DProf thesis,Doctorate by public works thesis

Leadership: the art of being human

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Leadership: The Art of Being Human

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A critical commentary and public works submitted

in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works

(Transdisciplinary)

Faculty of Business and Law

Middlesex University

London

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Acknowledgements

While this statement reflects my personal journey, I recognise that professional growth is never achieved alone. I'm grateful to many individuals who have supported me along the way.

I extend my appreciation to the Middlesex University's Faculty of Business and Law team. I'm especially thankful to Dr. Clarice Santos, whose guidance has been invaluable. I also want to acknowledge Dr. Darren Henley for initiating this journey and my fellow students who have provided ongoing encouragement.

I'm indebted to those who have significantly shaped my professional pathway. Numerous colleagues have contributed to how I have developed as a leader and a person, and I'm thankful for each of them.

Lastly, I want to express gratitude to my friends and family. Though not mentioned in this context statement, their role in all aspects of my life has been and continues to be crucial.

"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."

Rumi

Abstract

This context statement explores and reflects on the role of self-leadership as a foundational element for effective leadership within the Royal Air Force and the broader defence sector.

It argues that leadership is a shared responsibility which requires participation from all and that leadership should be made accessible to all via experiential self-leadership.

I challenge traditional notions of heroic leadership and passive masses. While recognising significant advancements in military leadership, I posit that leadership practice is hindered by persistent adherence to outdated concepts. Despite being disproven, these old ideas remain stubbornly influential in practice.

Through a critical examination of my professional practice spanning over two decades in the Royal Air Force, including key roles in addressing gender equity and cultural transformation, I present a narrative that traces my journey from conformity to conscious navigation of systemic change. This exploration is supported by an analysis of three public works that have significantly impacted defence policy and practice.

The critical reflection involved in creating this context statement has shown a unifying concept swooping through my professional practice: the evolution from traditional, hierarchical leadership models to a more inclusive, participatory approach. I identify a framework for leadership built upon awareness, acknowledgment and appreciation, and relationships.

Drawing on autoethnography, positive psychology, and leadership theory, I introduce novel concepts such as 'the disappeared' (exploring systemic erasure of identity) and 'internal intersectionality' (examining the interplay of diverse aspects within an individual's identity) to deepen our understanding of self-leadership. This work examines the unique tensions that arise when practitioners implement self-leadership within traditional hierarchical structures such as the military.

With the benefit of reflection, I recognise the tacit knowledge and understanding built up over years of professional practice, identifying how self-leadership can serve as an antidote to generational lag in organisational culture. I set out to illustrate how these insights have been present in my own professional practice and how they could be applied to foster more adaptive, agile leadership within the defence sector.

This thesis champions self-leadership as a concept that makes leadership accessible to all, potentially reshaping leadership development in military and hierarchical contexts. It contributes to the evolving discourse on leadership in complex, rapidly changing environments, advocating for a paradigm shift that empowers individuals at all levels to engage in reflective, agile, and values-driven leadership. The findings have implications for future leadership training and organisational culture within the defence sector and beyond.

NAVIGATION

This chapter gives an overview of my entire context statement. First by stating my overall purpose and then providing a summary of each chapter.

This navigation will serve as a road map of my journey. By outlining this map for you, I aim to guide your journey as my fellow wayfarer (Ingold, 2010). In 'wayfaring' I borrow intentionally, from Tim Ingold's concept of knowledge formation through movement and engaged experience (2010, p. S121-S139). He suggests, we 'know as we go,' and in this spirit, I invite you to navigate this journey with me, negotiating and improvising our path of understanding as we proceed (Ingold, 2010, p. S121-S139). I will: signpost key themes; explain my critical approach; explore the multi layered context in which I operate; and lay out my public works to enhance your familiarity with my professional practice. I intend to lead you to a place where the new insights and learnings that I have accumulated on this journey appear with clarity and coherence. I believe these insights can offer valuable contributions to my sector and the field of leadership.

Before we begin our journey together, I want to establish my vantage point - one that spans both inside and outside the Royal Air Force, allowing me to observe and engage with the tensions, complexities, and opportunities that arise at the intersection of tradition and change. This perspective has been shaped by my progression through several significant roles within and beyond the Service.

During the creation of my public works, I held two formal positions of significant responsibility within the Royal Air Force. As Commanding Officer of 85 (Expeditionary Logistics) Wing, I led over 1,000 logistics personnel distributed globally, providing the Royal Air Force with operational logistics capabilities ranging from heavy lift transport to field catering and deployable supply chain operations. Subsequently, as Chief of Staff to the Chief People Officer, I operated at the heart of the Royal Air Force's people function, overseeing personnel matters across the Service.

Concurrent with these formal roles, I held two voluntary positions that provided unique insights into cultural transformation within the military context. As Chair of the Royal Air Force Gender Network, I led a team of volunteers championing gender-related issues across the Service. Additionally, serving as Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for Defence on gender issues across Defence offered me a strategic perspective on institutional change.

My transition from Regular Service marked a significant shift in my positioning. I established myself as an executive coach, specifically supporting senior women in large organisations with potential for C-suite and Board roles. This external vantage point has enriched my understanding of leadership challenges beyond the military context.

Currently, I maintain a connection with the Royal Air Force through a Reservist role, where I coach self-leadership to high-potential leaders and those the Service seeks to value explicitly. This dual positioning - as both an external leadership coach and an internal champion of leadership development - provides me with a unique perspective on the intersection between traditional military culture and evolving leadership needs.

Next, I share my intent, allowing you to understand my driving motivation as you read this context statement.

My purpose is to champion leadership as a shared responsibility to which everyone can and needs to contribute (Haslam et al, 2024. p.10).

As I write, I acknowledge that this purpose has always driven me; however, until undergoing this programme this motivation was not one that I knew, recognised nor could articulate. As Ingold and Kurttila (2000; p 191) state I "knew by way of … practice". Now that I have evolved insight into my work and my purpose, I do not wish my purpose to be laid to rest. Instead, as I lay out in this context statement, I will explore how this purpose informed the creation of my works and how it addressed the challenges of bringing the works to the point of having impact. By articulating what I have known implicitly, I aim to influence the next stage of my professional life and, hopefully, the defence sector.

I aim to demonstrate through the insights that I have gained from examining my public works, how leadership is not an elitist activity, done by a select few, set apart from mere mortals such as ourselves, because of their unique qualities (Walberg, 2017). Instead, leadership emerges from the contributions and collaboration of everyone, everywhere (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

I will focus on self-leadership as the foundation for team, change, and organisational leadership. By amplifying the concept of self-leadership, leadership can be made accessible and inclusive to all (Berne, 1958; Stewart and Joines, 1987).

From a practitioner perspective, I will bring in evidence from my professional practice that challenges still prevalent ideas of heroic leadership centred on only leaders leading and group success being attributed to leaders (Lebrecht, N. 2023). In addition, I will present evidence from my own professional practise of leadership being:

1. Awareness
2. Acknowledgment and appreciation
3. Relationships

Next, I want to help you understand the terrain through which I have carved out my path. In this case, terrain equates to my critical lens (my view), my critical approach (my application) and my context (my practice).

My critical lens chapter articulates my view of my professional practice. It reveals the flora and fauna that have captured my attention whilst I travelled. I believe that a multi-faceted prism provides a nuanced and subtle interpretation of evidence, which enables ambiguity to exist as it does in professional practice. Therefore, the critical lens which I have chosen combines:

1. Autoethnography to recognise self-reflexivity and cultural context
2. Leadership to uncover discordant tension between quickly evolving practitioners and static systems
3. Positive Psychology as an internally driven commitment

In this second chapter I will define and deconstruct each of these lenses, before offering a reconstruction. It is through this reconstructed critical lens that I have assessed and explored my professional practice. The aim of this chapter is to build your trust in me as a critical thinker by:

1. Creating transparency around the existence and significance of blind spots:
    a. Which influenced by public works
    b. And which became known to me only through a critique of my public works
2. Deepening my analysis
3. Providing focus and clarity on the key messages which have emerged:
    a. From my public works
    b. And from my critique of those public works

The third chapter explores my critical approach through the novel lens of 'the disappeared'. This concept, originally referring to victims of state-sanctioned violence, is extrapolated to examine how aspects of self can be suppressed or erased within organisations. Using the analogy of a murmuration of starlings, the chapter investigates selfhood, belonging, and othering in organisational contexts, particularly within uniformed services. It demonstrates how my constructivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology inform my understanding of leadership dynamics. The chapter draws on critical theory to analyse power structures and systemic forces that shape individual and collective experiences. It concludes by proposing a leadership model that embraces multiplicity, even plurality and fosters environments where individuals can bring their whole selves to work. This approach challenges traditional notions of leadership, especially in hierarchical structures, and advocates for a more inclusive, human-centred approach to leadership in the 21st century.

This leaves the context chapter to depict the wider, surrounding environmental landscape, and demonstrate my credibility as practitioner. I will explore my context from three layers.

1. From the personal, I write about my own practice of leadership

2. The next layer discusses the nature of the defence sector
3. The final tier considers where my experience might add value to the wider landscape of leadership in the defence sector

The value of this context chapter is to build trust between us and enhance my credibility in my role as a practitioner. You should gain a sense of me as a leader and appreciate my credibility as a champion of leadership as an activity in which everyone can, and needs to, contribute.

Having discussed the guiding terrain of my work, I now want to highlight three key waypoints for reflection.

The first waypoint is in chapter 3 and examines a public work called **"Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report."** This first public work covers a time when I served as special advisor to Secretary of State for Defence regarding the Government's response to this House of Commons Select Committee report (Parliament. House of Commons, 2021)

The key takeaway from this chapter is how my professional practice and reflective practice highlight the critical importance of awareness, of both self and system. This is especially so within the context of large, hierarchical organisations like the military. I will examine how my journey from conformity to conscious navigation of change underscores the need for a new leadership paradigm.

The second reflection point occurs in Chapter 4, where I examine **"The Wigston Report on Inappropriate Behaviours in the Armed Forces"** (Ministry of Defence, 2019). My second public work involved implementing the report's recommendations within the Royal Air Force. Building upon the critique of my first public work, this chapter assesses my journey from conformity within the military structure to acknowledging and appreciating my whole self. It blends two concepts: the 'disappearing' aspects of self (examined further in my critical approach chapter) and the novel idea of 'internal intersectionality' which applies intersectional thinking to the various facets of an individual's own identity.

I want to acknowledge the origins of intersectionality in which scholars highlight how multiple marginalised identities can compound experiences of oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). This foundational understanding recognises that individuals at the intersection of various marginalised groups often face unique challenges that cannot be fully understood by considering each identity separately. Chapter 5 builds upon and expands this concept, introducing 'internal intersectionality.' As I explore the application of intersectional thinking to leadership, I'll examine how this powerful framework can be adapted and expanded, while still maintaining its core focus on understanding complex identities and challenging systemic inequalities.

The final stop, is in chapter 5 where I discuss the emergence of a piece of work entitled: **"Armed Forces Policy on Zero Tolerance to Inappropriate and Unacceptable Behaviours"** (Ministry of Defence, 2024). This UK Defence Policy is my third public work and critiquing it offers an exploration of leadership through the lens of piloting an aircraft in complex airspace. It reveals that at its core, effective leadership requires a deep understanding of oneself, the cultivation of genuine collaborative relationships, and the ability to navigate both internal and external complexities with awareness and intention.

In the final section of this context statement, if I have drafted your map well and guided you to this space with the clarity and coherence that you deserve, then we can explore the new insights and learnings that I have gathered, namely: my approach to leadership as a process to which everyone can, and needs to, contribute (Haslam et al, 2024, p.10).

CRITICAL LENS

Introduction

In this chapter, I intend to build your trust in me as a critical thinker as I introduce three key metaphors and present a unique critical lens through which I analyse my public works.

The metaphors I use are:

1. A murmuration of starlings to represent collective aspect of organisational life
2. An airborne metaphor likening leadership to piloting an aircraft through complex airspace
3. The concept of disappearing which weaves through both these metaphors, adding depth to our understanding of how individuals and aspects of self can become supressed within organisational contexts.

These metaphors are not isolated constructs but rather interweaving threads that together create a rich tapestry for understanding leadership transformation. Just as a murmuration's patterns emerge from countless individual decisions, and a pilot's navigation relies on multiple instruments and environmental readings, effective leadership emerges from the complex interplay of individual agency and collective movement.

Furthermore, these metaphors work in concert with my critical lens to illuminate the complex dynamics of leadership and transformation within military contexts. The critical lens I employ combines three established approaches:

1. Autoethnography
2. Positive psychology
3. Leadership

I have chosen to integrate these perspectives for three reasons.

1. First, they are fundamental to my identity as a reflective practitioner because as a military leader engaging in reflective practice, I find myself constantly reflecting-in-action, yet I grapple with a profound sense of unease stemming from the challenge of articulating my tacit knowledge and justifying the rigor of my intuitive decision-making processes in the field (Schön, 2017, p. 69).

2. Second, this precise combination of different critical lenses works uniquely for the context in which my public works were formed. I use a unique combination of prescription lens, binoculars and magnification to explore and understand the world around me; likewise, I have used this unique combination of critical lenses to ask challenging questions, to compare and contrast, to critique rather than accept, and to uncover implicit and explicit assumptions - including those I was often blind to, my 'unknown unknowns' (Rumsfeld, 2002: Rumsfeld, 2011) which shaped my thinking and actions without my awareness. They have kindled in me, higher level intellectual thinking, reasoning and analysis, all imbued with reflection.

3. Third, this combined lens allows me to emerge and illuminate my core arguments:

   a. That leadership is a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute
   b. And that self-leadership is a concept that makes leadership accessible to all

By using autoethnography, I can analyse my personal experiences within broader cultural contexts. Positive psychology provides a framework for understanding human potential and flourishing. Leadership offers critical perspectives on how influence and change occur within organisations and society. Together, these lenses create a multifaceted prism through which I can examine my public works and extract meaningful insights about inclusive leadership practices.

Accordingly, in this chapter I need to examine those lenses, with objectivity, honesty, and transparency. In doing so, I hope to build trust and understanding between us. I

would like you to leave this chapter with a deep appreciation and understanding of the value of my reflection and thinking. It is through articulating, examining, and exploring these lenses that I hope to demonstrate my credibility and foster your belief in me as a reflective thinker.

My approach recognises that reflective practice can be as valuable to professional development as it is to academic inquiry. While this chapter demonstrates critical thinking, and the next establishes my credibility as a practitioner, the overarching framework of this context statement positions lived experience and theoretical knowledge as complementary, equally valuable perspectives. By engaging with select leadership conversations through the lens of my professional practice, I hope to contribute to a more integrated understanding of leadership that respects both scholarly insights and practical wisdom.

In this chapter I will define and deconstruct each of these lenses, before offering a reconstruction. It is through this reconstructed, combined critical lens that I have assessed and explored my professional practice:

1. More conscious of the existence and significance of my blindspots
2. With deepening analysis
3. With focus and clarity on the key messages which have emerged from my public works and from my critique of those public works

Interweaving Metaphors

Throughout this work, three distinct yet interconnected metaphors help illuminate the complex dynamics of leadership and transformation within military contexts. Like different instruments in an orchestra, each metaphor contributes its unique voice while harmonising with the others to create a richer understanding.

The murmuration of starlings represents the collective aspect of organisational life - how individuals move together, create patterns, and respond to change. Within this metaphor, individual starlings must navigate their place in the larger whole, much as

military personnel navigate their role within the institution. However, the murmuration metaphor extends beyond mere collective movement. It captures the tension between individual agency and systemic constraints, between the need for coordinated action and the value of diverse perspectives.

The airborne metaphor, viewing leadership through the lens of piloting aircraft through complex airspace, connects intimately with the murmuration concept. Just as starlings must navigate air currents and respond to environmental changes, pilots must read and respond to complex conditions. Both metaphors speak to the challenge of maintaining direction and purpose while adapting to changing circumstances. However, the airborne metaphor adds a crucial dimension of intentional navigation - the conscious choice of direction and approach that leaders must make.

The concept of disappearing weaves through both these metaphors, adding depth to our understanding of how individuals and aspects of self can become invisible within organisational contexts. In a murmuration, individual starlings might disappear into the collective pattern, losing their distinctiveness. In the airborne metaphor, crucial instruments or readings might become invisible in complex conditions. This disappearing isn't simply about absence - it's about the active process of aspects becoming unseen or unacknowledged.

These metaphors interconnect most powerfully when we consider the challenge of authentic leadership in traditional hierarchical structures. Like a starling maintaining its individual flight while contributing to the murmuration's pattern, or a pilot reading both instruments and environmental conditions while navigating complex airspace, leaders must balance multiple demands and perspectives. The risk of disappearing - of losing crucial aspects of self or overlooking important perspectives - exists in all these contexts.

I use the term 'disappearing' rather than 'invisibility' intentionally. While invisibility suggests a passive state of not being seen, disappearing points to an active process - the gradual or sudden way aspects of self, perspective, or identity can be lost or suppressed within organisational contexts. This distinction is crucial for understanding how leadership development in military contexts often involves the active suppression

of certain aspects of self in service of conformity and tradition. The concept of disappearing also implies the potential for reappearance - just as a starling might temporarily vanish into the murmuration's pattern or instruments might become momentarily unreadable in complex conditions, these aspects can be recovered through conscious awareness and intentional action.

Together, these metaphors illuminate three critical issues in military leadership transformation. First, they highlight the tension between individual authenticity and organisational cohesion - visible in both the murmuration's collective patterns and the pilot's navigation of prescribed procedures. Second, they reveal the challenge of fostering inclusive leadership within hierarchical structures, as both starlings and pilots must maintain individual agency while operating within established systems. Third, they demonstrate how the process of 'disappearing' aspects of self can impact both individual leadership development and organisational effectiveness, whether through loss of distinctive perspectives in the murmuration or overlooked instrument readings in flight.

Through these interconnected metaphors, we can better understand and critically examine the complex dynamics of leadership transformation, particularly when viewed through the combined lens of autoethnography, leadership theory, and positive psychology.

Autoethnographical Lens

The first lens that I examine, is that of the autoethnographic researcher. In this section I will define the term, before deconstructing it and then reconstructing. In doing this, you should gain an understanding of the key purpose for which I use autoethnography. Namely, it is the method through which I analyse different layers of experience: individual, sectoral and cultural.

Definition

Since its emergence as a research method, autoethnography has diversified beyond simple, comprehensive definition (Hayano, 1979). Some argue that it perpetuates the voice of the researcher and can be a self-indulgent practice (Finlay, 2002); however, many more value it as primary data farmed from a researcher's personal experience (Adams et al., 2013, p. 108); an approach which analyses culture through personal experience (Adams et al., 2013, p. 108); and which enables human meaning to permeate research (Bochner and Ellis, 2003, p. 509).

Any definition of autoethnography should acknowledge the inherent link that exists between it, reflexivity and positionality. Hardman defines reflexivity as:

> "a metaphysical analysis of the researcher's analysis of the researcher's account, one that examines the researcher's own input into the research process. It involves the researcher observing him or herself in the act of observing, researching him or herself in the act of researching" (Hamdan, 2009, p. 378–379)

In this context statement, positionality is a critical component of my autoethnographic approach. It encompasses a range of factors including professional and educational background, socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, cultural identity, and political ideologies. Positionality also considers power dynamics, insider/outsider status, and potential biases stemming from my role as both a military leader and researcher. Throughout this work, I will examine how these aspects of my positionality influence my observations, interpretations, and conclusions, providing specific examples where relevant to my analysis and findings.

Deconstruction

It is through autoethnography that a 'wide angle lens' can be used to understand social and cultural aspects of personal experience (Ellis and Bochner, 2003). Concurrently, it enables an inward look which exposes the vulnerable self (Ellis and Bochner, 2003). Autoethnography as a method acknowledges the person of the researcher and

recognises them as an active, not passive agent. Furthermore, as a method autoethnography enables a connection between complex, plentiful layers whilst iterating between them.

It is a lens through which the far, mid and foregrounds of professional practice can be assessed and revisited. Each surface being visited frequently but often as if afresh, for the first time. I recognise these layers from the personal all the way through to the cultural. It is through an autoethnographic approach that a back and forth between the layers occurs with the aim of enriching awareness and understanding (Ellis and Bochner, 2003).

When these aspects of autoethnography connect with reflexivity and positionality, the lens begins to create an awareness of the influence of my background and experience. Plus, the way that I see and understand the wider world through my identity begins to surface. In autoethnography I become embedded in the work through personal introspection (Finlay, 2002). Personal introspection within autoethnography enables me as a practitioner to reflect deeply on my experiences, insights, and learnings to comprehend their impact and influence.

Reconstruction

Throughout this context statement I use the lens of autoethnography, with its inherent links to reflexivity and positionality, to examine simultaneously three connected but distinct elements:

1. My professional practice
2. Cultural transformation within the United Kingdom's Defence sector
3. Inclusivity within wider leadership

Summary

In sum, I have used an autoethnographic lens as a method to analyse different seams of my experience (individual, sectoral and cultural). And through the autoethnographic lens, I can examine how my personal experiences as a leader have shaped my

understanding of inclusive leadership. This approach allows me to critically reflect on instances where I have seen leadership emerge from unexpected places, supporting my argument that leadership is a process to which everyone can contribute.

