010) Identity workspaces: The case of business schools. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 9: 44–60.
- Reyes DL, Dinh J, Lacerenza C, et al. (2019) The state of higher education leadership development program evaluation: A meta-analysis, critical review, and recommendations. *The Leadership Quarterly* 30: 101311.

- Rowlands J, Blackmore J and Gallant A (2020) Enacting leadership professional development and the impediments to organizational and industry change in rural and regional Australia. *Gender, Work & Organization* 27(6): 1269–1284.
- Santiago IC, Karimi N and Alicea ZRA (2017) Neoliberalism and higher education: A collective autoethnography of brown women teaching assistants. *Neoliberalism, Gender and Education Work* 29(1): 48–65.
- Selzer R, Howton A and Wallace F (2017) Rethinking women's leadership development: Voices from the trenches. *Administrative Sciences* 7(2): 18.
- Smith WK and Lewis MW (2011) Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium model of organizing. *Academy of Management Review* 36(2): 381–403.
- Smolović Jones O, Grisnt K and Cammock P (2015) Public leadership development facilitation and the cross-roads blues. *Management Learning* 46(4): 391–411.
- Stead V and Elliott C (2013) Women's leadership learning: A reflexive review of representations and leadership teaching. *Management Learning* 44(4): 373–394.
- Sutherland I (2013) Arts-based methods in leadership development: Affording aesthetic workspaces, reflexivity and memories with momentum. *Management Learning* 44(1): 25–43.
- Taylor JR, Cooren F, Giroux N, et al. (1996) The communicational basis of organization: Between the conversation and the text. *Communication Theory* 6(1): 1–39.
- Tcholakian LA, Khapova SN and Van De Loo E (2023) Historical consciousness in executive education programs: Engaging with transgenerational collective traumas. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 22(3): 459–480.
- Useem M, Cook JR and Sutton L (2005) Developing leaders for decision making under stress: Wildland firefighters in the South Canyon Fire and its aftermath. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 4(4): 461–485.
- Vongswasdi P, Leroy H, Claeys J, et al. (2024) Beyond developing leaders: Toward a multinarrative understanding of the value of leadership development programs. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 23(1): 8–40.
- Wallace DM, Torres EM and Zaccaro SJ (2021) Just what do we think we are doing? Learning outcomes of leader and leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly* 32(5): 101494.
- Wright A (2024) I, strategist. *Management Learning* 55(2): 237–252.