Leadership

Definition

Leadership, both as a concept and a practice, forms a critical lens through which I analyse my work. This lens is fundamental because the act of leading - and being led - has shaped how I navigate the world and connect with it. Through writing this context statement, I've realised that my relationship with leadership goes beyond professional practice; it is intrinsic to my self-understanding and personal growth. This deep connection manifests in how I empathise with others, make decisions, and strive to create positive change - actions that feel like expressions of my core values and aspirations.

Deconstruction

In applying this lens, I aim to challenge prevailing leadership myths (Haslam et al., 2024, p.10):

1. That only leaders can lead
2. That leaders possess unique qualities setting them apart from others
3. And that group success should be solely attributed to leaders

These myths are embedded in mainstream leadership theory, which has proposed various explanations for how individuals become leaders, ranging from innate personality traits to responses to pivotal events (Bass and Stogdill, 1990). Additional theories suggest that leadership skills can be learned and developed through approaches such as transformational, authentic, and servant leadership (Bass, 1990; Greenleaf, 1998).

While each theory offers valuable insights, the overarching leadership discourse has not substantially evolved to reflect contemporary realities. This stagnation persists even as leadership contexts have been radically altered by technology, globalisation, and other forces. The static nature of leadership discourse, partly due to generational lag where future leaders learn from outdated models, limits our understanding of leadership's full potential.

My own leadership journey illustrates these limitations. In a male-dominated military organisation, I experimented with various leadership styles, finding resonance in servant leadership principles. However, the constraints of traditional leadership discourse limited how I could enact leadership authentically. This experience informs my critique of traditional leadership models and advocacy for more inclusive approaches.

Reconstruction

Through my autoethnographic reflection, I have come to champion an approach that views leadership as a process to which everyone can, and needs to, contribute (Haslam et al., 2024, p.10). This perspective better reflects the complex realities of modern organisations and the potential for leadership at all levels. My public works unconsciously applied this inclusive approach, such as when I, as chair of the Royal Air Force's gender network, provided leadership roles to people of all ranks and backgrounds.

Central to this reconstructed view is the concept of self-leadership, which I now recognise as crucial but often overlooked in traditional leadership discourse. Reflecting on my public works has deepened my understanding of self-leadership. I recognise now that I often relied on control, willpower, and self-discipline to lead others, sometimes at the expense of my authentic self. By emphasising self-leadership, we can provide individuals with a stronger sense of their worth, agency, and values, better equipping them to lead others and participate in leadership processes.

The integration of positive psychology with leadership is particularly beneficial for promoting universal participation in leadership. Positive psychology's strength-based approach aligns well with an inclusive leadership model, focusing on what individuals can contribute rather than their limitations. This integration encourages building relationships and collaborations, fostering a more participative leadership culture.

By combining autoethnography, leadership, and positive psychology as critical lenses, I offer a unique contribution to leadership discourse. This approach makes explicit the experience of being a leader in a large, hierarchical organisation while creating space for objective reflection on leadership practice. It also illuminates the reciprocal influence between personal identity and leadership.

Summary

In conclusion, my reconstructed leadership lens aims to evolve leadership discourse towards a more inclusive, participative model. By championing universal participation in leadership and emphasising the importance of self-leadership, we can create more resilient, adaptive, and effective organisations. This approach not only enhances organisational effectiveness but also contributes to the development of more engaged and empowered individuals across all levels of society.

Positive Psychology

Definition

Since its inception through the work of Seligman and Czikszentmihalyi (2000) positive psychology has been the subject of debate. On a broader scale, it aims to balance psychological research and practice by focusing on the positive aspects of human behaviour and experience. The field strives to combine our understanding of positive experiences with our knowledge of negative human functioning (Linley et al., 2006). At the pragmatic level, it asks us to understand the principles, processes and components that lead to desirable outcomes (Linley et al., 2006). However, I agree

that for many, positive psychology is defined as the scientific examination of optimal human functioning (Linley et al., 2006).

Deconstruction

That said, it is important to clarify what positive psychology is not. Positive psychology does not emphasise the positive at the expense of the negative (Held, 2004; Lazarus, 2003). It is not:

- A replacement for traditional psychology, but rather a complementary approach
- A denial of negative emotions or experiences
- A guarantee of happiness or a 'quick fix' for life's problems
- Solely focused on individual well-being at the expense of societal or systemic issues
- A one-size-fits-all approach to mental health and well-being
- Limited to self-help or pop psychology; it is grounded in rigorous scientific research

It does attempt to redress an imbalance in the focus of research attention and practice objectives in psychology, where it is argued that the negative dominates (Rozin and Royzman, 2001), and "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister et al., 2001, p. 323). As stated:

> "The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyse a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities." (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5)

Psychology has a traditional focus on diagnosis and distress which represents a smaller percentage of the population than those who experience the varied, different and contrasting but normal experience of human life. Therefore, positive psychology aims to widen the lens regarding inclusivity. It investigates 'positive' topics as equal and not "secondary, derivative, illusory, epiphenomenal, parasitic upon the negative, or otherwise suspect" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 4).

Reconstruction

So in sum, throughout this context statement I use the lens of positive psychology to focus on what works and what is improving (Sheldon and King, 2001, p. 216).

Since studying positive psychology in 2019, it has provided me with a different lens through which to understand myself, my leadership and human experience. This lens enabled me to ask questions such as: 'What are my strengths, and how can I leverage them in my leadership?' and 'How can I foster resilience in myself and my team?' I tested new ways of being, such as recognising and articulating the role of emotions in decision making, as well as implementing strength-based improvement programs.

For example, when faced with the challenge to understand risk appetite for our unit's operations, instead of focusing solely on limitations and obstacles, I used the positive psychology lens to identify areas of opportunity and strengths. This shift in perspective enabled a sense of confidence and creativity, ultimately leading to the articulation of a broad risk envelope that supported comprehensive operations supported by the strategic headquarters.

Positive psychology has increased my understanding of values, strengths, emotions, and evolution of selfhood. It has boosted my confidence in operating and assessing everything through the lens of learning, generalising and applying lessons more broadly to enable more people to improve their lives.

Most importantly, positive psychology provided me with a language to understand myself and describe myself to others. For instance, I could now articulate my leadership style using terms like 'strength-based approach,' 'growth mindset,' and 'psychological capital.' This vocabulary allowed me to explain how I focus on developing my team's strengths rather than just fixing weaknesses, how I view challenges as opportunities for growth, and how I cultivate hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism.

Within my professional practice, positive psychology provided a bridge between my personal and professional self, so that I could understand my own leadership and explain that leadership to others. It was incredibly empowering to have a language that encapsulated my way of being and doing leadership which resonated and was energising. Centred around understanding states, traits, and outcomes in relation to each other (Linley et al., 2006), it shifted the implicit value basis of my military leadership from often deficit-focus to asset-focus, and in so doing provided me with new and fertile ground for leadership.

Summary

The lens of positive psychology has been instrumental in shaping my understanding of self-leadership. By focusing on individual strengths and potential, this approach supports my argument that self-leadership can make the broader concept of leadership accessible to everyone, regardless of their formal position

Combining Lenses: A Synergistic Approach

The integration of autoethnography, leadership, and positive psychology creates a powerful analytical tool. Autoethnography provides self-reflexivity and cultural context, leadership uncovers discordant tension between quickly evolving practitioners and static systems, and positive psychology contributes insights into my internally driven commitment. Together, these lenses allow for a nuanced examination of leadership as an inclusive, accessible process.

For example, when analysing my public work as special adviser to the Chiefs of Staff on inappropriate behaviour, the autoethnographic lens allowed me to reflect on my personal experiences, the leadership lens provided critical perspectives on power dynamics, and the positive psychology lens highlighted opportunities for individual growth and contribution. This integrated approach revealed the importance of fostering positive ethical contributions, supporting my argument that leadership is a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute (Haslam et al, 2024, p.10).

Conclusion

Reconstructed Critical Lens

I began this chapter with the intention of building your trust in me as a reflective, critical thinker. Through the introduction of three interconnected metaphors and three complementary analytical lenses, I have established the framework through which I will examine my professional practice and public works.

The metaphors of murmuration, airborne navigation, and disappearing provide rich imagery for understanding the complex dynamics of leadership and transformation. Meanwhile, my critical framework combines three established lenses that are highly relevant to my professional practice: autoethnography, leadership, and positive psychology. Each have diverse and disparate definitions, so I have deconstructed and then reconstructed them to demonstrate their relevance and how I intend to use them.

In sum:

- Through autoethnography I analyse different layers, namely: the personal, sectoral and cultural
- By means of leadership I recognise how I choose to move through the world and connect with it
- Amidst the study of positive psychology, I have understood why I choose to connect with the world

During the introduction to this chapter, I highlighted an underlying principle of this context statement, namely, that this level of reflection applies not just to academic endeavours but also to practice. This chapter has focused on setting the foundations from which I will demonstrate critical thinking. The next chapter will demonstrate my credibility as a practitioner.

CHAPTER 1: CRITICAL APPROACH

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding, 1943

Introduction

When I embarked on this context statement, my intended audience was quite specific: senior female leaders with extensive organisational experience who were positioned to reach board-level or C-suite roles. My focus stemmed from observing how these accomplished women often experienced 'ego chill' (Keegan,1982, p. 169)- a profound tension between their emerging personal values and the organisational values they had internalised over decades of service.

However, as my critique deepened, this audience focus underwent a significant evolution. The gender-specific lens, while valuable, gave way to a broader realisation: the fundamental challenges of leadership development and self-expression within hierarchical structures transcend gender. While my insights resonate across many large, traditional organisations, I found that the Royal Air Force's distinct military environment provided an ideal crucible for examining these universal leadership dynamics. The clarity of military hierarchies and the starkness of its traditional culture threw these challenges into sharp relief, allowing me to distil insights that apply far beyond gender-specific leadership development. T S Eliot's words from Little Gidding resonate deeply as I reflect on the evolution of my intended audience.

Plus. this evolution in my understanding of audience and scope aligns with my fundamental philosophical approach to leadership research and practice. As a constructivist, I believe that reality and meaning are constructed through human interaction and interpretation (Crevani et al., 2010). My epistemology is subjectivist, in that I see knowledge as based on individual perspective and experience (Hosking,

2007). In this regard, my approach aligns with leadership studies that advocate for a shift away from traditional, individualistic views of leadership. Drawing on process ontology, I view leadership as a continuous social flow rather than a set of static entities or traits (Wood, 2005). This perspective sees leadership as emerging through daily interactions and social processes, embedded in cultural contexts. It challenges the 'heroic' conception of leadership centred on individuals, instead proposing that leadership is a complex, socially constructed phenomenon (Parry and Bryman, 2006). By adopting a constructionist epistemology, I understand leadership as created through interactions between people, rather than as a fixed trait or easily measured skill set (Fletcher, 2004). This view allows me to explore the darker aspects of leadership and challenge accepted notions. Ultimately, by reflecting on how I conceptualise leadership (ontology) and how I gain knowledge about it (epistemology), I develop a richer, more nuanced understanding of leadership as it is practiced.

This approach aims to capture the complex reality of leadership, moving beyond a focus solely on individual leaders and their attributes. However, I also draw upon critical theory to analyse broader cultural and societal dynamics. In this chapter, I will explore these philosophical stances through a novel idea: the concept of 'the disappeared.'

Drawing on my experiences in the Royal Air Force, I will use the analogy of a murmuration of starlings to illustrate how selfhood, belonging, and leadership interact in organisational contexts. To illustrate my ontological and epistemological approach, I invite you to consider the image of a murmuration of starlings - a swooping mass of thousands of birds whirling in the sky. This natural phenomenon serves as a powerful analogy for how I conceptualise selfhood, belonging, and the process of disappearing within organisational contexts.

Historically, 'the disappeared' refers to victims of state-sanctioned abductions and killings, particularly in Latin American contexts. I propose that by extrapolating this concept to organisational and individual levels, we can gain profound insights into the dynamics of selfhood, belonging, and othering within contemporary leadership and organisational contexts.

By the end of this chapter, I aim to demonstrate that:

1. The concept of 'the disappeared' can be a powerful tool for understanding how aspects of self are silenced or suppressed within organisations
2. This framework illuminates the complex interplay between selfhood, belonging, and othering in organisational settings
3. Applying critical theory to this concept reveals broader cultural and societal forces shaping identity and belonging in the workplace

Through this analysis, I intend to challenge current leadership conversations and practice, still often centred on masculine, heroic ideals. Instead, I advocate for an evolved, inclusive approach that recognises the full multiplicity of self in leaders and followers alike.

This exploration will serve my broader goal: to persuade you that the concept and implementation of self-leadership deserves greater awareness, visibility, and understanding within current leadership discourse and practice. By refocusing our approach through the concept of the disappeared, I hope to evolve leadership thinking so that:

1. Leadership is considered as something to which everyone can and needs to contribute
2. Self-leadership is recognised as foundational to all leadership and makes it accessible to all

These applied goals, grounded in my ontological and epistemological approach, combine an assessment of current leadership discourse with my lived experience as a practitioner. Through this approach, I invite you to join me in reimagining leadership for a more inclusive and authentically human future.

The Disappeared: A Critical Approach

The concept of 'the disappeared' originated in Latin America, particularly during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. It refers to individuals who were abducted, often tortured, and killed by state agents, with their fates concealed and

their bodies never recovered. This practice was a form of state terrorism, designed to instil fear and suppress dissent (Gatti, 2020).

While the historical context of forced disappearances is extreme, I propose that the underlying dynamics can be extrapolated to understand more subtle forms of erasure and silencing within organisations and individual psyches. By viewing 'disappearance' as a mode of power and exclusion, I hope to provide insight into how aspects of selfhood are suppressed or silenced in various contexts.

Returning to the murmuration analogy, we can consider an organisation as the entire flock, with each individual representing a starling. Just as each starling contributes to the overall pattern and movement of the murmuration, each individual contributes to the culture and dynamics of an organisation. However, when certain 'starlings' are silenced or made invisible, the entire murmuration is affected, potentially losing its harmony and coherence.

In organisational settings, 'disappearing' can manifest in several ways:

1. Silencing of dissenting voices
2. Erasure of diversity in favour of a homogeneous corporate culture
3. Suppression of emotional or 'unprofessional' aspects of self
4. Invisibility of certain groups or individuals within the organisational hierarchy

Just as state-sanctioned disappearances served to maintain power structures, these organisational 'disappearances' often function to preserve existing hierarchies and norms (Rubin, 2015).

At the individual level, we might 'disappear' aspects of ourselves to fit in, advance our careers, or avoid conflict. This self-imposed disappearance can lead to a fragmented sense of self and a disconnect between our selves and our professional personas. In the context of the murmuration, this would be akin to a starling altering its flight pattern to conform with the flock, potentially at the cost of its own natural instincts.

By applying this approach, we can examine:

1. How power dynamics in organisations lead to the silencing or erasure of certain voices or identities
2. The psychological impact of having to 'disappear' aspects of oneself in professional contexts
3. The role of organisational culture in fostering or preventing these 'disappearances'
4. How leadership practices can either perpetuate or challenge these dynamics

This framework allows me to critically examine the often unspoken ways in which power operates in organisations, shaping identities and behaviours. It provides a unique perspective on issues of diversity, inclusion, and genuine self in the workplace.

In the following sections, I will explore how this concept of 'the disappeared' intersects with my understanding of selfhood, belonging, and othering, and what implications this has for leadership theory and practice. Throughout this exploration, we will return to the murmuration analogy to illuminate these complex dynamics in a vivid and accessible way.

Selfhood through the Concept of the Disappeared

In exploring selfhood through the concept of the disappeared, I aim to illuminate how aspects of our identity can be suppressed or erased within organisational contexts. This perspective aligns with my constructivist view that reality and meaning are socially constructed through human interaction and interpretation.

Reflecting upon several theorists, I understand selfhood as a multiplicity rather than a unitary whole like (Schwartz, 2021). This paradigm suggests that we comprise various 'parts' or 'sub-selves', each with its own perspectives, needs, and roles. To return to our murmuration analogy, everyone can be seen as a complex murmuration, with various aspects of self represented by individual starlings within this personal flock.

Through the concept of the disappeared, I propose that certain parts of our multiplicity may be 'disappeared' in response to organisational pressures or cultural norms. In the

murmuration analogy, this would be akin to certain starlings within an individual's flock being forced out or made invisible, disrupting the harmony and completeness of the whole.

Kegan (1982) challenges us to recognise that people are constantly evolving, arguing that individuals construct reality and meaning through a process of cognitive and moral development stages. This aligns with my view of the self as continuously developing and my constructivist approach to meaning-making and meaning-sensing. Vaillant (2008) further supports this idea, presenting a model of adult development consisting of social life stages and arguing that self-mastery enables passing value on to others.

For instance, in my experience within the Royal Air Force, I observed how certain aspects of self were implicitly discouraged or overtly suppressed. The emphasis on physical fitness and mental robustness, while valuable in many respects, often led to the 'disappearing' of vulnerability or emotional expression. This aligns with research suggesting that organisational cultures can shape which aspects of self are deemed acceptable or valuable (Waller, 2020).

My family used to joke that I was married to the Royal Air Force. I volunteered for every opportunity that I was offered: living overseas, spending years deployed on operations, moving location every 18 months. Birthdays, anniversaries, any milestone never registered as being missed because my commitment to the Royal Air Force came first. For nearly two decades, I made sense of myself through the Royal Air Force and would have struggled to separate myself from it as an organisation. This experience illustrates Kegan's (1983, p.16-17) concept of moving from "I am my relationships" to "I have relationships" or "There is now a self who runs the organisation where before there was a self who was the organisation."

The process of 'disappearing' aspects of self can manifest in various ways:

1. Self-censorship: Withholding opinions or ideas that don't align with organisational norms
2. Emotional suppression: Hiding or denying feelings deemed 'unprofessional'.

3. Identity concealment: Downplaying aspects of one's background or personal life to fit in
4. Skill obscuration: Hiding capabilities that don't fit prescribed roles or expectations

These acts of 'disappearing' can have profound implications for one's sense of self. They may lead to ego chill - an internal schism when the self might be lost because there is risk of a split between the created (or professional) self and the actual self (Erikson, 1968). This fragmentation can result in stress, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished well-being.

Moreover, the concept of the disappeared helps illuminate how power dynamics within organisations can shape our very sense of self. Just as state-sanctioned disappearances served to maintain political power structures, organisational dynamics can lead us to 'disappear' aspects of ourselves to maintain our position or advance our careers.

However, recognising this process also opens possibilities for resistance and change. By understanding how and why we 'disappear' parts of ourselves, we can begin to challenge these dynamics and create spaces where a fuller expression of self is possible. In terms of our murmuration analogy, this would mean creating organisational environments where all 'starlings' within an individual's personal flock are allowed to fly freely, contributing to the richness and diversity of the larger organisational murmuration.

In the next section, I will explore how this understanding of selfhood intersects with concepts of belonging and othering, further illuminating the complex dynamics at play in organisational settings.

Belonging and Othering in the Context of Disappearing

In this section, I will explore how the concept of the disappeared intersects with belonging and othering in organisational contexts. This analysis builds upon my

subjectivist epistemology, recognising that knowledge and experience are deeply personal and contextual.

Belonging, as I've come to understand it, is a fundamental human need that profoundly impacts our psychological well-being, self-esteem, and overall functioning (Baumeister and Leary, 2017). Prior to 1995, research on belonging provided two main conclusions: that belonging was fundamentally good for human health, and not belonging was fundamentally bad (Allen et al., 2022). Ultimately, it can be argued that humans have evolved an innate and widespread need to create and sustain social connection with others (Baumeister and Leary, 2017).

Through my experiences in the Royal Air Force, I witnessed first-hand the power of belonging. I worked hard to be physically fit, mentally robust, and to embody the values of the organisation: Respect, Integrity, Service, and Ethos (Ministry of Defence, 2009, p.9). I remember being selected for my first operational deployment to the Balkans just three weeks after leaving training. My excitement and sense of belonging was palpable – I thought, 'this is me; I belong here'. This sense of belonging increased further when I refuelled my first Apache in the battlefields of Banja Luka and when I underwent the symbolic ritual of receiving and wearing my first operational medal.

However, viewed through the approach of the disappeared, belonging takes on a more complex hue. The very act of belonging often requires a degree of conformity, which can lead to the 'disappearing' of aspects of self that don't align with the group's norms or values. Of note, belonging is an active engagement in communication and cooperation, but this engagement can sometimes come at the cost of individual expression (Allen et al., 2022).

In terms of our murmuration analogy, belonging can be seen as the process by which individual starlings align their flight patterns with the larger flock. While this alignment creates the breathtaking patterns we observe, it may also require individual starlings to suppress their unique flight tendencies.

Othering, on the other hand, can be seen as the antithesis of belonging. It's a process of defining oneself or one's group in opposition to others, often leading to exclusion

and discrimination. In the context of disappearing, othering can manifest as the active suppression or erasure of characteristics or identities that don't conform to the dominant group. In our murmuration analogy, othering would be akin to pushing certain starlings to the edges of the flock or expelling them entirely.

The interplay between belonging, othering, and disappearing creates a complex dynamic:

1. Pressure to belong can lead to self-imposed disappearing of 'undesirable' traits
2. Fear of being othered may cause individuals to hide aspects of their identity
3. Organisational cultures may inadvertently encourage the othering and disappearing of certain groups or characteristics
4. The very act of belonging to one group may necessitate the othering of another

This dynamic was evident in my experiences with gender in the military. While striving to belong, I unconsciously participated in the othering of traditionally feminine characteristics, disappearing aspects of myself and potentially contributing to an environment where others felt pressured to do the same. For instance, I initially took pride in being told I was 'not bad for a girl', internalising and perpetuating masculine ideals of leadership without questioning their implications.

Understanding these dynamics through the approach of the disappeared offers new insights into inclusion and diversity efforts. It suggests that true inclusion isn't just about inviting diverse individuals into a space, but about creating an environment where people don't feel compelled to 'disappear' parts of themselves to belong.

However, I recognise the tension that exists when a uniformed organisation, like the military, is challenged to make space for multiplicity. The very nature of a uniformed service implies conformity and unity, which can seem at odds with embracing diversity and individual expression. My experience in uniform, I now realise, had blinded me to the variety, creativity, and innovation that multiplicity can bring.

This tension is real and should be acknowledged. Yet, I argue that we must not bend to it. Instead, we should view it as an opportunity for growth and evolution within these

organisations. The strength of a military force, or indeed any organisation, lies not just in its unity but in its ability to harness diverse perspectives and approaches to solve complex problems.

Moreover, this perspective challenges us to reconsider what belonging means in an organisational context. Rather than striving for a homogeneous culture where everyone 'fits in', we might aim for a culture that values and makes space for multiplicity, even plurality- both within individuals and across the organisation. In terms of our murmuration analogy, this would mean creating a flock where each starling's unique flight pattern contributes to, rather than detracts from, the beauty and effectiveness of the whole.

In the next section, I will explore how critical theory can further illuminate these dynamics, helping us understand the broader societal and cultural forces at play in the processes of belonging, othering, and disappearing, particularly within the context of uniformed and hierarchical organisations.

Critical Theory and the Disappeared

In this section, I will explore how aspects of critical theory can deepen our understanding of the disappeared in organisational contexts, particularly within uniformed and hierarchical structures. This approach aligns with my use of critical theory to analyse broader cultural and societal dynamics that shape experiences of selfhood, belonging, and othering.

For example, it is through the arguments of recognition theory that being recognised and respected by others is seen as crucial for developing a healthy sense of self, with misrecognition potentially leading to negative psychological impacts (Fraser, 1995; Honneth and Farrell, 1997). Fraser's work on recognition and redistribution is particularly relevant to discussions of visibility and invisibility in organisations (1995), while Honneth's recognition theory provides insights into the psychological impacts of 'disappearing' in organisational contexts (1997). Nevertheless, I am aware that while recognition theory offers valuable insights, some argue for a more comprehensive

approach that considers structural and institutional factors alongside interpersonal and psychological dynamics (Garrett, 2009).

Critical theory provides also a valuable lens through which to examine the phenomenon of disappearing in organisations, encouraging an analysis that goes beyond individual experiences to understand the systemic forces at play in organisations and society. Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal work, "Dialectic of Enlightenment" forms the foundation of this approach, arguing that organisational rationality, often presented as neutral and efficient, can be a form of domination that suppresses individual autonomy and critical reflection (1972). This perspective challenges the assumption that increased rationalisation in organisations inherently leads to progress and they promote a more reflexive approach to organisational practices (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972). Although, of course critical theory has limitations. Habermas, for instance, argues for a more nuanced understanding of rationality, distinguishing between instrumental and communicative reason, and seeks to preserve reason's emancipatory potential while recognising its capacity for domination (Habermas and Levin, 1982). Despite these critiques, I find critical theory remains a powerful tool for analysing organisational phenomena, balancing its provocative insights with an awareness of its potential shortcomings.

Another key insight from critical theory is the concept of hegemony as developed by Gramsci (1971) and if taken further could be applied to organisational contexts. The idea that dominant groups maintain power not just through force, but through cultural dominance that makes their worldview seem natural and inevitable. In the context of disappearing, this suggests that the pressure to conform and suppress certain aspects of self isn't just a personal choice, but a reflection of broader societal norms and power dynamics.

For instance, in my experience within the Royal Air Force, the prevalence of masculine leadership ideals wasn't just a matter of individual preference, but a reflection of deeply ingrained societal beliefs about strength, authority, and competence. Critical theory helps me understand how these norms became so entrenched and why challenging them can be so difficult. As Stuart Hall writes:

"(The dominant class) sets the limits – mental and structural --- within which subordinate classes 'live' and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them." (2018, p. 62)

Another relevant concept from critical theory is that of false consciousness - the idea that oppressed groups may internalise and perpetuate the very ideologies that contribute to their oppression (Augoustinos, 1999). This resonates with my previously mentioned experience of initially taking pride in being told I was 'not bad for a girl', unknowingly reinforcing gender stereotypes that ultimately limited both myself and others.

Applying critical theory to the concept of the disappeared also illuminates the ways in which organisations, especially uniformed services, can function as microcosms of broader societal power structures. The hierarchical nature of these organisations often mirrors and reinforces societal hierarchies based on gender, race, class, and other factors.

Drawing from Davis and Ward (1990), we can analyse how organisations might be complicit in disappearing aspects of self. This could stem from a conscious or unconscious bias to maintain historical traditions, or a propensity to instil a sense of propriety into the general population of the organisation to limit divergence and dissent from its historical predisposition.

The narrative evidence connecting these themes includes:

1. The way governments translate the fate of individuals into the habitual practices and language of the military (de Reufels, 2018)
2. The effects on societies which go through traumatic experiences and how these are passed on from one generation to another (Doucet and Rovers, 2010)
3. The arbitrary element to disappearances, indicating an attempt by regimes to instil a sense of terror and fear into the general population to limit antiregime activity
4. The governmental addiction to repressive violence, despite its dysfunctional character on the development of society (Davis and Ward, 1990)

While these examples refer to extreme state violence, we can see parallels in organisational contexts where certain voices or identities are systematically silenced or erased.

Returning to our murmuration analogy, critical theory helps us understand how the patterns of the larger flock (society or organisation) are shaped by invisible currents of power and ideology. It reveals how certain starlings (individuals or groups) might be pushed to the margins or made invisible, not by chance, but by systemic forces.

However, critical theory doesn't just help us understand these dynamics; it also provides tools for challenging them. By making visible the hidden power structures that contribute to disappearing, we can begin to imagine and work towards alternatives.

For instance, critical pedagogy, a branch of critical theory developed by Paulo Freire (1985), emphasises the importance of dialogue and critical consciousness in challenging oppressive structures. This approach could be applied in leadership development programmes to help leaders recognise and challenge the dynamics that lead to disappearing.

Moreover, intersectionality, a concept from critical race theory, highlights the complex, overlapping forms of oppression individuals may face. However, bell hooks (1989) reframes marginality as not just a site of deprivation, but as a space of potential resistance and transformation. This perspective suggests that those on the margins have a unique vantage point, seeing both the centre and periphery of society. By embracing marginal status, individuals can engage in acts of empowerment and resistance. As you will read later in this context statement, it is this school of positive interpretation of marginality which informs my concept of 'internal intersectionality', moving beyond traditional views of oppression to explore how embracing diverse perspectives can transform both marginalised individuals and broader societal structures.

In applying critical theory to the disappeared, I'm also mindful of the potential tensions and challenges. Critical theory's emphasis on systemic critique can sometimes seem at odds with the need for unity and shared purpose in uniformed organisations. However, I argue that true unity comes not from enforced conformity, but from creating spaces where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated.

By bringing critical theory into dialogue with the concept of the disappeared, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in organisations. This understanding, in turn, can inform more effective and equitable leadership practices.

In the next section, I will explore the implications of these insights for leadership and self-leadership, considering how we might create organisational cultures that allow for a fuller expression of self while maintaining the cohesion necessary for effective operation.

Implications for Leadership and Self-Leadership

Having explored the concept of the disappeared through the approaches of selfhood, belonging, othering, and critical theory, I now turn to the implications of these insights for leadership and self-leadership. Just as a murmuration of starlings adapts its flight pattern in response to both internal and external factors, our approach to leadership must evolve to address the complexities we've uncovered.

As I stated in my introduction, my intention is to evolve leadership thinking so that:

1. Leadership is considered as something to which everyone can and needs to contribute
2. Self-leadership is recognised as foundational to all leadership and makes it accessible to all

These goals are particularly relevant in light of our exploration of the disappeared. Recognising the phenomenon of disappearing calls for a fundamental shift in how we

conceive of leadership, especially within uniformed services and hierarchical organisations.

In my experience within the Royal Air Force, I observed how traditional models of leadership often emphasise conformity and the projection of a singular, 'strong' image. However, our exploration of the disappeared suggests that this approach may be counterproductive, leading to the suppression of valuable perspectives and the fragmentation of self.

Instead, I propose a model of leadership that embraces multiplicity and creates space for the full expression of self - both for leaders and those they lead. This approach acknowledges that effective leadership isn't about presenting a perfect, unwavering front, but about navigating complexity and fostering an environment where diverse viewpoints can coexist and contribute.

A key practical application of these insights is the implementation of 1-2-1 coaching across all ranks in the military. This approach can help embed self-awareness and self-leadership from the very start of a career, making these skills an engrained part of military practice.

Here's how this might work:

1. Early Career Coaching: From the moment individuals join the military, they would be assigned a coach to work with them on developing self-awareness and self-leadership skills. This early intervention can help individuals recognise and value their own multiplicity before they feel pressure to 'disappear' aspects of themselves.
2. Ongoing Development: Regular coaching sessions throughout one's career can provide a space for reflection on leadership challenges, including pressures to conform or 'disappear' aspects of self. These sessions can help individuals navigate these pressures while maintaining their integrity and authenticity.
3. Leadership Coaching: Those in formal leadership positions would receive specialised coaching to help them create environments where others don't feel pressured to 'disappear' aspects of themselves.

By implementing such a comprehensive coaching programme, we can work towards creating a military culture where self-leadership is valued and nurtured at all levels. This approach can help address the challenges we've discussed regarding belonging, othering, and disappearing, while maintaining the cohesion necessary for effective military operations.

Insights from critical theory can further inform these leadership practices. By raising awareness of systemic power dynamics and hidden biases, leaders can work to create more inclusive environments that resist the pressure to 'disappear' diverse perspectives and identities.

In conclusion, the implications of our exploration of the disappeared for leadership and self-leadership are profound. They call for a reimagining of what it means to be a leader, moving away from rigid, one-size-fits-all models towards an approach that values multiplicity, even plurality, fosters belonging without demanding conformity, and recognises the leader within every individual. By embracing these principles and implementing practical measures like comprehensive coaching programmes, I believe we can create more human, effective, and inclusive organisations, even within the unique context of uniformed services.

While this approach offers significant potential for creating more inclusive and effective organisations, it's important to acknowledge the challenges in implementation, particularly within hierarchical structures with long-standing traditions. However, I believe that the benefits of nurturing self-leadership and embracing multiplicity far outweigh these challenges, leading to more resilient, innovative, and human-centred organisations.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have explored the concept of 'the disappeared' as a novel approach through which to examine selfhood, belonging, and leadership in organisational contexts. By extrapolating from the historical concept of state-

sanctioned disappearances to more subtle forms of erasure within organisations, we've uncovered complex dynamics that shape individual and collective experiences.

Our journey, much like the murmuration of starlings I've used as an analogy, has taken us through various interconnected themes:

1. We've seen how aspects of self can be 'disappeared' in response to organisational pressures, leading to fragmentation and 'ego chill'
2. We've explored how the drive for belonging can paradoxically lead to the suppression of individual uniqueness
3. We've examined how critical theory illuminates the systemic forces that contribute to these dynamics
4. Finally, we've considered the implications for leadership and self-leadership, proposing a model that embraces multiplicity, plurality and fosters environments where individuals can bring their whole selves to work

This exploration reinforces my constructivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, demonstrating how reality and meaning are constructed through human interaction and interpretation, and how knowledge is deeply rooted in individual perspective and experience.

The concept of the disappeared offers a powerful tool for understanding and addressing issues of diversity, inclusion, and selfhood in the workplace. It challenges us to reconsider traditional notions of leadership.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT

In this chapter I will depict the wider, surrounding environmental landscape, and demonstrate my credibility as practitioner. I will do this by exploring the context from which my public works emerged and in which my public works were formed.

I will explore my context from three layers. The first tier considers the strategic aspects of the characteristics of war and evolving nature of leadership. The next layer discusses the nature of the defence sector and Royal Air Force. The final layer uncovers the personal and I write about my own practice of leadership.

The value of this context chapter is to build trust between us and enhance my credibility in my role as a practitioner. You should gain a sense of me as a leader and appreciate my credibility as a champion of leadership as an activity in which everyone can, and needs to, contribute.

Introduction

The rapidly evolving defence landscape, characterised by blurred boundaries between peace and war, state and non-state actors, and virtual and real domains, demands a new approach to leadership. As the UK Ministry of Defence (2021) highlights, success in this era of systemic competition requires integration across all five domains - space, cyberspace, maritime, land, and air - and a constant adaptation to technological change. This context presents an opportunity to explore how leadership in the Armed Forces must evolve to seize the initiative and gain a competitive advantage.

Strategic Context

The character of war continues to evolve, with the UK's Integrated Operating Concept emphasising the need for a posture that is integrated across all operational domains, nationally, and internationally (Royal United Services Institute, 2020). As the Chief of the Defence Staff notes:

"We cannot afford to operate in silos – we have to be integrated: with allies as I have described across Government, as a national enterprise, but particularly across the military instrument" (Royal United Services Institute, 2020).

The pace of technological advancement also necessitates a rapid crowdsourcing of innovative ideas from across headquarters, domains, and partners, resonating with the US Air Force Chief of Staff's message of "accelerate change or lose" (Brown, 2020).

These contextual changes demand a corresponding evolution in leadership. As Nye (2008, p. 88) argues, leaders must possess "contextual intelligence," allowing them to adjust their style to the situation and their followers' needs. Confident, competent, and emotionally intelligent leaders should be able to adapt their approach depending on the context.

Professional Context

The UK defence sector faces imperatives to integrate across government departments, international allies, private sector partners, and society. This in response to the complex strategic landscape. Military leaders must focus on supporting and influencing broader coalition efforts to fulfil UK objectives (Ministry of Defence, 2021). The increasing diversity of the workforce, with the arrival of Generation Z (born 1997-2012), requires leaders who:

"Give individuals and groups opportunities to voice differing opinions and engage in collaborative problem solving, and design 'third spaces' that allow interactions outside departmental boundaries to promote dialogue, create identity and build community" (Forbes, 2018, p.1).

Moreover, the information revolution is transforming organisations and flattening hierarchies. This necessitates leaders skilled at communicating and coordinating across boundaries of expertise, status, and distance (Edmondson, 2019; Nye, 2008). As General Dempsey notes:

"As the digital echo spreads, as complex issues multiply, as uncertainty increases, as technology exponentially changes, and as risk rises, it seems

reasonable that we should seek to lead by sharing our challenges rather than owning them outright" (Dempsey and Brafman, 2018, p. xiv-xv).

This new context demands a more blended and nuanced approach, incorporating leadership styles traditionally found in business and high-tech organisations, supporting Moore's (2011) premise that the military needs to move towards consultative leadership.

Personal Context

Engaging in a profound process of personal reflection is crucial within this broader context of changing leadership. As a leader in the Royal Air Force for 23 years, I have developed my leadership in challenging circumstances, including operational tours and senior staff roles. However, reflecting objectively and completely on my own leadership has been constrained by rapid role changes and organisational drivers that prioritise task completion over process reflection.

Transitioning into civilian life to develop my skills as an executive coach has provided a unique opportunity. To reflect on my leadership with a new lens and extract new understanding of myself and my agency. Studying positive psychology, mindfulness, and coaching has helped me develop a sense of leadership that resonates with my personal values and provided a language to explain and validate my behaviours, actions, and emotions within the Royal Air Force.

One key moment was learning about second-generation gender bias (Grover, 2015) and reflecting on its pervasive nature within the military. Second generation gender bias refers to hidden and often unintentional practices, values, and beliefs in organizations and society that disadvantage women, particularly in leadership roles. Unlike overt discrimination, these biases are subtle and may appear neutral, but they ultimately reinforce male-oriented structures and hinder women's advancement to top positions (Grover, 2015). This bias exists because many Royal Air Force practices and policies, while appearing neutral, strongly reflect the values of the men who created and developed the organisation.

Early in my career whilst deployed in Iraq in 2007, I received praise for my assertiveness and decisive leadership style, which aligned with traditionally masculine traits. However, when I demonstrated empathy and emotional intelligence, by actively listening to and supporting my team, these qualities were often overlooked couched in terms that minimised their effect or power. This learning led me to reflect on the contradictions I experienced, such as being praised for stereotypically masculine leadership traits while feeling less valued for nurturing others and using emotional intelligence.

Another key insight was the effect of generational lag. The military training environment is often formative for individuals. Those in charge are often a generation older than the new recruits and mirror behaviours from their own instructors, an even earlier generation. As a result, new leaders are frequently influenced by generations many decades away from their current existence. This phenomenon helps explain the difficulty of achieving cultural and behavioural change in hierarchical systems like the military. As a group captain, I mentored a young female officer from an ethnic minority community who had experienced inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour whilst undergoing training. This involved unsolicited touching and kissing by an instructor, violating cultural and personal boundaries as well as expectations for her to adapt to an alcohol-centric social culture at odds with her values. She shared how the unevolved and unnuanced attitudes and practices, perpetuated by older generations, hindered the Royal Air Force's ability to create an inclusive training environment and develop new leaders who embody the values of inclusivity and respect.

This context statement offers an opportunity to engage anew with my recent legacy, view my Royal Air Force role with a new lens, and extract new understanding of myself and my agency. I hope to develop my own leadership while exploring it, discovering whether I have always led in a certain way or only since stepping out of the Royal Air Force education and training system. This reflection will help me understand my leadership with unique insight, especially where my beliefs and values aligned or conflicted with those of the Royal Air Force.

Leadership Context

The UK military recognises that "those selected … will need to adopt new styles of leadership to cope with the increasingly complex character of operations" (Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2017, p. 36). There will be a need for the next generation of leaders to enable, create and maintain am ecosystem rather than directing every move (Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2017).

In this new military operating environment, leaders must work more with and through a range of partners to deliver military effects. The Defence Command Paper highlights that "integration with allies will be fundamental to retaining our global strategic advantage" (Ministry of Defence, 2021, p. 27), requiring leaders to focus on supporting and influencing broader coalition efforts. During my tenure as Chief of Staff to the Royal Air Force's Chief People Officer, I led a cross-functional team tasked with developing a new diversity and inclusion strategy. By collaborating closely with representatives from various branches, ranks, and backgrounds, as well as external experts and stakeholders, we created a comprehensive plan that addressed the unique needs and concerns of our diverse workforce. This experience highlighted the power of inclusive leadership and the importance of leveraging diverse perspectives to drive meaningful change.

The importance of psychological safety in maximising the chances of combined success across organisations and domains cannot be overstated. As one of the most studied enabling conditions in group dynamics and team learning, fostering psychological safety in the military context can bring a multitude of benefits, from harnessing wider stakeholders to creating more successful teams.

Personal Leadership

Viewing leadership as an art practiced by skilled craftsmen, rather than a science reducible to explicit rules and theories, aligns with Schön's (1991) notion of the reflective practitioner. Royal Air Force personnel, like Schön's managers, operate in an organisational context, draw on cumulatively developed organisational knowledge, and function as agents of organisational learning. However, the Royal Air Force's

organisational learning system can become immune to reflection-in-action, limiting people's ability to discuss and describe their practice.

Some in the Royal Air Force possess a capacity for reflection-in-action on their own frames and theories of action. However, whilst serving, there are limits to reflection-in-action due to the behavioural norms and organisational learning system that the Royal Air Force, its individuals, and I have been skilled at creating. It was not until I undertook a Masters degree outwith the military that I began to uncover the language that empowered me to articulate my own leadership style; so inculcated had I been by the military's description, articulation and expectation of traditional leadership.

Leadership in the Royal Air Force is a core quality expected, taught and assessed throughout an individual's career. And while Air Publication 7001 (Ministry of Defence, 2024) establishes self-leadership as foundational within the Royal Air Force's leadership pathway, in practice the concept struggles to become absorbed into the organisational culture and cut through more traditional concepts of leadership. Understanding the difficulty of catalysing cultural change within a military organisation could be unlocked by exploring the role of self-leadership.

The importance of this gap in research, where the role of self-leadership is often unexplored in practice, even if it exists in doctrine is worth considering further. As through this exploration I hope to champion leadership as an activity in which everyone can, and needs to, contribute.

Conclusion

The rapidly morphing defence landscape demands evolving leadership. Leadership that transcends boundaries, and integrates capabilities while simultaneously looking inwards and outwards. Outdated notions of heroic leaders give way to flexible, inclusive leadership grounded in ethical relationships. Traditional demands for homogeny and uniformity evolve to respect and cherish huge differences between individuals. Technical prowess melds with emotional skills like empathy. Innovation arises through diversity of all types. And agility with constant learning and reflection allows for adaptation essential to complexity. Defence leadership fitting this context requires recognition that leadership is not confined to those at the top. It does not want

dependent and passive masses. Instead defence leadership needs to engage everyone and everyone needs to be engaged – in practice not just in doctrine.

The strategic, professional, and personal contexts outlined in this chapter provide a rich tapestry against which to situate my public works and the evolution of my leadership approach. While my critical lens, which combines autoethnography, positive psychology, and leadership, will be fully elaborated in a subsequent chapter, the insights gleaned from this context chapter serve to add depth and nuance to that lens. By exploring the complex interplay of factors shaping the changing nature of war, the challenges facing the UK defence sector, and the unique culture of the Royal Air Force, I aim to ground my autoethnographic reflections in a broader understanding of the forces that have shaped my leadership journey. This contextual understanding will inform my analysis of my public works, allowing me to explore how they reflect and respond to the pressing need for more adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative forms of leadership in the face of an increasingly volatile and uncertain world. Through this analysis, I hope to contribute to a broader conversation about the future of leadership in the Royal Air Force and the defence sector more widely, drawing upon the insights of positive psychology to advocate for a paradigm shift that empowers individuals at all levels to engage in the kind of reflective, agile, and values-driven leadership demanded by the challenges of the 21st century.

CHAPTER 3: AWARENESS
PUBLIC WORKS 1

Soaring Awareness

To help me understand how and why I shaped my first public work, I imagine my professional practice as a murmuration of starlings.

Imagine me, as a young starling, joining a murmuration for the first time. The collective swooping and swirling is breathtaking, and I feel a profound sense of purpose and belonging. The flock's movements seem to create beautiful patterns in the sky. I'm exhilarated by the perfect synchronisation, seeing it as a symbol of equality and empowerment. My wings beat in perfect rhythm with the others, and I'm fully committed to my place in this magnificent aerial dance. I call this my 'conforming stage.'

As I become a more experienced flyer, I take pride in my ability to anticipate and execute the flock's complex manoeuvres. I trust implicitly in the wisdom of the lead birds, believing in their intent and decisions. Unaware, I start to judge other birds harshly, particularly other female starlings who unlike me, struggle to keep up with the masculinised flying patterns demanded by the flock. I develop a dismissive attitude, believing that they are not worthy of being part of 'my murmuration'. I stretch my wings to breaking point, holding uncomfortable positions to maintain the flock's shape, ignoring the strain. All the while, I believe I am upholding the ideals of the murmuration, not realising how I am unconsciously reinforcing problematic patterns and contributing to the marginalisation of those just like me. In this stage I am complicit.

One day, during a particularly intricate manoeuvre, I find myself momentarily separated from the flock. In that brief instant, I see the murmuration from the outside. The revelation is sudden and profound. I notice patterns I had not seen before - how certain birds always end up at the edges, how some voices are consistently drowned out by the collective whoosh of wings. Most strikingly, I observe that the lead birds, despite changes in individual leaders over time, all mirror each other in appearance and behaviour. They form a homogeneous core, starkly different from the diverse birds

struggling at the fringes. As I rejoin the flock, I cannot unsee these dynamics. Worse, I am confused that other birds do not seem to notice that we are perpetuating a system that favours conformity over diversity. Instead, they continue to fly as if nothing has changed, because for them it hasn't. This stage is my awareness rising.

Now, every flight is a complex negotiation. I'm still part of the murmuration, shaped by its collective energy and bound by its gravitational pull. However, I'm no longer flying on compliant autopilot. I attempt to influence the flock's direction subtly - a wing tilt here, a slight speed adjustment there. Sometimes, I create small eddies of change, momentarily altering the flock's shape. Other times, I find myself pushing against an unyielding wall of feathers, leaving exhausted and bruised. I'm constantly balancing between maintaining my influential place in the flock and staying true to my newfound perspective. This navigation phase, is a flight of resilience, often leaving me tired but also oddly invigorated by small victories and the hope of gradual transformation.

Introduction

The strategic, professional, and personal contexts outlined in the previous chapter provide a rich tapestry against which to situate my public works and the evolution of my leadership approach. This chapter explores my first public work, published in November 2021 while I served as special advisor to the Secretary of State on women's experience of the Armed Forces. However, its roots stretch back to 1999 when I joined the Royal Air Force, capturing the true extent of my personal and professional growth over two decades.

This work led to significant governmental acknowledgments, including recognition of past failures in providing women with deserved experiences, a commitment to listening to women's voices, and an emphasis on inclusive leadership as a crucial driver for cultural change. These outcomes reflect not just policy shifts, but a deeper understanding that "culture change is not just about policy, it is also about personal experience" (Parliament. House of Commons, 2021, p.9).

In this chapter, I explore how my professional practice evolved, focusing on the catalysing emergence of awareness - awareness of both self and system. This journey unfolded in four distinct stages:

1. **Conformity**: where my leadership was shaped by the system and cultural environment
2. **Complicity**: where I unknowingly perpetuated narrow leadership prototypes
3. **Awareness**: where awareness of self and system emerged
4. **Navigation**: where I consciously navigated previously unseen tensions to stimulate systemic change

Through this exploration, this chapter aims to:

1. Champion leadership as an inclusive, collective process requiring input and participation from everyone
2. Champion self-leadership as an accessible concept which is foundational to all inclusive, ethical leadership

To achieve these aims, I will critically examine my experiences through the lens of autoethnography, positive psychology, and leadership theory. This approach allows for a deep, reflective analysis of my journey from conformity to conscious navigation of systemic change.

By sharing this journey, I hope to challenge the notion that leadership is an elite skill reserved for a select few. Instead, I argue that leadership lives within everyone, and we must create space for marginalised voices to shape and lead collectively.

My leadership experience in the military context demonstrates that within large, hierarchical organisations a paradigm shift is required in how we conceptualise and enable experience of self-leadership. Rather than equating it solely with self-discipline, control, or willpower—traits often valorised in military contexts—we must foster a discourse that values self-discovery, emotional intelligence, and critical self-reflection as central to developing equitable, ethical leaders capable of navigating complex organisational dynamics.

As we delve into each stage of this journey, we'll explore how my understanding of leadership, inclusivity, and systemic change evolved. We'll examine the challenges faced, the insights gained, and the transformative power of increased self-awareness and systemic understanding. Through this process, I aim to provide a nuanced perspective on the complexities of leadership development within traditional institutions and the potential for meaningful change.

Conformity

Debs: From the very beginning, I set my sights on meeting the most demanding physical standards in the RAF - those typically expected of the youngest men. I built my professional reputation and personal image around fitness and strength. Now, after decades of service, global deployments, and even commanding the RAF's critical emergency logistics unit, I can say I've always felt respected and judged on my merits. However, with time and reflection, I've come to recognise that part of my motivation for joining was to prove myself. I wanted to demonstrate that I could hold my own, and succeed on 'their' terms. As I look back, I realise I had suppressed certain memories - instances of senior officers behaving inappropriately towards me as a young officer. I'd like to believe the system has evolved since then. But I can't help wondering: is it truly the system that's changed, or is it my position? Perhaps it's my age and seniority that have shifted, rather than the institution itself. It's a sobering thought, isn't it? That perhaps the changes I perceive are more about my personal journey than systemic improvements.

Like the young starling in the murmuration, during my early career I was fully committed to making my place in the magnificent aerial dance that is the Royal Air Force. I conformed to the typical model of military leadership, seeking to advance my own sense of belonging and professional reputation through the adoption of masculine traits and behaviours. The concept of dwelling provides a framework to critically examine this conformity (Ingold, 2000). As a new Royal Air Force recruit, I exemplified the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their environments, unconsciously

adopting masculine-coded behaviours such as participating in alcohol-fuelled formal events and accepting feedback like 'not bad for a girl' as a compliment.

This mutual influence between myself and the military environment indicates why I initially overlooked my own agency in challenging existing structures (Strathern, 2004). Conforming to institutional norms made it difficult to recognise or question exclusionary practices. This sense of dwelling contributed to my perpetuation of exclusive leadership prototypes.

Critically reflecting, I now understand that my conformity was driven by a desire for acceptance and advancement within a system that valued traditionally masculine traits. However, this conformity came at the cost of suppressing aspects of my identity and overlooking systemic biases. The transition from conformity to complicity was subtle, as I began to judge others, particularly other women, who didn't conform as successfully as I believed I had.

My early conformity to military leadership norms was particularly evident in my approach to physical fitness. Excelling in carrying weight and running, I was often chosen to join the fastest men in field exercises, elevating my profile across the squadron. This conformity extended beyond mere physical prowess; it reflected a deeper societal belief that women could 'have it all' if they matched men's standards. A poignant example was when I demonstrated full-body weight press-ups to the entire squadron, leading to the physical training instructor berating others for being outperformed by 'a girl'. At 164 cm and 64 kg, I often carried proportionally more weight than my male counterparts, driven by an internalised pressure to be 'equal' - which I interpreted as 'the same'. This conformity, while boosting my standing, inadvertently perpetuated exclusive leadership prototypes.

It's only through recent deep reflection, enabled by this doctorate, that I've recognised the internal conflict between my enjoyment of physical excellence and my evolving belief in inclusive leadership. This awareness has profoundly shifted my approach; I now champion fitness for everyone, seeing clear parallels with inclusive leadership. My current leadership development in the military focuses on coaching self-awareness and self-leadership, a method that helps individuals see themselves as leaders while

disconnecting from outdated leadership systems. This journey from conformity to critical awareness has been instrumental in reshaping my understanding of leadership as an inclusive, accessible concept rather than an exclusive domain for the physically elite.

Complicity

Debs: *At the end of my fourth week in initial officer training, a fellow female cadet was publicly shamed for sleeping with an instructor. He had clearly orchestrated the sexual encounter as well as the very choreographed, very public reveal. My reaction, at the time was driven by conformity. I rationalised that to be taken seriously, a female in the military had to avoid sexualisation; I believed that this approach was part of navigating the military environment successfully. In my desire to belong, I judged my fellow, female cadet harshly and concluded that she had been found wanting.*

My complicity in perpetuating narrow leadership models was deeply ingrained and multifaceted. Returning to the murmuration of starlings, I believed I was upholding the ideals of the murmuration, not realising how I was unconsciously reinforcing problematic patterns and contributing to the marginalisation of those just like me. I entered the Royal Air Force believing that they defined leadership, and it was my role to embody that definition. This manifested in my unwavering commitment to work, often at the expense of personal relationships and a balanced life. I unconsciously perpetuated the myth that leadership equated to long hours and complete devotion to work, neglecting other aspects of life.

The concept of 'habitus' provides a framework for understanding this complicity (Bourdieu, 2018). I had internalised certain social structures and norms within the military, which I then unconsciously reproduced. This 'habitus' shaped my actions and beliefs, leading me to maintain gender inequalities and narrow leadership models without realising it. For instance, I could perform transactional, directional leadership effectively, even though it didn't align with my natural leadership style. This ability to conform to expected leadership behaviours further entrenched my complicity in the system.

My relationships with other women in the military were complex and often competitive. Influenced by a scarcity mindset, I viewed other capable women as threats rather than allies. The system itself fostered this competition, exemplified by the practice of having only two women in each flight of 12 during training. This environment, coupled with my desire to be 'one of the lads', led to an edgy, competitive attitude towards other women, resulting in profound loneliness throughout much of my career.

The incident with the female cadet publicly shamed for an encounter with an instructor, remains a source of deep regret. My harsh judgment of her at the time reflected my internalised belief that women in the military had to avoid sexualisation to be taken seriously. This incident exemplifies how I had become complicit in perpetuating harmful gender norms and power dynamics within the military structure.

Looking back, I realise I played a part in maintaining the status quo, especially in how I reacted to inappropriate behaviour. Much like many women who've spoken out in the #MeToo movement, I spent a large portion of my career brushing off incidents that I now understand were unacceptable. Without meaning to, I reinforced the idea that 'tough' women could simply ignore or overcome such treatment. By doing so, I unknowingly helped perpetuate a culture where experiencing sexual discrimination or harassment was seen as a personal failing rather than a widespread, systemic problem that needed to be addressed.

This complicity was not just about my actions, but also about what I failed to do or speak up against. It was easier to conform and be part of the system than to challenge it, especially when I believed I was succeeding within that system. The complexity of this complicity lies in how it intertwined with my sense of belonging and professional identity.

Awareness of Systemic Biases

Debs: *In 2001, I deployed to an austere Middle East base, as one of only two females in a unit of 36 people. We shared our tented accommodation with the men from our*

unit, who before our arrival had created a makeshift divide between our two bedspaces and theirs. It was only after the deployment ended that I realised that this was not an act of respect. The divide had been staged so that whilst undressing our silhouettes were on full display to anyone sharing the tent. Following the deployment, my (male) Commanding Officer, who was one of the recipients of this odd shadow show, spoke about it freely in front of others, as if I had been responsible for not realising the effect of the divide. It was clear that he did not feel it was his responsibility to shield a fellow officer from the behaviour of the 'the lads'. For many years I suppressed the loss of trust that this incident caused in me, I was ashamed of my naivety and having let the situation arise.

I judge that my **awareness** phase began in 2018, when I undertook professional and personal development outwith the military. This turning point, catalysed my awareness on two levels:

1. The individual level: through increased self awareness as a person and leader
2. The organisational level: through greater recognition of the Royal Air Force as a system

Like the starling from the murmuration, I separated myself momentarily from the flock and by doing so, I saw myself and the murmuration from the outside. From this time, and for the first time, I was immersed in something outside of the military system, and I glimpsed a previously unseen perspective. Moreover, this awareness came through a prolonged period of conscious reflection and exposure to diverse perspectives.

On the individual level, through critical analysis of positive psychology I explored the concept of emotions and their role in leadership. My self awareness developed exponentially as I examined the layers of emotions that I had unconsciously suppressed or repressed within my leadership. I became aware that I had been socialised to judge some emotions as traditionally feminine and not appropriate in military leadership, and yet other emotions were too masculine and not appropriate in a female leader. On a systemic level, as I became more aware, I recognised for the first time, that I, and other women in the military are asked to embody both traditionally

feminine and masculine leadership qualities, reflecting Heilman and Okimoto's (2007) double bind faced by women leaders.

As my awareness increased, and influenced by my exploration of positive psychology, I strived to enact my values, the inherent contradictions within existing structures presented significant challenges. For example, as I became aware of invisible barriers faced by women and explored second-generation gender bias (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb, 2011), I faced an identity crisis, connecting deeply with being a leader and a woman within a context of leadership formed in the masculine.

Slowly, I recognised that activities connecting me to others on a human level challenged notions of exclusivity and my own conformity. I realised how the pervasive leadership myth limited sustainable leadership development and cohesion. Connecting authentically with peers and subordinates was a pivotal step in dismantling assumptions of superiority that conflicted with my deepening values around inclusivity.

Concurrent with increased self-awareness, my knowingness of the system within which I operated became clearer. Through coaching interventions, I examined the concept of second-generation gender bias (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb, 2011) and began to use it as a framework for understanding the often systemic, invisible barriers to women's advancement in leadership roles. My own journey towards this awareness mirrors Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb's (2011) process of becoming leaders, navigating contradictory expectations and overcoming internalised gender biases. I assessed policies and cultures limiting women's leadership across the military. This experience illuminated systemic disadvantages embedded at individual, procedural, and cultural levels, exemplifying second-generation gender bias in action.

The emergence of this awareness was neither quick nor easy. Like the starling rejoining the flock with new insights, I often found myself revisiting familiar spaces but seeing them anew, wondering how I had not noticed these issues before. This process of critical reflection and re-evaluation of my military experiences created tension between my belief in the utility of military power and frustration with institutional shortcomings.

Articulating my newfound awareness of the military system presents a unique challenge. There's a fine line between sharing insights and appearing presumptuous about having exclusive understanding. This tension is further complicated by my deep-rooted loyalty to the institution that shaped my identity. I often catch myself using 'we' when discussing the Armed Forces, a linguistic habit that reflects my enduring connection.

However, my evolving understanding of the gendered nature of military service has forced me to reevaluate my memories and experiences. I find myself in a constant state of cognitive dissonance, attempting to reconcile the positive, formative aspects of my military career with the uncomfortable realities of systemic gender biases. This internal struggle reflects the complex nature of institutional change and personal growth, where loyalty and critical awareness coexist in an uneasy balance.

My journey of self-reflection has been both personal and professional, shaping my leadership style and my approach to driving change within the military. This perspective allows me to push for necessary reforms while maintaining empathy for those still deeply entrenched in traditional military culture.

As I began to view the military through a new lens, I found some parallels with the concept of the 'mortification of the self' in total institutions (Goffman, 1961). My growing awareness of both the system and my place within it led to a dual sense of embarrassment: first, over my own experiences and the denial of similar experiences by other women, and second, in recognising how institutionalisation is an inherent part of military life (Antrobus and West, 2023). This mortification occurred in two stages - initially through the process of becoming institutionalised, and later, as I redefined my relationship with the Royal Air Force, by confronting my own past actions (or inactions) and those of my colleagues, some of whom I considered friends and capable leaders, despite their failure to uphold basic behavioural standards.

The impact of this heightened awareness continued to grow. The publication of "Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life" (Parliament. House of Commons, 2021) motivated me to assume the role of Chair of the Royal Air Force Gender Network and to serve as a special advisor to

the Secretary of State. In the following years, I initiated a series of discussions with individuals of all genders about the unacceptable aspects of life in the Royal Air Force. During these conversations, I was startled to recall unsettling incidents from my own service that I had previously normalised. To illustrate the themes covered in these discussions, I've included excerpts from my contributions at the beginning of each section in this chapter.

In reflecting on my journey, I've come to a profound realisation: during my military service, I became so deeply integrated into the team that it came at the cost of my individual identity. This awareness, while rewarding, was also a painful first step towards understanding myself as both a person and a leader, and recognising the systemic biases that needed challenging. Moving forward, I am committed to championing a new paradigm of leadership—one where everyone can and should participate. The cornerstone of this approach is self-leadership which needs self awareness and self understanding, which naturally fosters an understanding of the system within which one operates.

For me, this concurrent awareness was two sides of the same coin, and its emergence was painful as I recognised how my identity had been unknowingly absorbed into the system. However, for future military personnel, this process of awareness could be proactively managed by incorporating experiential self-leadership development from the outset of their careers. Such an approach could not only prevent identity crises at pivotal career junctures but also facilitate system-wide renewal, reducing generational lag and entrenched biases. By nurturing individual awareness alongside systemic understanding, we can forge a path towards more inclusive, adaptive, and effective leadership within the military context.

Navigating Tensions

Following my journey through conformity, complicity, and rising awareness, I found myself navigating a new terrain of leadership within the Royal Air Force and Defence. Imagining again that I am a starling in a murmuration, now every flight is a complex negotiation. I'm still part of the murmuration, shaped by its collective energy and bound

by its gravitational pull. However, I'm no longer flying on compliant autopilot. I attempt to influence the flock's direction subtly. And this phase is characterised by a growing tension between my evolving leadership style and the traditional military approach. I began to consciously balance the forces of tradition and change (Lewin, 1947).

My new leadership approach, while not yet fully formed, was markedly different from the style that I had previously mastered. It was more inclusive, reflective, and focused on empowering others. However, implementing this style within the existing military structure presented its own set of challenges.

A pivotal example of navigating tensions in my evolving leadership approach came during my role as special advisor on gender issues to the Secretary of State for Defence. This position placed me at the intersection of political leadership, military culture, and the lived experiences of women in the Armed Forces.

My influence in this role led to significant acknowledgments from the Secretary of State to the House of Commons Defence Committee. These included recognising past failures in providing women with deserved experiences, committing to listening to women's voices, and emphasising the importance of inclusive leadership for cultural change.

However, this experience also highlighted the complex tensions I was navigating. On one hand, I had successfully influenced high-level policy acknowledgments and commitments. On the other, I was acutely aware of the gap between these political statements and the lived experiences of many women in the military.

This tension manifested in my approach to advising, particularly in areas of gender integration and equity. While I pushed for acknowledgment of issues and commitments to change, I also found myself moderating some of my recommendations. For instance, based on my observations of European allies' success with female personnel in frontline roles and positive population responses, I wanted to advocate for greater gender equity in infantry and operational positions. However, I had to strategically temper this recommendation, accepting that the UK military's decision to allow women's entry into infantry roles was a significant first step for the time being. This

self-censorship wasn't due to a lack of conviction, but rather a strategic consideration of what the system could accept at that time. Another example of this delicate balance arose in discussions about uniform changes. I had to carefully navigate the tension between voices calling for no change, those advocating for gender-neutral uniforms, and concerns about the potential masculinisation of uniforms under the guise of 'gender neutrality'. In these situations, I was consciously balancing the drive for necessary changes with an understanding of the military's capacity for transformation, often proposing incremental changes or pilot programs to test new approaches before full implementation.

This experience exemplified the delicate balance required in my new leadership approach. I was simultaneously an insider with deep understanding of the military system and an advocate for change. This dual perspective allowed me to push boundaries while maintaining credibility within the existing structure.

Reflecting on this period, I realise that my leadership had evolved to embody a form of 'tempered radicalism' (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). I was working within the system to change it, carefully calibrating my actions to maximise impact without triggering overwhelming resistance. This approach, while sometimes frustrating in its incremental nature, allowed for meaningful progress in a highly traditional institution.

The tension between my desire for more radical change and the realities of institutional inertia was a constant companion. It required continuous reflection and adaptation, embodying Schön's (1984) concept of reflection-in-action. Each interaction, each piece of advice, was a microcosm of the larger struggle between tradition and transformation in military leadership.

As I continued to navigate these tensions, I realised that my journey of awareness was ongoing. I was still part of the system, yet increasingly able to see its limitations and opportunities for improvement. This dual perspective allowed me to act as a guiding starling, subtly influencing the murmuration's flight path towards more inclusive, adaptive leadership approaches while maintaining connection with the traditional flock.

The process of influencing change was not always conscious or strategic. Often, I found myself intuitively sensing my way through situations, much as I had done in my early days in the Royal Air Force. The difference now was that my intention had shifted from conformity to transformation.

Summary

Building on the personal, social, and military context established in the previous chapter, this exploration of my first public work has charted the evolution of my professional practice and leadership approach within the Royal Air Force.

This chapter aimed to champion leadership as an inclusive, collective process and to advocate for self-leadership as a foundational concept for ethical, inclusive leadership. To achieve these aims, we examined four crucial stages of my journey:

1. **Conformity**: This section illustrated how my early leadership was shaped by the military system and cultural environment, highlighting the power of institutional norms in moulding individual behaviour

2. **Complicity**: Here, we explored my unconscious perpetuation of narrow leadership prototypes, revealing the subtle ways in which systemic biases are maintained

3. **Awareness**: This pivotal stage demonstrated the emergence of self-awareness and systemic understanding, marking a turning point in my leadership approach

4. **Navigation**: Finally, we examined how I consciously navigated previously unseen tensions to stimulate systemic change, embodying the challenges of being both an insider and an advocate for transformation

The key takeaway from this chapter is how my professional practice and reflective practice highlight the critical importance of awareness, of both self and system. This is especially so within the context of large, hierarchical organisations like the military.

Furthermore, this chapter reveals that my journey extends beyond mere awareness to what I now recognise, through the process of writing this context statement, as an active and intentional practice of 'paying attention.' Interestingly, this concept was not explicitly known to me as I led at the time; rather, it has emerged through my current

reflection on my past leadership experiences. This practice, which can be understood as an epistemic virtue, involves a deliberate and humble engagement with both self and system. It represents a deeper level of consciousness than awareness alone, requiring an ongoing commitment to noticing, questioning, and understanding the nuances of leadership dynamics and institutional structures.

While I was not consciously aware of it then, this attentive approach has been fundamental to my ability to navigate complex situations and advocate for change while remaining sensitive to the constraints and realities of the military context. By unknowingly cultivating this practice of paying attention, I was able to more effectively bridge the gap between traditional military leadership paradigms and the inclusive, collective leadership process I champion. Recognising this retrospectively has provided valuable insights into my leadership development and the potential for fostering more reflective and adaptable leaders within hierarchical organisations.

This reflection highlights the transformative power of critically examining one's past experiences and practices. It underscores how the very act of articulating and analysing our leadership journey can reveal deeper truths and principles that were operating beneath the surface of our conscious awareness at the time.

My journey from conformity to conscious navigation of change underscores the need for a new leadership paradigm. It challenges the notion of leadership as an elite skill, instead championing it as an inclusive process requiring input from all. By sharing this experience, I hope to contribute to a broader dialogue on leadership development in complex institutions.

Key Insights and Future Explorations

Through the process of crafting this context statement, I've gained deeper insights into my professional practice, particularly regarding self-leadership. These reflections, which I will explore more fully in the final chapter, centre around two interconnected themes:

Reframing Self-Leadership in Hierarchical Organisations

The critical importance of redefining self-leadership within large, hierarchical organisations like the military cannot be overstated. Traditionally, in these contexts, self-leadership has been equated primarily with self-discipline and willpower. However, my experience demonstrates the need for a paradigm shift. We must foster a culture that values self-discovery, emotional intelligence, and critical reflection as integral components of self-leadership. This redefinition is crucial for developing leaders capable of navigating the complexities of modern organisational dynamics and promoting genuine inclusivity.

Self-Leadership as an Antidote to Generational Lag

Self-leadership, when properly understood and implemented, can serve as a powerful tool in addressing the phenomenon of generational lag within organisational cultures. While it's important to acknowledge that organisational cultures often send strong signals that perpetuate certain behaviours and values, self-leadership provides individuals with the capacity to critically engage with these cues. As young and inexperienced members enter an organisation, they encounter established norms and practices that may not align with current ideals or needs. However, through developing strong self-leadership skills, these individuals can enhance their self-awareness and critical thinking abilities. This self-understanding enables them to more effectively discern between valuable traditions and outdated practices, allowing them to consciously choose which aspects of the organisational culture to adopt, challenge, or adapt. By fostering self-leadership, organisations can empower their members to navigate the complex interplay between established norms and evolving requirements, potentially reducing the impact of generational lag.

By emphasising self-leadership from the outset of one's career, we empower individuals to ask the fundamental question, 'Who am I?' This introspective approach allows them to develop authentically rather than fixating on perceived organisational expectations. It enables even the youngest and most inexperienced members to contribute fresh perspectives and challenge outdated norms.

To realise these benefits, the concept and practice of self-leadership within the military need to be reframed. Currently, the process and experience of self-leadership in this context often equate more with self-discipline and control. As an organisation, the military needs to make self-leadership more explicit and experiential, moving beyond the limited synonyms of willpower and control.

These insights underscore the transformative potential of a nuanced understanding of self-leadership in hierarchical organisations. By fostering this approach, we can create more adaptive, inclusive, and effective leadership cultures that are better aligned with the needs of current and future generations.

As we move into the next chapter, which will explore my second public work and the role of relationships in leadership, we'll build on these insights. We'll examine how the awareness gained through this first public work influenced my approach to building and leveraging relationships in leadership contexts. This progression will further illuminate the interconnected nature of personal growth, systemic change, and effective leadership in large organisations.

CHAPTER 4: ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND APPRECIATION
PUBLIC WORKS 2

Over Flight to Insight

Let's again imagine a vast murmuration of starlings, swirling and dancing across the twilight sky. On this occasion, this breathtaking display represents an organisation, with each bird symbolising an individual member. The mesmerising patterns they create together embody the collective purpose and achievements of the organisation.

But let's look closer. Each starling isn't just a single-coloured bird. Instead, imagine that every starling is a kaleidoscope of shifting colours and patterns. These ever-changing hues represent the multifaceted nature of everyone - their gender, race, cultural background, experiences, and unique perspectives. This is intersectionality at the individual level.

Traditional leadership might focus only on the overall shape of the murmuration, neglecting the rich diversity within each bird. An intersectional leader, however, recognises and values the full spectrum of colours within every starling.

Now, zoom in even further. Within each starling, these colours aren't static - they interact, blend, and influence each other in a constant dance. This internal interplay of colours represents internal intersectionality - how various aspects of an individual's identity interact and shape their perspective and experiences.

The true magic of the murmuration comes from how these kaleidoscopic birds interact. As they fly together, their colours not only shift within themselves but also influence and are influenced by the colours of nearby birds. This interplay creates an ever-evolving tapestry of hues that enriches the entire murmuration.

An effective leader understands that the strength and beauty of the murmuration come not from uniformity, but from this dynamic interplay of diverse 'colours'. They create an

environment where each starling feels empowered to express their full spectrum of colours, knowing that this diversity strengthens the whole.

However, this approach isn't without challenges. Sometimes, a particularly vibrant display from one bird might momentarily disrupt the flow of the murmuration. The leader must navigate these tensions, helping the flock adapt and incorporate new patterns and colours into their flight.

Moreover, the leader must also recognise and harmonise their own 'internal kaleidoscope' - acknowledging and appreciating their own diverse experiences and perspectives to become a more authentic and effective guide for the murmuration.

In this grand aerial ballet of intersectionality, leadership becomes not about controlling the shape from outside, but about being part of the flock, sensing and responding to the myriad of colours and patterns. It's about creating an environment where every starling can contribute their full, multi-hued self to the collective flight.

The result is a murmuration more resilient, more adaptive, and more breathtaking than ever before. It can shape-shift to meet new challenges, drawing on the full spectrum of colours and experiences within its members. In this way, leadership transforms organisations into dynamic, inclusive entities capable of navigating the complex skies of modern challenges.

This murmuration model of intersectional leadership reminds us that true harmony and effectiveness come not from enforced uniformity, but from the rich interplay of diverse voices and experiences, both *within* individuals and across the entire organisation.

Introduction

This chapter explores the concept of intersectionality and its profound implications for leadership, particularly within the context of organisational change. Drawing from my professional practice and critiques of my public works, I examine how intersectionality shapes individual identities, organisational dynamics, and leadership approaches.

At this stage, it's important to acknowledge the breadth and depth of intersectionality scholarship. As van Hilten and Ruel (2024, p. 2071) observe,

> "Intersectionality scholarship now…straddles many different identities, social positions, and exclusionary practices."

This field of study goes beyond merely listing unique identities; it explores the complex interconnectedness of these identities and the resultant social order. Intersectionality is not a simple additive exercise of combining identities (Bowleg, 2008), but rather an examination of how these interconnected identities work together and the marginalising order that often ensues. Scholars like Crenshaw (1991), Bilge and Collins (2016), and Holvino (2010) have highlighted the unequal treatment of individuals with complex identities in various contexts, from legislative to organisational.

Ultimately, intersectional scholarship aims to undo oppressive orders and create more equitable systems. While my work focuses on internal intersectionality at the individual level, it's crucial to situate this approach within the broader context of intersectionality research and its goals of addressing systemic inequalities.

Therefore, this chapter introduces the novel concept of 'internal intersectionality,' which applies intersectional thinking to the various facets of an individual's own identity. This approach builds on the awareness of self and system explored in the previous chapter and examines the role of acknowledging and appreciating the multifaceted self in effective leadership.

Through an analysis of my professional practice in driving equity change in the Royal Air Force, I highlight the unique tensions that arise when implementing intersectional leadership principles in a traditional hierarchical structure. The chapter also details the challenges and opportunities presented by the evolving multi-domain defence environment, which necessitates a more diverse and adaptive leadership approach.

By interweaving theoretical arguments, practical experiences, and personal insights, this chapter aims to challenge traditional notions of leadership as an elite skill. Instead,

it champions leadership as an inclusive process requiring universal participation, enabled by self-leadership and a deep appreciation for diversity in all its forms.

The Kaleidoscopic Nature of Individuals (Individual Intersectionality)

Imagine each starling in our murmuration as a kaleidoscope of shifting colours and patterns. These ever-changing hues represent the multifaceted nature of each individual - their gender, race, cultural background, experiences, and unique perspectives. This is intersectionality at the individual level, a complex interplay of identities that shapes how each 'bird' moves through the world and interacts with others in the flock.

Identity: The Core of Our Being

In psychological terms, identity encompasses self-awareness, self-image, self-reflection, and self-esteem (Shields, 2008, p. 301). Within the context of contemporary British society, identity serves as a conduit for expressing one's authentic self. Like the core of each starling, our identity is central to who we are and how we navigate our environment.

Intersectionality: The Interplay of Our Many Selves

Intersectionality describes the complex interrelations among various social identities (Shields, 2008, p. 301). This concept recognises that social identities, which function as organising principles in social relations, mutually shape, reinforce, and naturalise one another. Thus, identity is not a fixed construct but rather a dynamic interaction of social categories and their associated personal meanings (Ashmore et al., 2004). These identities are interwoven and collectively influence our experiences, much like the blending and interplay of colours in a kaleidoscopic representation of starlings.

The intersectionality framework emerged from diverse academic fields, including gender studies, critical race theory, and sociology. It developed as a response to the

limitations of feminist scholarship, which had predominantly centred on the experiences of middle-class, educated, white women (Shields, 2008, p. 302). This more inclusive perspective led to the recognition that individuals identifying with multiple marginalized identities may face compounded oppression (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008).

It is important to note that discussions of intersectionality often focus on power inequalities within systems and structures, with an emphasis on social justice:

> "When someone occupies multiple marginalized intersections, their individual-level experiences reflect social and structural systems of power, privilege, and inequality." (Wyatt et al., 2022, p. 863)

While this systemic perspective is vital, in this work, I am deliberately applying intersectionality theory at a different level - bringing it to bear on the individual experience.

Internal Intersectionality: A Novel Approach

Building upon this traditional understanding, I propose a novel concept of internal intersectionality. This approach applies the intersectional framework to the various facets of an individual's own identity. Internal intersectionality recognises that within each person, there exist multiple, intersecting aspects of self, some of which may have been unconsciously marginalised, neglected, or 'disappeared' due to external pressures or internal conflicts. This concept emphasises the importance of **acknowledging and appreciating all aspects of one's identity** for more authentic self-leadership and understanding of others.

By viewing oneself through this internal intersectional lens, individuals can become aware of the diverse parts that comprise their being. This self-reflection enables the recognition of the need to lead and integrate these different aspects of self, fostering a more holistic and authentic sense of identity. Embracing internal intersectionality involves acknowledging and empowering the hidden or suppressed parts of one's

identity, ultimately leading to greater self-understanding, personal growth, and more effective self-leadership.

Implications for Leadership

This concept is particularly relevant to leadership, as it underscores the importance of learning to lead all aspects of oneself, including those parts that might have been marginalised or neglected. By recognising and embracing the intersectionality within, individuals can develop a more inclusive and participatory approach to leadership, both of themselves and others. This process of self-leadership through internal intersectionality plays a fundamental role in democratising leadership and making it accessible to all.

In the context of our murmuration, a leader who understands and embraces internal intersectionality is better equipped to appreciate and leverage the diverse 'colours' within themselves and others. This understanding enables them to guide the flock more effectively, creating patterns of flight that draw upon the full spectrum of experiences and identities within the group.

By adopting this kaleidoscopic view of individuals, I challenge the notion that leadership is an elite skill reserved for a select few. Instead, I champion leadership as an inclusive process that requires universal participation, enabled by a deep understanding and integration of our multifaceted selves.

Internal Intersectionality (The Interplay Within)

Within each starling in our murmuration, there's a complex interplay of colours and patterns - a kaleidoscope of internal identities. This section explores my journey of recognising and embracing internal intersectionality, as defined earlier.

The Whole Person in a Fractured System

One of the foundational principles of both intersectionality and coaching is the concept of the whole person. This principle is crucial in working with people, seeing and hearing them for who they are in their entirety. However, during my military career, I realised I wasn't embracing my whole self. Like a starling suppressing certain colours to blend with the flock, I had 'disappeared' parts of myself to fit into the military culture.

This realisation is a powerful example of internal intersectionality at work. It wasn't until 2018 that I began to surface these hidden aspects, and only now, through this reflective process, can I fully understand the experience. This journey illustrates how even well-intentioned leaders grapple with internal barriers when attempting to embrace intersectionality.

Navigating Gender Identity in a Masculine Environment

As a female officer, I thought that I was cognisant of my position within a predominantly male profession. However, I had not fully grasped the pervasive nature of the masculine; whether that was the imagery (Carreiras 2006, p. 42) or character (Woodward and Winter 2007, p. 15) . The military's deeply rooted historical association between men and warfare, and women and peace (Goldstein, 2001) influenced my experience in ways that I am only now beginning to comprehend.

My journey involved a constant negotiation of my gendered military identity, oscillating between 'masculinisation', 'accommodation of femininity', and 'adoption of a neutral persona' (Barrett, 2002, cited by Woodward and Winter 2007, p. 75; Sjoberg 2013). Analogous to a starling adjusting its flight to synchronise with the flock, I modulated my behaviour to assimilate, often emphasising physical fitness as a means to establish credibility among my male colleagues.

The Illusion of Acceptance and the Reality of Conformity

With the benefit of temporal and emotional distance from my military career, I now recognise that my perceived sense of acceptance and integration was, in many

respects, illusory. My reluctance to distinguish myself or advocate for women within a hierarchical, traditionally masculine institution led me to subordinate my own agency to the structural norms I had embraced (Antrobus and West, 2023, p. 32).

This conformity exacted a significant toll. I ceased to question inappropriate behaviours and potentially discriminatory practices, believing such acquiescence was necessary for career advancement. It is only through years of introspection and dialogue with fellow servicewomen that I have gradually dismantled these internalised notions of leadership that obscured the recognition of marginalisation

Tensions and Transformations

The tension between the masculine warrior archetype and any admission of vulnerability created a complex internal landscape. Like a starling trying to maintain its individual flight pattern while staying within the murmuration, I struggled to reconcile my fulfilling experiences and relationships with the uncomfortable realities of a gendered institution.

As I transition into civilian life, I'm experiencing a newfound liberation, but also awkwardness. The pressure to 'hold my own' amongst men has diminished. I'm now in the process of finding a new way to be, which involves coming to terms with my past and present selves.

Appreciation the Key to Internal Intersectionality

This journey of self-discovery and integration exemplifies the power of internal intersectionality in fostering personal growth and authentic leadership. By recognising and embracing the diverse, sometimes conflicting aspects of my identity, I'm developing a more nuanced understanding of myself and others.

Like a starling whose individual colours contribute to the breathtaking patterns of the murmuration, my internal intersectionality enriches my leadership approach. It allows me to appreciate the complexity within others, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic leadership style.

In essence, this process of internal intersectionality underscores that leadership is not about conforming to a single ideal, but about acknowledging and appreciating our whole selves and encouraging others to do the same.

The Dynamic Interplay in the Murmuration (Organisational Intersectionality)

In our murmuration analogy, the dynamic interplay between individual starlings creates the breathtaking patterns we observe. Similarly, in organisations, the interactions between diverse individuals shape the culture and effectiveness of the whole. This section examines how intersectionality theory guided and shaped my professional practice in driving cultural change within the Royal Air Force, particularly in response to the Report on Inappropriate Behaviours (Ministry of Defence, 2019)

Catalysing Cultural Change

Just as a sudden gust of wind can dramatically alter the flight path of a murmuration, the Report on Inappropriate Behaviours (Ministry of Defence, 2019) became a catalyst for change in Defence culture. This report highlighted the urgent need for cultural transformation in Defence through improved policies, leadership, communications, training, and transparency. This moment represented a critical juncture, forcing the organisation to confront its internal dynamics and biases.

Coordinating the Response: A Leadership Challenge

In my role working with the Royal Air Force's Chief People Officer, I found myself at the heart of this transformative process. Like a starling helping to guide the flock's movement, I coordinated the Royal Air Force's response to the Wigston Report. This involved tracking actions and amplifying the report's intent to the Senior Leadership Team, operational commanders, and policymakers.

This process was akin to helping the murmuration adjust its flight pattern - it required careful coordination, clear communication, and a deep understanding of the complex interplay of factors influencing organisational behaviour.

Fostering Inclusive Dialogue

In addition, as chair of the Royal Air Force Gender Network, I facilitated regular dialogues and broader diversity forums. These forums served as spaces where marginalised groups across the spectrum of intersectionality could exchange challenges, share practices for overcoming barriers, and discuss lessons for inclusive leadership.

This process mirrored the constant communication between starlings in a murmuration, where each bird's movements influence and are influenced by those around it. By creating these spaces for open dialogue, I was enabling a more responsive and adaptive organisational culture.

Personal Growth Informing Professional Practice

Through this work, I began to recognise how my own experience of internal intersectionality - the aspects of my identity I had suppressed or 'disappeared' to fit into military culture - informed my approach to these discussions. This self-awareness enhanced my ability to empathise with diverse perspectives, much like a starling becoming more attuned to the subtle movements of its neighbours.

Evolving Leadership for the Multi-Domain Era

The complexity of multi-domain operations not only necessitates a more diverse and adaptive leadership approach but also highlights the relevance of intersectional thinking in modern military contexts. The rapidly evolving defence landscape, characterised by blurred boundaries between peace and war, state and non-state actors, and virtual and real domains, demands a new approach to leadership. As the UK Ministry of Defence (2021) highlights, success in this era of systemic competition requires integration across all five domains - space, cyberspace, maritime, land, and

air - and a constant adaptation to technological change. This integration across diverse domains mirrors the intersectional approach, which recognises the interconnectedness of various aspects of identity and experience.

This context presents an opportunity to explore how leadership in the Armed Forces must evolve to seize the initiative and gain a competitive advantage. The increasing diversity of the workforce, with the arrival of Generation Z, requires leaders who can foster collaborative problem-solving and create spaces for dialogue across departmental boundaries. This demographic shift underscores the importance of intersectional leadership, which is uniquely equipped to understand and leverage the diverse perspectives brought by Generation Z and other underrepresented groups. Moreover, the information revolution is flattening hierarchies, necessitating leaders skilled at communicating and coordinating across boundaries of expertise, status, and distance. This flattening of hierarchies aligns with intersectional thinking, which challenges traditional power structures and values diverse voices regardless of their position within the organisation.

In this new military operating environment, leaders must work more with and through a range of partners to deliver military effects. As noted by General Dempsey:

> "As the digital echo spreads, as complex issues multiply, as uncertainty increases, as technology exponentially changes, and as risk rises, it seems reasonable that we should seek to lead by sharing our challenges rather than owning them outright" (Dempsey and Brafman, 2018, p. xiv-xv).

This evolution in leadership challenges traditional military leadership models in several ways:

1. Leadership as an Inclusive Process: Contrary to the still pervasive, although debunked idea that leadership is for the few with a specific skill set, this new approach champions leadership as a process to which everyone can and needs to participate (Haslam et al., 2024, p.10). This shift recognises that in a complex, multi-domain environment, valuable insights and solutions can come from any level of the organisation.

2. Self-Leadership as Foundational: Traditional military leadership often emphasises self-leadership based on willpower, control, and self-discipline. However, the evolving approach acknowledges and appreciates all aspects of self - including those that might have been suppressed or repressed in traditional models. This holistic self-leadership serves as the foundation for effective team, change, and organisational leadership.

3. Embracing Diversity and Inclusion: By acknowledging and appreciating all aspects of oneself, leaders become better equipped to genuinely acknowledge and appreciate all members of their team and organisation. This intersectional approach is crucial in a multi-domain environment that requires diverse perspectives and skill sets, allowing leaders to recognise and leverage the unique contributions that arise from the intersection of various identities and experiences.

Key tensions arise in implementing this evolved leadership approach, including: the constant pull between maintaining military traditions and adapting to new realities; and the flattening of hierarchies in the information age challenges traditional military command structures. Plus, generational lag, where each generation of leaders is trained by people influenced by the generation ahead of them, creating a culture resistant to change. This can be particularly challenging in a rapidly evolving multi-domain environment.

However, by focusing on self-knowledge and self-understanding as foundational principles, I can create an antidote to this resistance. Intersectional leadership, with its emphasis on recognising and valuing diverse perspectives and experiences, provides a framework for developing leaders who are attuned to their current selves and the complexities of the multi-domain era.

Navigating Tensions and Disruptions

In a murmuration, moments of tension and disruption can create breathtaking patterns or threaten to break apart the flock. Similarly, in implementing intersectional leadership, organisations face challenges that can either lead to transformative

change or reinforce existing biases. This section explores these challenges and strategies for navigating them, drawing from my professional experience in the Royal Air Force.

Recognising Invisible Norms

Just as a starling might not be aware of the air currents shaping its flight, I found that my efforts to fit into the Royal Air Force led me to internalise norms I couldn't always articulate. As Vickers (2018) notes, I could recognise deviations from the norm more clearly than I could describe the norm itself. This experience of 'disappearing' parts of myself aligns closely with the concept of internal intersectionality, highlighting how external pressures can lead to the suppression of certain aspects of our identity.

The Challenge of Entrenched Bias

Large organisations like the Royal Air Force face significant challenges in addressing intersectionality and promoting equity. Without deliberate intent, white, male behaviours, characteristics, and values have been normalised, creating what Shields (2008) calls "second-generational gender bias." This entrenchment is like an invisible current guiding the murmuration, influencing its shape without the individual starlings being aware of it.

The perpetuation of gender-as-difference as the primary lens for understanding gender reaffirms gender stereotypes. In the Royal Air Force, this meant that the prevailing "web of normalcy" was rooted in the experiences and perspectives of white men, defining what was considered 'normal' within the organisation.

Unique Challenges in a Military Context: Reflections and Future Considerations

As I critically examined my public works and experiences in the Royal Air Force, I begin to recognise the existence of and potential power of emerging intersectional leadership into conscious awareness. This reflection process illuminated several unique challenges that the military context presents for such an approach:

1. Tradition vs. Innovation: The Royal Air Force, like all military organisations, has a rich history and established ways of doing things. I observed how this sometimes conflicted with more innovative, inclusive approaches. For instance, efforts to introduce more inclusive language in official communications often met with resistance from those who saw it as unnecessary rather than a vital step towards inclusivity.

2. Uniformity vs. Diversity: The military's emphasis on uniformity, crucial for operational cohesion, sometimes clashed with the celebration of diversity that intersectional leadership would promote. In my work, I began to see how diversity of thought and experience could potentially enhance our capabilities rather than undermine them, particularly in strategic planning sessions.

3. Command Structure: The rigid hierarchical structure of the Royal Air Force poses significant challenges to implementing a more inclusive, participatory leadership style. While initiatives like the Royal Air Force Gender Network forums provided some informal channels for feedback and ideas, fully integrating intersectional leadership principles would require careful consideration of how to balance this with the formal command structure.

4. Operational Effectiveness: Perhaps the most critical consideration for any future implementation of intersectional leadership would be ensuring that diversity and inclusion initiatives are seen as enhancing, not detracting from, operational effectiveness. In my experience, every change had to be justified in terms of how it would make the Royal Air Force more capable of fulfilling its mission.

5. Generational Differences: I observed a significant gap between older and younger generations of Royal Air Force personnel in their understanding and acceptance of more inclusive approaches. Any future implementation of intersectional leadership would need to bridge this gap, potentially leveraging the enthusiasm of younger personnel to influence their seniors.

Reflecting on these challenges has deepened my understanding of the complexities involved in evolving leadership practices in a military context. The Wigston Report, while not explicitly about intersectional leadership, provided a crucial catalyst for considering change in the Royal Air Force's culture and practices. It highlighted many of the areas where a more inclusive, intersectional approach could be beneficial.

Through this process of reflection, I've come to understand that implementing intersectional leadership in a military context would not be about dismantling existing structures, but about evolving them to become more inclusive, adaptive, and effective. It's about envisioning how to harness the full potential of every individual to create a more capable and resilient force.

As I look to the future and consider how these insights might shape my upcoming work with the Royal Air Force, I see both significant challenges and exciting opportunities. The task ahead will be to navigate these complexities, demonstrating how intersectional leadership principles could enhance our capabilities and make us a stronger force for the 21st century.

Case Study: Implementing the Wigston Report

In my role coordinating the Royal Air Force's response to the Report on Inappropriate Behaviours (Ministry of Defence, 2019), I encountered several of these challenges. The report's recommendations for cultural change through better policies, improved leadership, communications, training, and transparency were akin to asking the murmuration to fundamentally alter its flight patterns.

I faced resistance from those comfortable with the status quo, confusion from those unaware of their own biases, and fear from those who felt threatened by change. Navigating these tensions required:

1. Creating safe spaces for dialogue, like the Royal Air Force Gender Network forums
2. Encouraging leaders to reflect on their own biases and privileges
3. Consistently reinforcing the message that diversity and inclusion strengthen the organisation
4. Developing policies and training that addressed both overt and subtle forms of discrimination

By approaching these challenges with an intersectional lens and a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation, I was able to begin the process of cultural transformation. Like a murmuration adjusting to new environmental factors, the Royal Air Force began to evolve towards a more inclusive and equitable culture.

This process is ongoing and not without its challenges. However, by continually reflecting on our approach, remaining open to diverse perspectives, and maintaining our commitment to change, I can navigate these tensions and disruptions to create a more inclusive and effective organisation.

The Intersectional Leader: Roles and Organisational Benefits

In our murmuration analogy, the intersectional leader doesn't direct from outside but rather guides from within, embodying the collective intelligence that emerges from the flock's movements. This leader facilitates the intricate 'dance' of diverse individuals within an organisation, fostering an environment where the whole truly becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

At the core of intersectional leadership lies a deep sense of self-awareness and reflection. Just as each starling must be acutely attuned to its own movements to maintain harmony within the flock, an intersectional leader constantly engages in self-examination. This process of exploring one's own mindsets, assumptions, and biases aligns closely with the concept of internal intersectionality I've discussed. By recognising and integrating various aspects of their own identity, including those previously 'disappeared', leaders become better equipped to appreciate the complexity within others.

This self-awareness naturally extends to how the leader interacts with others. An intersectional leader fosters open, caring, and interested exchanges with people of diverse backgrounds. This approach mirrors the constant communication between starlings in a murmuration, allowing for increased mutual understanding and smoother collective movement. It also requires a willingness to embrace vulnerability and fallibility. Like a starling adjusting its flight based on the movements of others, an

intersectional leader must be open to admitting gaps in their perspective, thereby building trust and creating safer spaces for authentic sharing. This can be cultivated through intentional practices for internal reflection, such as seeking diverse perspectives, engaging in regular feedback exchanges, or partnering with a trusted mentor or peer who can provide a safe space for exploring one's hidden biases and suppressed identities.

The intersectional leader's toolkit often includes a coaching mindset, as outlined by the International Coaching Federation (ICF Core Competencies, 2023). This approach promotes openness, curiosity, and person-centeredness, cultivating the trust and safety that allows a murmuration to move as one. Complementing this, mindfulness practices, drawing from Kabat-Zinn's (2013) attitudinal foundations, enable leaders to create an environment of non-judgment and patience. This allows individuals to be present and authentic, much like starlings responding instinctively to their environment.

By embodying these qualities, intersectional leaders catalyse numerous benefits for their organisations. Perhaps most significantly, they foster innovation and adaptability. Just as a murmuration can quickly adapt to avoid predators or obstacles, organisations led with an intersectional approach can more effectively navigate complex challenges. The diversity of thought and experience encouraged by this leadership style creates a richer pool of ideas and solutions. The collision of different viewpoints often sparks creative solutions and novel approaches, much like how the interplay of individual starlings' movements creates unexpected and beautiful patterns in the sky.

Moreover, intersectional leadership cultivates engagement and a sense of belonging (Thomas et al., 2021). When individuals feel their whole selves are valued and understood, they're more likely to experience a sense of belonging. This is akin to how each starling, despite its individual movements, feels part of the larger murmuration. By fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are not just tolerated but actively sought out, intersectional leaders create psychological safety, allowing employees to express their ideas and concerns more freely.

The decision-making process also benefits tremendously from this leadership style. By considering a wide range of intersectional experiences, leaders can make more informed and inclusive decisions. This broader perspective helps identify potential issues or opportunities that might be overlooked from a single vantage point, leading to more robust and effective solutions.

In my experience with the Royal Air Force, embracing these principles of intersectional leadership led to significant organisational benefits. The Royal Air Force's purpose was redefined, shifting perception from a 'fighter of enemies' to an organisation 'focused on delivering broad spectrum effect.' This more inclusive narrative valued diverse contributions, akin to redefining a murmuration's purpose from merely avoiding predators to achieving complex, collective goals.

Furthermore, by encouraging leaders to explore their own internal intersectionality, I fostered greater empathy for the diverse experiences within the organisation. This ongoing process of cultural transformation mirrored the constant adjustments made by a murmuration to maintain its cohesive flight.

In essence, the role of the intersectional leader is to create an environment where, like a well-coordinated murmuration, the organisation can achieve feats of collective intelligence and adaptability that far surpass what any individual could accomplish alone. By valuing and leveraging the full spectrum of human experiences and identities, intersectional leadership not only benefits marginalised groups but enhances the entire organisation's ability to adapt, innovate, and thrive in complex environments.

Practical Implementation: Choreographing the Murmuration

Just as a murmuration's complex patterns emerge from simple rules followed by each starling, implementing intersectional leadership requires consistent application of key principles across all levels of an organisation. This section explores how to translate the theory of intersectional leadership into practical action, drawing from my experiences in the Royal Air Force and reflections on professional practice.

Key Strategies for Implementation

1. Cultivating Self-Awareness: Like a starling attuned to its own movements, leaders must engage in ongoing self-reflection. In the Royal Air Force, I encouraged leaders to recognise their own biases, privileges, and 'disappeared' aspects of identity. This process often revealed uncomfortable truths but was crucial for authentic leadership.
2. Championing Diverse Voices: I ensured that leadership teams and decision-making bodies reflected the diversity of our organisation. This approach, akin to how different parts of a murmuration influence its overall direction, led to more comprehensive and nuanced decision-making.
3. Implementing Intersectional Policies: I reviewed and revised organisational policies through an intersectional lens. This involved reassessing recruitment practices, promotion criteria, and workplace flexibility policies. For instance, I adjusted promotion boards to include diverse perspectives and mitigate unconscious biases.
4. Encouraging Authentic Expression: I created safe spaces for employees to bring their whole selves to work. This was particularly challenging in the military context but crucial for unleashing the full potential of our personnel.

Reflections on the Implementation Process

Throughout this journey, it became clear that cultural transformation is an ongoing process, not a destination. Like a murmuration constantly adjusting its flight, I had to remain adaptable and responsive to feedback and changing circumstances.

The concept of creating a 'culture of belonging' emerged as a powerful guiding principle. I strived to create an environment where people felt valued for their potential, and their worth wasn't tied solely to their position. However, embedding this culture without reinforcing stereotypes proved challenging.

I found that focusing on behavioural change, rather than just mindsets and unconscious biases, was key (Helgesen and Goldsmith, 2018). It required active

engagement from those with privilege to recognise and address their biases, and a supportive environment that empowered all individuals to challenge prevailing norms.

Looking Forward

While significant progress has been made, the journey towards truly intersectional leadership in the Royal Air Force and beyond is ongoing. The principles and practices we've developed have potential applications far beyond the military context. As organisations across sectors grapple with increasing diversity and complexity, the need for intersectional leadership approaches becomes ever more pressing.

The murmuration never reaches a destination; its beauty lies in the continuous, adaptive flight. Similarly, implementing intersectional leadership is not a state to be achieved, but a dynamic, ever-evolving practice. As we move forward, the challenge will be to continuously refine and adapt these practices to meet the evolving needs of our organisations and society at large.

Personal Reflections and Conclusion

My journey from conformity within the military structure to acknowledging and appreciating my whole self, including previously 'disappeared' aspects, illustrates the transformative potential of internal intersectionality. This personal evolution mirrors the broader organisational and societal shifts we're witnessing.

As I've transitioned out of the Royal Air Force, the diversification of my daily interactions has profoundly impacted my sense of self and leadership style. This experience underscores how our environments shape our identities and, conversely, how embracing our full, intersectional selves can reshape our environments.

The tensions that arise when advancing equity through an intersectional lens – from dominant mindsets to structural barriers – are not obstacles to be eliminated, but rather dynamics to be navigated with care and conviction. Like a murmuration adjusting its flight to navigate through turbulent air, leaders must learn to hold these tensions

purposefully, fostering environments where diverse perspectives can coexist and contribute.

The concept of internal intersectionality offers a powerful tool for this navigation. By acknowledging and appreciating the diverse aspects of our own identities, we become better equipped to understand and value the multifaceted identities of others. This self-leadership is pivotal to overcoming tensions and creating truly inclusive environments.

In conclusion, the foundation of all leadership is knowing and understanding yourself. With that as a foundation, leadership is not an elite skill, but an inclusive process requiring universal participation. By continuing to acknowledge and appreciate our own internal diversity, we can lead the way in creating more authentic, empathetic, and effective leadership practices. These practices will value and leverage the full spectrum of human experiences and identities, much like how a murmuration's breathtaking patterns emerge from the diverse movements of countless individual starlings.

As we move forward, let us remember that this journey is ongoing. The murmuration never reaches a destination; its beauty lies in the continuous, adaptive flight. Similarly, self-leadership is not a state to be achieved, but a dynamic, ever-evolving practice that will continue to shape and be shaped by the complex, interconnected world we inhabit.

CHAPTER 5: RELATIONSHIPS
PUBLIC WORKS 3

Airbourne Perspective

Imagine leadership as piloting a complex aircraft through ever-changing skies. The external relationships a leader builds are like the various instruments and systems of the plane, each vital for a smooth and successful flight.

The altimeter, representing collaborative relationships, helps maintain the right altitude - not too high to lose touch with the ground realities, nor too low to crash into obstacles. The compass, symbolising positive connections, keeps the aircraft on course towards its destination of high performance and well-being.

But here's the crucial part often overlooked: the pilot's relationship with themselves is like the pre-flight checklist. Just as a thorough self-inspection ensures the pilot is fit to fly, a leader's self-awareness and internal dialogue determine their readiness to lead effectively.

Now, picture this aircraft navigating through a unique airspace - the complex ecosystem of military culture and transformation. The sky is filled with air currents of tradition, gusts of change, and pockets of resistance. The pilot's task is not just to fly through this airspace but to reshape it.

In this journey, the pilot (our leader) initially believes they're operating purely on instruments - using rational decision-making and collaborative strategies to navigate. They're confident in their ability to read the air currents, avoid turbulence, and chart a course that balances tradition and change.

However, upon landing and reflecting on the flight, the pilot realises something profound. What they thought was instrument flying was, at times, influenced by an internal autopilot - their 'chimp brain'. This autopilot, driven by the fear of being grounded (shamed or alienated), the desire for a smooth flight (being liked), and the

anxiety of instrument failure (not doing the job properly), had subtly altered their course.

This realisation doesn't negate the genuine efforts to build collaborative relationships or the positive outcomes achieved. Instead, it adds a layer of complexity to the flight log. It reveals that even as the pilot was adeptly managing external systems, an internal weather system was at play, influencing decisions in ways not fully recognised at the time.

The lesson? A truly masterful pilot doesn't just excel at reading external instruments and navigating complex airspaces. They also become adept at recognising and managing their internal weather patterns. This self-leadership - the ability to understand and navigate one's own thoughts, fears, and motivations - is like installing a highly sophisticated onboard weather radar.

With this internal radar, the pilot can better distinguish between genuine collaborative manoeuvres and those subtly influenced by personal fears or desires. It allows for more authentic navigation, reducing power imbalances that might arise from unrecognised internal turbulence.

In the end, the journey of leadership is not just about safely piloting the aircraft to its destination. It's about continually upgrading one's internal navigation system, ensuring that both the external flight path and the internal compass are aligned towards true north - genuine, positive, and transformative leadership.

Introduction

Leadership, much like piloting a complex aircraft, requires a delicate balance of technical skill, situational awareness, and self-understanding. This chapter explores the critical role of collaborative relationships in leadership, using the metaphor of a pilot navigating through ever-changing skies. As we journey through this analogy, we'll examine how theoretical concepts from scholars like Tim Ingold (attentive engagement and deep listening, 2017) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (dialogical understanding and

fusion of horizons, 2013) manifest in real-world leadership scenarios, particularly within the context of military culture and transformation. These concepts emphasise the importance of open communication, shared understanding, and engaged presence in effective leadership practices.

Our flight plan will take us through five key phases: the pre-flight checklist (self-awareness), understanding our instruments and systems (external relationships), navigating complex airspace (military culture and transformation), recognising the influence of our internal autopilot (unconscious biases), and developing an internal weather radar (self-leadership). Through each phase, we'll explore how my professional experiences in the Royal Air Force intersect with theoretical frameworks, culminating in deep personal insights that have reshaped my understanding of leadership and collaboration.

Pre-flight Checklist: Self-Awareness

Before any pilot takes to the skies, they must complete a thorough pre-flight checklist. In leadership, this checklist is akin to cultivating self-awareness – a critical first step in effective leadership which was examined in Chapter 3, but will be built upon here in the context of relationships.

Theoretical Concept: Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy provides a valuable framework for understanding the importance of self-awareness in leadership. Gadamer posits that understanding is a dialogical process, one that requires us to be aware of our own prejudices and preconceptions (Gadamer, 1960/2004). In leadership, this theoretical concept translates into practical application in several ways. Firstly, it emphasises the need for leaders to recognise their own biases and assumptions, which may stem from their personal backgrounds, education, or prior experiences. Secondly, it encourages leaders to actively engage in self-reflection, examining how these preconceptions might influence their decision-making processes. Finally, it underscores the importance of approaching interactions with team members and stakeholders with an

open mind, acknowledging that one's initial understanding may be limited or skewed. By applying Gadamer's theory in this manner, leaders can develop a more nuanced and self-aware approach to their roles, potentially leading to more effective and inclusive leadership practices

Professional Practice: Initial Approach to Leadership Roles

Early in my Royal Air Force career, my pre-flight checklist was primarily focused on technical competencies and adherence to established protocols. I believed that effective leadership stemmed from expert knowledge and strict adherence to hierarchical structures. This approach aligned with the traditional military leadership model, which emphasises command and control.

However, as I progressed in my career and faced increasingly complex challenges, particularly in addressing gender equity issues, I began to realise the limitations of this approach. The pre-flight checklist needed to expand beyond technical competencies to include a deeper understanding of my own perspectives, biases, and the impact of my leadership style on others.

A pivotal moment in my leadership development came during my time as commander of 85 Wing. During this period, I underwent a 3-day coaching intervention, which, combined with my pursuit of a Masters in Positive Psychology, led to a profound shift in my leadership philosophy. These experiences allowed me to articulate and embrace my own authentic leadership style: one that is strengths-based, mindful, relationship-focused, and values-driven.

Reflection: Early Assumptions and Beliefs about Leadership

Reflecting on this period, I now recognise that my initial approach to leadership was heavily influenced by the institutional culture of the Royal Air Force and my own unexamined assumptions about effective leadership. I believed that authority and expertise were the primary currencies of leadership, often overlooking the importance of emotional intelligence and collaborative relationships.

This realisation marked the beginning of a significant shift in my leadership philosophy. I began to understand that true self-awareness requires ongoing reflection and a willingness to challenge one's own assumptions. This process of self-examination, much like a pilot continually updating their pre-flight checklist, became an integral part of my leadership development.

My engagement with this professional doctorate program has truly transformed my view on self-leadership. This process highlighted the critical importance of knowing and understanding myself, not just for personal growth, but for the benefit of others and to enhance my effectiveness as a leader of teams, change initiatives, and organisations.

Over time, I've discarded the assumption that effective military leadership must conform to a narrow, traditionally masculine model. I've come to understand that diverse leadership styles, including those that emphasise emotional intelligence, collaboration, and inclusivity, are not just acceptable but essential for a modern, effective military organisation.

Perhaps the most profound shift in my thinking has been the recognition of self-leadership as foundational to all other forms of leadership. This concept – the idea that one must first lead oneself effectively before leading others – has become central to my leadership philosophy. I've come to believe that this aspect of leadership should be experienced and emphasised with leaders as early as possible in their careers, potentially reshaping how we approach leadership development in military and hierarchical contexts. This conviction has led me to actively support other leaders in the military to be confident in leading as themselves. Through coaching junior leaders in the Royal Air Force, I am committed to nurturing a generation of individuals who will embrace their authentic leadership styles earlier in their careers. My goal is to help these emerging leaders avoid the self-doubt I experienced, enabling them to contribute their unique perspectives and strengths to the organisation more fully and confidently from the outset of their leadership journeys

Instruments and Systems: External Relationships

Once airborne, a pilot relies on various instruments and systems to navigate safely. In leadership, these instruments and systems are analogous to the external relationships we build and maintain.

Theoretical Concept: Ingold's Emphasis on Relationality

Tim Ingold's work on relationality provides a powerful framework for understanding the importance of external relationships in leadership. Ingold argues that the world is a dynamic, constantly evolving web of relations (Ingold, 2000). This perspective challenges the notion of leadership as a top-down, hierarchical process and instead emphasises the interconnectedness of all individuals within an organisation.

Professional Practice: Building Collaborative Relationships in the Royal Air Force

When I took command of 85 (Expeditionary Logistics) Wing, I encountered several niche, small, and remote units under my command. These units operated almost independently from the rest of the RAF. While expert in their fields and professionally diligent, they were wary of outsiders, lacked transparency, and tended to operate in isolation. In sum, their relationship with the Wing and the broader RAF was suboptimal.

Over time, I focused on building trust. I visited the units, observed their operations, and got to know the people within them. Through this process, we found common ground on which to build stronger relationships. Safety and risk management emerged as two key factors for discussion.

My approach was multifaceted: I aimed to get everyone, up and down the chain of command, on the same page; I fostered mutual understanding and allowed expression from all sides; I looked for solutions while establishing facts, remaining prepared to change and compromise; I clarified responsibilities at all levels.

This approach established psychological safety that enabled greater operational freedoms within a collectively endorsed risk envelope. As a result, these units began to work more openly and transparently. Their purpose became more clearly connected to that of the RAF, improving their reputation and integration within the larger organisation.

This experience reinforced my belief in the power of collaborative relationships and the importance of creating environments where all voices can be heard. It demonstrated how building trust and fostering open communication can transform isolated units into integral parts of a larger, more effective organisation.

As I grappled with the challenge of addressing gender equity issues in the Royal Air Force, I began to see the practical implications of Ingold's relational approach. I realised that meaningful progress couldn't be achieved through directive leadership alone. Instead, it required building a network of collaborative relationships across all levels of the organisation.

Two specific examples illustrate this approach:

1. As Chair of the Royal Air Force Gender Network, I spearheaded the drafting of a defence policy to prevent inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour. This initiative was unique in that it was developed 'with' the Chiefs of Defence Staff, rather than being imposed from above. This collaborative approach marked a significant departure from traditional top-down policy-making processes in the military.
2. During my tenure as Officer Commanding 85 Wing, I focused on increasing psychological safety during high-risk operations. This was achieved through fostering collaborative relationships that engendered trust, empowerment, and mutual understanding of risk envelopes.

I initiated forums where individuals from various ranks and backgrounds could share their experiences and perspectives on gender equity. These dialogues often revealed underlying issues and potential solutions that might have been overlooked in a more top-down approach. By fostering these collaborative relationships, I was able to gather

a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges we faced and develop more effective strategies for change.

Reflection: Challenges and Successes in Fostering Positive Connections

The journey of fostering collaborative relationships within the Royal Air Force was fraught with both challenges and successes. The deeply ingrained hierarchical structure of military culture often acted as a barrier to open communication, particularly when addressing sensitive issues like gender equity. Creating safe spaces for dialogue became a conscious effort, requiring me to model the kind of open, non-judgmental communication I hoped to foster.

Despite these challenges, the outcomes of these initiatives were profoundly impactful. In the short term, we created spaces where previously marginalised voices could be heard. Whether it was victims of unacceptable behaviour or specialised units like Mountain Rescue that felt isolated, these initiatives gave voice to perspectives that had long been overlooked. The long-term implications were even more significant. As these individuals and their capabilities began to be understood and appreciated, we witnessed a marked increase in overall performance. By creating an environment where people could focus their energy on excelling rather than struggling to be seen and heard, we unlocked a wealth of untapped potential.

This approach represented a significant departure from traditional military leadership models. It was built on genuine partnership, inclusive agenda-setting, open dialogue, clear alignment of responsibility and authority, and an emphasis on mutual understanding rather than winning arguments. While this approach faced resistance, particularly when addressing sensitive issues like defining unacceptable behaviour, it ultimately led to more nuanced, context-aware policies that accounted for power dynamics and individual perspectives.

Reflecting on this experience, I now see how crucial these external relationships – these instruments and systems – are to effective leadership. Just as a pilot must

constantly monitor and adjust based on the readings from various instruments, a leader must remain attuned to the insights and feedback from a diverse network of relationships. This relational approach not only leads to better decision-making but also fosters a more inclusive and adaptive organisational culture.

Navigating Complex Airspace: Military Culture and Transformation

Theoretical concept: Ingold's rejection of dualism

Tim Ingold's rejection of dualism provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of navigating military culture and transformation. Ingold challenges artificial dichotomies, such as tradition vs. change, arguing instead for a more holistic, interconnected view of the world (Ingold, 2000). This perspective is particularly relevant when addressing cultural transformation within a traditional institution like the military.

Professional practice: Addressing unacceptable behaviours and cultural transformation

In my role as Chair of the Royal Air Force Gender Network, I led the development of a defence policy to prevent inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour. This task epitomised the challenge of navigating complex airspace - balancing the need for cultural transformation with respect for military traditions and hierarchies.

The process involved engaging with diverse stakeholders, from junior personnel to the Chiefs of Defence Staff. We had to navigate air currents of tradition, gusts of change, and pockets of resistance. The goal was not to simply impose new rules, but to reshape the cultural airspace itself.

One significant challenge was defining unacceptable behaviour in a way that accounted for power dynamics. We recognised that an action between peers might be perceived differently than the same action between a superior and a subordinate. This

nuanced approach required us to move beyond simple dualities of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' to consider context and power relationships.

Reflection: Balancing tradition and change, overcoming resistance

Navigating this complex airspace required a delicate balance. We had to respect the valuable aspects of military tradition while pushing for necessary changes. Resistance was often palpable, stemming from those who felt that change might undermine the service they had offered their country.

To overcome this resistance, we focused on linking the purpose of defence to the need for cultural change. By reframing the military's role from simply 'fight the enemy' to achieving 'multi-domain effect,' we could justify and promote cultural changes as essential to operational effectiveness in the modern world.

This experience taught me the importance of patience and persistence in cultural transformation. Change doesn't happen overnight, especially in institutions with deep-rooted traditions. It requires constant adjustment, much like a pilot navigating through changing weather conditions.

Realising the Influence of Internal Autopilot: Unconscious Biases

Theoretical concept: Jung's shadow archetype

Carl Jung's concept of the shadow archetype provides a powerful framework for understanding unconscious biases in leadership. Jung describes the shadow as composed of traits we resist identifying as our own, including repressed ideas, weaknesses, desires, instincts, and shortcomings (Jung, 2014). In leadership, these shadow aspects can significantly influence decision-making and behaviour, often without conscious awareness.

Professional practice: Recognising the impact of personal fears and motivations

Upon reflection, I realised that what I thought was purely instrument flying - rational decision-making and collaborative strategies - was at times influenced by an internal autopilot, or what could be termed my 'chimp brain'. This autopilot was driven by unconscious fears and motivations:

1. Fear of being grounded (shamed or alienated)
2. Desire for a smooth flight (being liked)
3. Anxiety of instrument failure (not doing the job properly)

These unconscious drivers subtly altered my course, influencing decisions in ways I didn't fully recognise at the time. For instance, in collaborative settings, I sometimes found myself tailoring my responses based on the rank dynamics in the room. When I was the highest-ranking officer, I had to question whether I was truly fostering collaboration or subtly imposing my own agenda. Conversely, when I was the lowest-paid individual present, I had to examine my motivations to ensure I wasn't compromising my views out of fear or desire for advancement.

Reflection: Uncovering shadow traits in intentionality

The process of uncovering shadow traits in my leadership intentionality has been both challenging and illuminating. Through deep reflection, I've come to recognise two key shadow traits that have significantly influenced my actions as a leader.

Firstly, I discovered a deep-seated aversion to conflict, which I experienced as a sense of personal failure. This realisation helped me understand that my strong drive for collaboration was partly motivated by this unconscious fear. While collaboration is undoubtedly valuable, recognising this shadow trait allowed me to approach it more authentically, acknowledging that healthy conflict can often be productive.

Secondly, I uncovered a lack of trust in myself, which manifested as a tendency to seek external validation and consensus, sometimes at the expense of trusting my own

judgment. This insight has been crucial in my development as a leader, prompting me to work on balancing collaborative decision-making with confidence in my own insights and experiences.

Recognising these shadow aspects has added a layer of complexity to my understanding of my leadership journey. It's revealed that even as I was adeptly managing external systems and relationships, an internal weather system was at play, subtly influencing my decisions and actions in ways I hadn't fully appreciated at the time.

This realisation has been crucial in my development as a leader. It's taught me the importance of continual self-reflection and the need to integrate all aspects of myself - including those I might have previously rejected or suppressed - into my leadership approach.

Developing an Internal Weather Radar: Self-Leadership

The recognition of my internal autopilot's influence led me to develop a more sophisticated approach to leadership - akin to installing an advanced onboard weather radar. This evolution involved a multifaceted approach to enhancing my self-awareness and decision-making processes.

I began by cultivating greater self-awareness, paying closer attention to my internal states, motivations, and reactions in various leadership situations. This heightened awareness allowed me to catch myself when old patterns emerged and make more conscious choices.

Simultaneously, I started practicing mindful decision-making. Before engaging in collaborative processes or making important decisions, I would take time to check in with myself, questioning my intentions and examining potential unconscious biases. This practice helped me ensure that my actions were aligned with my stated values and goals.

Perhaps most significantly, I began to reframe my understanding of conflict. Rather than avoiding it due to personal discomfort, I started to see conflict as a potentially productive part of the collaborative process. This shift in perspective allowed me to create environments where disagreement could be expressed constructively, leading to more robust solutions and stronger team dynamics.

Lastly, I worked on finding a balance between valuing collaboration and trusting my own judgment. While I continued to prize collaborative approaches, I also focused on developing greater confidence in my own insights and decisions. This balance allowed me to lead more authentically, knowing when to seek input and when to trust my own instincts.

Reflection: New insights on intention and action, personal growth

This evolution in my leadership approach has yielded several profound insights that have not only enhanced my effectiveness as a leader but also contributed significantly to my personal growth.

I've come to deeply appreciate the importance of alignment between intention and action. Regular self-reflection has become a crucial part of my leadership practice, allowing me to check whether my actions truly align with my stated intentions. When I notice misalignment, I can now adjust course more quickly and effectively.

Moreover, I've learned the value of embracing all parts of myself, including those I previously saw as weaknesses. Rather than trying to suppress my aversion to conflict, for instance, I've learned to acknowledge and work with this aspect of myself. This self-acceptance has paradoxically allowed me to handle conflict more effectively and authentically.

Perhaps most importantly, I've discovered the power of authentic leadership. By becoming more aware of my internal processes and leading from a place of greater self-understanding, I've found I can foster more genuine and effective collaborative relationships. This authenticity has not only improved my leadership but has also enhanced my personal well-being and job satisfaction.

Lastly, I've come to see self-leadership as a continuous journey of learning and adjustment. Much like a pilot constantly refining their skills and updating their understanding of aviation technology, I now approach my leadership development as an ongoing process of growth and adaptation.

Conclusion

This exploration of leadership through the lens of piloting an aircraft in complex airspace has revealed that true mastery in leadership transcends mere external skills and strategies. At its core, effective leadership requires a deep understanding of oneself, the cultivation of genuine collaborative relationships, and the ability to navigate both internal and external complexities with awareness and intention.

Self-awareness emerges as the foundation of this leadership journey. Just as a pre-flight checklist is essential for safe flying, understanding our own biases, motivations, and shadow aspects allows for more authentic and impactful leadership. This self-knowledge forms the basis for all other aspects of leadership.

The power of collaborative relationships cannot be overstated. These external connections, like the instruments of an aircraft, are vital for navigating the complex landscape of organisational leadership. Building genuine collaborative relationships across hierarchies leads to more comprehensive understanding and effective change, creating an environment where diverse perspectives can flourish.

In environments steeped in tradition, like the military, navigating the delicate balance between honouring the past and embracing necessary change is crucial. By linking change to core organisational purposes, leaders can overcome resistance and foster meaningful evolution, ensuring that the organisation remains relevant and effective in changing times.

Recognising the influence of our 'internal autopilot' - our unconscious biases and motivations - is a critical step towards genuine self-leadership. This awareness allows

for more intentional and aligned decision-making, reducing the gap between our stated intentions and our actions.

Finally, the continuous development of self-leadership, akin to developing an 'internal weather radar,' emerges as a key factor in navigating complex leadership situations. Through practices like mindfulness and intentional self-reflection, leaders can approach challenges with greater clarity and authenticity.

As we continue to face increasingly complex organisational and societal challenges, cultivating these aspects of leadership will be crucial. By developing a deep understanding of ourselves, fostering genuine collaborative relationships, and honing our ability to navigate both internal and external complexities, we can guide our collective journey toward positive transformation. This holistic approach to leadership not only enhances our effectiveness as leaders but also contributes to our personal growth and well-being, creating a virtuous cycle of improvement and impact.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

This thesis champions leadership as a shared responsibility, accessible to all, rather than an elitist activity reserved for a select few. Through critical examination of my public works and professional practice, I've demonstrated how leadership emerges from the collective contributions and collaborations of everyone. By focusing on self-leadership as the foundation for team, change, and organisational leadership, I've challenged prevalent notions of heroic leadership. Instead, I propose a more inclusive model grounded in awareness, acknowledgment, and relationships. This perspective, evolved from implicit knowledge to explicit articulation, not only informs my future professional endeavours but also aims to influence the broader defence sector, promoting a more collaborative and empowering approach to leadership.

Personal Journey

Throughout this journey of critically reflecting on my public works, I've come to recognise how specific challenges and events have profoundly shaped my perspective on leadership and the nature of my contributions to the field.

One pivotal challenge was my experience as a woman in a traditionally masculine military environment. Initially, I saw this as a personal hurdle to overcome through conformity and excellence. However, upon reflection, I realise this context led me to develop a unique insider/outsider perspective. This dual positioning has been crucial in allowing me to critically examine and challenge traditional leadership norms within the defence sector while maintaining credibility and understanding of the system.

Another event was my exposure to positive psychology and coaching methodologies outside the military context. This intersection of my military experience with civilian leadership theories catalysed a significant shift in my understanding of leadership. It allowed me to articulate and embrace an authentic leadership style that values strengths, mindfulness, and relationships - concepts not traditionally emphasised in military leadership training.

The process of re-contextualising my work for this doctorate has further evolved my understanding of leadership in several ways:

1. **From Hierarchy to Inclusivity**: I've moved from sensing leadership as a top-down, hierarchical process to experiencing it as an inclusive, collaborative effort that requires participation from everyone. This shift challenges the traditional military leadership model and opens up new possibilities for organisational effectiveness.

2. **Recognising Internal Intersectionality**: Through this reflective process, I've come to understand the importance of acknowledging and integrating diverse aspects of one's identity in leadership. This insight has deepened my appreciation for the complexity of individual experiences and how they contribute to leadership capacity.

3. **Emphasising Self-Leadership**: Re-examining my public works has highlighted the critical role of self-leadership as a foundation for all other forms of leadership. This realisation has prompted me to advocate for earlier and more comprehensive self-leadership development in military contexts.

4. **Valuing Reflection**: The process of critical reflection itself has become central to my understanding of effective leadership. I now see continuous self-reflection and learning as crucial components of leadership development, challenging the often action-oriented culture of military leadership.

This evolution in my understanding of leadership has not only reshaped my personal approach but also informs my vision for leadership development within the defence sector and beyond. It underscores the value of diverse experiences, interdisciplinary learning, and continuous reflection in developing adaptive, inclusive leaders capable of navigating the complexities of modern organisations.

Furthermore, the process of reflection on my professional practice has expanded beyond my initial focus on leadership and defence implications. It has examined my identity as a transdisciplinary individual and through that the potential influence of this approach on leadership in the defence sector. Transdisciplinarity, as Montuori (2012) argues, extends far beyond a set of academic inquiry tools; it necessitates a profound reflection on our identity, our methods of understanding the world, and our capacity to embody diverse modes of existence, cognition, relationship-building, and action.

Transdisciplinarity builds towards a leadership of "everyone, everywhere, everyday" (Montuori and Donnelly, 2017), emphasising the integration of personal growth with

social change, recognising the interconnectedness of individual development and broader societal transformation. It creates leadership that is an adaptive, creative process, particularly crucial in navigating complex environments. The transdisciplinary approach also highlights specific traits, such as tolerance for ambiguity, independent judgment, and a preference for complexity. Importantly, it acknowledges the significance of microactions and microconnections, emphasising that small, daily actions play a vital role in effective leadership. Finally, this perspective is situated within a transformative global context, recognising the pressing need for innovative leadership approaches in our rapidly changing world.

These elements enrich the discussion of leadership in the defence sector, particularly concerning awareness, acknowledgment, appreciation, relationships, and the necessity for leadership paradigms which in complex, evolving environments champion participation by all.

Summary of Key Learnings and New Insights

Through the process of critically reflecting on my public works through the combined lens of autoethnography, positive psychology, and leadership, I have gained significant insights that both challenge and extend current thinking particularly within the context of the defence sector.

These insights have evolved my understanding of myself to consciously become a champion of leadership as a universal process in which everyone can and needs to participate. My emphasis on universal participation in leadership both challenges and extends current thinking in the defence sector. While military training theoretically develops leadership at all levels, my experience in the Royal Air Force revealed the need to bridge the gap between leadership theory and practice, emphasising the importance of fostering individual agency and proactive leadership at all levels.

The most significant insight to emerge from this reflection is the critical role of self-leadership as a foundation for inclusive leadership. In the defence sector, self-leadership has traditionally been viewed primarily through the lens of willpower, control, and self-discipline. However, my work reveals a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of self-leadership, one that forms the bedrock of

effective team, change, and organisational leadership. This approach has revealed three aspects which are worth summarising:

Awareness

Exploration of my first public work, published in November 2021 while I served as special advisor to the Secretary of State on women's experience of the Armed Forces led to a critical insight into self-leadership within hierarchical organisations like the military. The public works in themselves, led to significant governmental acknowledgments, including recognition of past failures in providing women with deserved experiences, a commitment to listening to women's voices, and an emphasis on inclusive leadership as a crucial driver for cultural change. These outcomes reflect not just policy shifts, but a deeper understanding that "culture change is not just about policy, it is also about personal experience" (Parliament. House of Commons, 2021, p. 9).

The insight of the critique into the work emphasised the need to redefine self-leadership beyond traditional norms. Exploring awareness of self and system beyond notions of discipline and willpower; instead incorporating elements of self-discovery, emotional intelligence, and critical reflection. This redefinition is crucial for developing leaders equipped to navigate modern organisational complexities and foster inclusivity.

Furthermore, a comprehensive approach to self-leadership can counteract generational lag in organisational culture. By encouraging individuals to question and increase awareness of their authentic selves from the outset of their careers, we enable fresh perspectives and challenge outdated norms. This approach moves beyond self-discipline, making self-leadership more explicit and experiential within the military context.

Acknowledgement and Appreciation

Perhaps the most novel contribution of this work is the application of intersectionality to the self in the context of leadership. Through self-reflection, I've become aware of the diverse parts that comprise my being, many of which I had unconsciously

marginalised or 'disappeared'. This internal intersectionality has profound implications for self-leadership, which I argue is the foundation for all forms of leadership. By recognising and integrating these different aspects of ourselves, we can foster a more holistic and authentic sense of self, leading to greater self-understanding, personal growth, and more effective leadership.

My work coordinating the Royal Air Force's response to the Wigston Report provided a rich ground for applying and understanding the importance of acknowledging and appreciating all aspects of the self in self-leadership. This insight emerged as a key factor in navigating the complex challenges of cultural transformation.

For instance, in creating safe spaces for dialogue through the Royal Air Force Gender Network forums, I had to acknowledge and appreciate my own multifaceted identity. As a leader in this context, I drew upon my experiences as both a member of the military establishment and as someone who had felt marginalised in certain situations. This internal intersectionality allowed me to empathise with diverse perspectives and create an environment where others felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

When encouraging leaders to reflect on their own biases and privileges, I first had to engage in deep self-reflection. I recognised parts of myself that I had previously marginalised or 'disappeared,' such as my own biases and areas of privilege. By acknowledging these aspects, I was better equipped to guide others through this process, demonstrating leadership rooted in self-awareness.

Developing policies and training that addressed both overt and subtle forms of discrimination required a nuanced understanding of discrimination's many forms. By appreciating the complexity within myself - the times I've felt discriminated against and the times I may have unknowingly perpetuated discrimination - I was able to create more comprehensive and empathetic policies.

This process of self-discovery and integration has profound implications for self-leadership. By recognising and integrating these different aspects of ourselves, we can foster a deeper sense of self. In my case, this led to greater self-understanding, personal growth, and more effective leadership in navigating the tensions and disruptions involved in organisational change.

The application of intersectionality to the self in the context of leadership emerged as a novel contribution of this work. Through my experiences with the Royal Air Force's cultural transformation, I've demonstrated how internal intersectionality can enhance a leader's capacity to drive change, empathise with diverse perspectives, and create more inclusive environments. This holistic approach to self-leadership forms the foundation for all forms of leadership, enabling us to lead others more effectively.

Relationships

My experiences as Chair of the Royal Air Force Gender Network and as Officer Commanding 85 (EL) Wing provided valuable opportunities to apply and understand the importance of relationships and the insider/outsider perspective in effective leadership.

When spearheading the drafting of a defence policy to prevent inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour, I leveraged my position as both an insider and a collaborator. As an insider, I had deep connections and understanding within the system, which allowed me to approach the Chiefs of Defence Staff as peers rather than subordinates. This collaborative approach, developing the policy 'with' the Chiefs rather than imposing it from above, marked a significant departure from traditional top-down policy-making processes in the military. It demonstrated how leadership grounded in connections rather than formal authority can lead to more effective and widely accepted outcomes.

During my tenure as Officer Commanding 85 (EL) Wing, I focused on increasing psychological safety during high-risk operations. This effort required me to balance my insider status as a commanding officer with an outsider perspective that recognised the need for change. By fostering relationships that engendered trust, empowerment, and mutual understanding of risk envelopes, I was able to create an environment where team members felt safe to voice concerns and ideas. This approach illustrated how leadership can be a process to which everyone contributes, challenging traditional notions of heroic leadership in military contexts.

My evolving position as both an insider and outsider within the Royal Air Force has been crucial in shaping my understanding of effective leadership. As an insider, I built

deep connections and understanding within the system. Now, as a Reservist with an outsider perspective, I can leverage these relationships in new ways. This shift in positioning has opened exciting new avenues for contribution, demonstrating how relationships can enable more inclusive, ethical, and effective leadership even within traditional hierarchical structures.

This dual role has highlighted the importance of relationships in effective leadership. It challenges the traditional top-down leadership model often associated with military structures and instead promotes a more nuanced, inclusive approach that recognises the potential for leadership in all individuals. By emphasising the value of relationships and the insider/outsider perspective, this work provides a novel approach to understanding and developing effective leadership in complex organisational settings, particularly within the defence sector.

These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership as a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute. The emphasis on collaborative relationships and the insider/outsider perspective as foundational to effective leadership, particularly within the military context, is a significant contribution. This approach is particularly valuable because:

1. It challenges entrenched notions of leadership in military contexts, promoting a more inclusive and collaborative model
2. It offers a means of fostering proactive leadership at all levels of the organisation, combating the tendency towards rigid hierarchical thinking

By highlighting the importance of collaborative relationships and the value of both insider knowledge and outsider perspective, this work extends the forefront of my professional practice by demonstrating how leaders can leverage diverse viewpoints and experiences to drive positive change, even within traditional hierarchical structures.

Advancing Leadership Practice in the Defence Sector

Collectively, these insights contribute to a new understanding of leadership in the defence sector. They challenge traditional hierarchical models, emphasising instead

a more inclusive, participatory approach that recognises and nurtures leadership potential at all levels. This new paradigm has significant implications for leadership development in the Royal Air Force and beyond, suggesting a need for earlier and more comprehensive support to develop conscious self understanding and self-leadership.

Furthermore, this research extends the forefront of professional practice in leadership within the defence sector in three key ways:

1. **Redefining self-leadership**: While self-leadership in military contexts has traditionally focused on self-discipline and control, my work expands this concept to include self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and internal intersectionality. This broader understanding of self-leadership has the potential to develop more adaptable and empathetic leaders, better equipped to navigate the complex challenges of modern military operations.

2. **Challenging hierarchical norms**: By emphasising leadership as a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute (Haslam et al., 2024, p.10), this work challenges the traditional top-down leadership model prevalent in hierarchical organisations. This approach has the potential to foster greater innovation, engagement, and resilience across all levels of the defence sector.

3. **Addressing generational lag**: My research highlights the issue of generational lag in military leadership development and proposes strategies to accelerate cultural change. This insight provides a new perspective on why certain leadership development efforts may fall short and offers a pathway for more effective, timely transformation.

Implications for the Defence Sector

This research has significant implications for the defence sector, particularly in relation to championing leadership as a shared responsibility. Three key implications stand out:

Fundamental Shift in Leadership Conceptualisation and Practice

The findings of this study call for a paradigm shift in how leadership is understood and implemented within military organisations. Traditional notions of leadership as the domain of a select few at the top of the command chain are challenged. Instead, this research advocates for recognising and nurturing leadership potential in every individual, regardless of rank or position.

This shift is crucial for several reasons:

1. It promotes greater resilience and adaptability in military organisations
2. It leverages diverse perspectives and experiences to tackle complex challenges
3. It fosters innovation and engagement across all levels of the organisation

Implementing this shift will require significant changes in training programs, organisational structures, and cultural norms within the defence sector.

Paradox of Self-Leadership in a Conformity-Driven Culture

A central challenge emerging from this research is the apparent contradiction between promoting self-leadership and maintaining the collective identity crucial to military effectiveness. Military culture often emphasises conformity and the sublimation of individual identity to the group. This can lead to what I term the 'disappearing' of certain aspects of the self, where individuals suppress parts of their identity that don't align with perceived military norms.

Addressing this paradox involves:

1. Reconceptualising self-leadership within the defence context to go beyond self-discipline and control
2. Fostering a culture that values individual agency while maintaining necessary military structure
3. Developing support systems that help personnel integrate their individual identities with their military roles

Overcoming Generational Lag in Leadership Development

The research highlights a significant challenge in the form of generational lag in implementing cultural and behavioural change. The lived experience and experiential leadership pathway in the military often defaults to a paradigm of 'special' leaders and passive followers, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as 'learned helplessness'.

Tackling this issue requires:

1. Implementing targeted interventions that emphasise the importance of genuine lived experience in leadership development
2. Introducing structured support for development of self-leadership earlier in military careers

By addressing these implications, the defence sector can cultivate a new generation of leaders at all levels, better prepared to navigate the complexities of modern warfare and peacekeeping. The Royal Air Force, with its history of innovation and adaptability, is well-positioned to pioneer this new approach to leadership, potentially influencing practice across the broader defence sector and beyond.

Recommendations for Target Audiences

These insights regarding self-leadership as an antidote to generational lag point toward specific opportunities for transformation within the defence sector. While the challenge of evolving leadership practices within hierarchical organisations is significant, practical steps can be taken at multiple levels to foster meaningful change.

This work's insights and implications extend across multiple audiences within the defence sector. Like a murmuration of starlings adapting its flight pattern, each group must play its part in evolving leadership practices to meet modern challenges.

For Senior Military Leaders

Just as pilots must complete thorough pre-flight checks before taking to the air, consider implementing early-career coaching interventions that emphasise experiential self-leadership development. This development should focus first on awareness - of self and system - creating opportunities for personnel to recognise how they navigate within the broader defence environment. Rather than waiting until

officers reach senior ranks, integrate practical self-awareness and leadership reflection from the outset of military careers. This approach moves beyond theoretical understanding to lived experience, helping personnel develop genuine self-understanding through practice rather than just principle. Like starlings learning to sense their position within the murmuration, such experiential learning could help mitigate the generational lag identified in this research while fostering more inclusive leadership cultures.

For Military Education and Training Developers

Incorporate experiential self-leadership as a foundational element in professional military education, recognising that like each starling in the murmuration, every individual brings unique perspectives and capabilities to the collective. Move beyond traditional focus on command and control to create opportunities for personnel to acknowledge and appreciate their whole selves, including those aspects that might have previously 'disappeared'. Design programmes that help individuals recognise the kaleidoscopic nature of their identity, moving past the notion that self-leadership equates solely to willpower and control. Develop curricula that explicitly address the tension between uniformity and individual expression, helping future leaders navigate this complex airspace through practical experience rather than theoretical frameworks alone.

For Military Policy Makers

When crafting policies affecting leadership development and organisational culture, consider how institutional structures might create air currents that unintentionally suppress diverse leadership styles and perspectives. Design frameworks that value awareness of both self and system, acknowledge the multiplicity within individuals, and appreciate the strength that comes from allowing all aspects of identity to contribute to the collective flight pattern. Most crucially, ensure policies support experiential development of self-leadership rather than relying on classroom-based or theoretical approaches alone. Like the complex patterns that emerge when starlings are free to respond naturally to their environment, allow space for organic development of leadership capabilities.

For Individual Military Leaders

Engage actively in experiential self-reflection and leadership development, regardless of rank or position. Like a pilot developing their internal weather radar, focus first on awareness of your own patterns and responses. Acknowledge those aspects of self that might have been 'disappeared' during your career, appreciating how these elements might strengthen your leadership capability. Consider how your own experiences of conformity might influence your leadership style and impact on others. Seek out opportunities for practical development of self-awareness and understanding beyond traditional military leadership training.

Implementation of these recommendations requires careful consideration of the unique military context while advancing toward more inclusive and effective leadership practices. Like a murmuration finding new flight patterns while maintaining its essential cohesion, the goal is not to dismantle necessary hierarchical structures but to evolve them to better serve modern defence requirements through enhanced self-leadership capabilities at all levels. By focusing on awareness, acknowledgment, and appreciation, we can create an environment where leadership truly becomes a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute.

This comprehensive approach to transforming leadership development in the defence sector aligns closely with my ongoing work and future vision. By implementing these recommendations through careful, measured steps, we can begin to reshape how leadership is understood, experienced, and practiced across all levels of military service. Looking ahead, my vision for future work builds directly upon these recommendations, particularly in the realm of coaching and leadership development.

Vision For Future Work

My vision for future work within the Royal Air Force is deeply rooted in my commitment to championing leadership as a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute (Haslam et al., 2024, p.10). This vision centres on a targeted coaching program to emphasise self-leadership and inclusive practices, with the goal of creating an environment where all members feel valued, empowered, and recognised as potential leaders.

Central to this vision is my plan to introduce coaching across all ranks in the Royal Air Force. This approach reflects my belief that leadership potential exists at every level of the organisation. By adopting a bottom-up methodology, working with individuals to test and expand the coaching program, I aim to demonstrate that leadership development is not reserved for those in formal positions of authority, but is a shared responsibility and opportunity for all.

My two-pronged approach to expanding coaching within the Royal Air Force as a Reservist exemplifies this philosophy:

1. Providing leadership coaching for junior but high-potential individuals, recognising that leadership can and should be nurtured early in one's career
2. Offering coaching to those whom the organisation wants to demonstrably value, reinforcing the idea that leadership contribution is valued at all levels and stages of one's career

This approach to job crafting allows me to leverage my unique insider/outsider perspective to drive meaningful change. By focusing on these key cohorts, I aim to create a ripple effect, empowering others as agents of change and demonstrating that leadership is indeed a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute.

Ultimately, my goal is to catalyse a broader cultural transformation within the defence sector. By fostering self-leadership and inclusive practices at various levels, I hope to contribute to the development of a more adaptive, resilient, and effective military organisation – one where leadership is seen as a collective responsibility rather than the domain of a select few.

Dissemination Strategy

The insights gained through this research are already finding practical application within the Royal Air Force and broader defence context. Like a murmuration adapting its flight patterns, the dissemination of these ideas continues to evolve and influence leadership development in multiple spheres.

Current Activities

My role as a Reservist coach within the Royal Air Force provides a direct channel for implementing the insights from this research. Through one-to-one coaching with high-potential leaders and those whom the Service seeks to explicitly value, I am actively sharing and testing concepts of self-leadership, particularly focusing on experiential development rather than theoretical understanding. This work has reached over thirty senior leaders in the past year, creating ripple effects throughout their commands and areas of influence.

Future Dissemination Strategy

Looking ahead, I envision expanding the impact of this research through several complementary channels:

Leadership Coaching Evolution

Building upon my current one-to-one coaching practice, I plan to develop group and team coaching programmes that specifically address self-leadership within military contexts. These programmes will maintain the emphasis on experiential learning while creating opportunities for collective exploration of leadership challenges. The group dynamic will allow leaders to witness and learn from others' journeys of awareness, acknowledgment, and appreciation.

Speaking and Conference Engagement

I have identified several defence and leadership conferences where these insights could contribute to broader discussions about leadership development in hierarchical organisations. These speaking engagements will serve to both disseminate the research findings and gather additional insights from other practitioners in the field. Through carefully chosen speaking opportunities, I aim to challenge traditional notions of military leadership while respecting the unique requirements of defence organisations.

Academic Publication

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks suggested by the External Examiner, particularly in relation to current scholarship on military leadership transformation, I plan to submit articles to academic journals. These publications will focus on the application of self-leadership concepts in hierarchical organisations, contributing to the scholarly discourse on military leadership development while maintaining appropriate confidentiality regarding specific contexts.

Book Development

I intend to develop a book that synthesises the key insights from this research, presenting them in a format accessible to military leaders and others working within hierarchical organisations. The book will integrate the metaphorical frameworks developed in this research with practical guidance for developing self-leadership capabilities. Through narrative and example, it will illustrate how leadership can become a process to which everyone contributes. However, I recognise that this endeavour represents a significant challenge to my own self-leadership. Before embarking on this project, I am consciously working to develop the clarity, focus, and confidence required for such an undertaking. This personal development journey exemplifies the ongoing nature of self-leadership - even as I guide others, I continue to navigate my own path of growth and challenge.

Creative Exploration

There may also be potential to explore these concepts through fiction, using storytelling to bring to life the ideas of self-leadership, the 'disappeared', and the evolution of leadership within traditional institutions. This approach could make these concepts more accessible and relatable to a broader audience while maintaining the rigour of the underlying research.

This comprehensive approach to dissemination ensures that the insights gained through this research continue to influence and shape leadership development within the defence sector, creating lasting positive change in how leadership is understood and practiced at all levels.

Broader Implications and Closing Thoughts

The insights gained from this research have relevance far beyond the defence sector, resonating with the broader challenges faced by organisations and societies in an increasingly complex world. The need for inclusive, participatory leadership that recognises and nurtures the potential in every individual has never been more critical.

As I reflect on my journey through this doctorate and my experiences in the Royal Air Force, I am struck by the profound realisation of the impact that a single individual can have on systemic change. Initially, as I worked to influence culture and implement change within the RAF, there were moments when I felt my efforts might be inconsequential in the face of such a large and established institution. However, the process of writing this context statement has allowed me to zoom in and out, gaining a clearer understanding of individual agency and its ripple effects.

By championing leadership as a process to which everyone can and needs to contribute (Haslam et al., 2024, p.10), I aim to create more resilient, adaptive, and equitable organisations and societies by fostering a sense of shared responsibility for outcomes. This vision extends far beyond the confines of the military – it has the potential to transform how leadership is understood and practiced across all sectors of society.

The journey from traditional, hierarchical leadership models to this more inclusive, participatory approach is challenging but necessary. It requires us to rethink ingrained assumptions about power, authority, and individual agency. However, the potential rewards are immense. By embracing self-leadership through awareness, acknowledging and appreciating the intersectionality within ourselves, and fostering collaborative relationships, we can create a leadership paradigm that is truly fit for the complexities we face.

As I embark on my role as a coach for leaders in the RAF, I see it as a crucial first step towards cultivating a coaching culture within the broader Defence sector. Each individual I work with has the potential to influence not just their immediate team, but the entire organisational culture. It's akin to throwing a pebble into a pond – the initial impact may seem small, but the ripples extend far and wide, influencing ever-larger circles.

Imagine a future where all 31,750 people in the RAF understand and embrace their role in leadership, recognising their own agency and potential for impact. This shift in perspective could transform not just the RAF, but the entire Defence sector. As Defence personnel interact with other sectors and organisations, this new understanding of leadership could spread, influencing how leadership is practiced and understood on a global scale.

The potential for this approach to reshape our understanding of leadership in practice is immense. By helping individuals recognise the leader within themselves and their role in the broader leadership process, we can create a more engaged, resilient, and adaptive society. This is not just about making organisations more effective – it's about empowering individuals to take ownership of their potential to create positive change, wherever they are.

As I look to the future, I envision a world where leadership is no longer seen as the domain of a select few, but as a shared responsibility and opportunity for all. In this world, organisations are more agile and innovative, better equipped to tackle complex global challenges. Communities are more collaborative and resilient, with individuals feeling empowered to contribute to collective goals. On a global scale, this shift in leadership paradigm could lead to more effective international cooperation, as diverse perspectives are valued and integrated into decision-making processes.

This journey has transformed not just my understanding of leadership, but my very sense of self. The process of critically examining my public works and professional practice has been profoundly enlightening, challenging my assumptions and expanding my perspective in ways I could not have anticipated. As I apply these

insights in my coaching practice, I aim to catalyse a ripple effect of change, empowering future leaders to embrace their authentic selves, increase awareness of self and system, navigate complex intersectionalities, and foster truly collaborative environments.

By doing so, we can create not just a Defence sector, but a global community that is more inclusive, adaptive, and better equipped to meet the multifaceted challenges of our rapidly evolving world. As I step into this new chapter, I carry with me a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper appreciation for the transformative power of self-aware, inclusive leadership. The potential for positive change is limitless, and it begins with each individual recognising their capacity to lead and influence, regardless of their formal position or title.

In conclusion, this work is not just about redefining leadership within the military context – it's about reimagining how we approach collective action and shared responsibility in all aspects of society. As we embrace this new paradigm, we open the door to a future where the collective potential of humanity can be more fully realised, creating a more just, sustainable, and flourishing world for all

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Appendix B: Bibliography

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Žižek, S., 1989. Looking awry. *October*, *50*, pp.31-55.

Appendix C: Public Works Portfolio

Officer Commanding 85 (Expeditionary Logistics) Wing 2018 – 2020 during which period the unit supported the following national, multinational, joint and Air operations: AZOTIZE, BILOXI, BROADSHARE, KIPION, TURUS, SHADER and RESCRIPT.

Ministry of Defence UK, 2022. *Zero tolerance of unacceptable sexual behaviour a victim/ survivor focused approach.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2022din01-073-zero-tolerance-of-unacceptable-sexual-behaviour-a-victimsurvivor-focused-approach. (Accessed 8 August 2024)

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Director Ryhall Leadership, 2022 – Present: https://www.linkedin.com/feed/

Appendix D: Curriculum Vitae

Curriculum Vitae Deborah Helen Pratley Wright

2022 -	Director Ryhall Leadership
2020 - 2022	Chief Of Staff to the Royal Air Force Chief People Officer
2018 - 2020	Officer Commanding 85 (Expeditionary Logistics) Wing
2016 - 2018	Staff Officer 1, RAF Career Management
2014 - 2016	Staff Officer 1, Middle East Operations Team
2013 - 2014	Advanced Command and Staff Course
2011 - 2013	Staff Officer 2, Board Secretariat, Ministry of Defence
2010 - 2011	Officer Commanding Defence Movements School
2010	Staff Officer 2, Strategic Communications, Op HERRICK
2008 - 2010	Staff Officer 2, Battlefield Utilities
2006 - 2008	Staff Officer 3, Logistics, Joint Helicopter Command
2007	Duty Air Movements Officer, Op TELIC
2004 - 2006	Liaison Officer, Germany
2002 – 2004	Officer Commanding Front Line Logistics, Air Transport Fleet
2002	Officer Commanding Mechanical Transport, British Forces Falkland Islands
2000 - 2002	Officer Commanding Mechanical Transport, Tactical Supply Wing
2000	Officer Commanding Tactical Supply Wing, Op PALATINE
1999	Officer Cadet, RAF Cranwell

Appendix E: Ethics Form for Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works

	Questions required to be completed	YES	NO	NOT YET	N/A
1	Do you have written agreement to use co-authored/co-created/collaborative works for the purposes of a doctorate. Provide evidence				NA
	Comment: All co-created/ collaborative works are open source and widely available to the public				
2	Do you have testimony as to your role in those works. Provide evidence	Yes			
	Comment:				
3.	Do you have written permission to use personal data that may identify a person you are including in your research. Provide evidence				NA
	Comment:				
4.	Do you have permission to use images to illustrate your work or images of contributors, participants in your works. Provide evidence				NA
	Comment:				
5.	Will your critique disclose information that was confidential at the time the works were created (such as privileged access, professional /personal/relationship)		No		
	Comment:				
6.	Have you named anyone in a way that will be a danger to them or their organisations or their reputation		No		
	Comment:				
7.	Have you named any organisation in a way that will bring their reputation into disrepute		No		
	Comment:				
8.	To your knowledge have any of your works resulted in harm for individuals or organisations		No		
	Comment:				
9.	Will your critique have the possibility of bringing harm to you due to changing geopolitical and social contexts		No		
	Comment:				
10.	Are there patents/publications pending related to your existing works		No		
	Comment:				
11.	Has your work been through Turnitin		Yes		
	Comment:				

Your Name	Your signature		Date
Deborah Helen Pratley Wright	DHPW		31 August 2024
Name of DoS			
Dr Clarice Santos			