1. What this book is about and why

In the mid twentieth century the American sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote a book entitled *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). In it he critiqued the disciplinary direction of sociology for being focused on the wrong yardsticks. Instead of the earliest sociologists' interest in developing and using theoretical concepts to analyze data collected on a social issue when and where it manifested itself, the field was moving toward what he termed "abstracted empiricism." For Mills this meant that in the interest of looking more scientific the field was losing its way. In the move toward standardization, quantification, and the other elements of making itself more compatible with the premises of conventional science, something precious was being lost. He termed it the "sociological imagination," the most succinct definition of which is the acquired intellectual habit of distinguishing personal "troubles" (e.g., someone struggling with a bullying boss or difficulty breathing) from the surrounding social structures that systematically spawn such social "issues" on a large scale.

For Mills, tens of thousands of people experiencing illegal management practices or constant difficulty breathing due to high ozone levels constitute more than one person's trouble. Rather, these are social issues engendered by systematic policies and social processes; the ideal subject matter for sociological analysis. However, because such issues often resist concise definition and the kinds of experimental models treasured by the bench sciences, Mills wrote that such issues were being transformed into more malleable research topics. Meanwhile the intellectual habits required for doing sociology that truly grapples with difficult social issues were eroding (1959, pp. 3–24).

Mills admitted to being hectored by reviewers for labeling his desired intellectual stance the "sociological" imagination instead of a number of other social science adjectives (e.g., "political" or "anthropological") that might have also worked. He openly admitted that the main reason he chose the term was because he was a sociologist (1959, p. 19). This book borrows the gist of Mills's jeremiad but substitutes "leadership" as the referent. Hence its title, *The Leadership Imagination*, which is the phrase I have been informally using to explain the subject matter of my courses for almost 30 years. What follows briefly explains what I mean by the term,

its theoretical roots, and how I teach students to study ongoing leadership issues by using it.

Very briefly, the gist of *The Leadership Imagination's* argument is that leadership's structure and dynamics are partly captured by both artistic and scientific theory and methods. However, if studying leadership issues as embedded within their surrounding social structures (as Mills would suggest) is to occur, the object of the research cannot be entirely captured by a one-dimensional scientific or artistic approach. Rather, leadership analysis requires a hybrid of art and science.

BRIEF PERSONAL EXCURSUS

Before going further, it helps to know a bit about my background and the program context in which I have spent my academic career. In US vernacular, my training fits the description of a "disciplinary mutt"; although a more genteel description for it is "interdisciplinary." Although I earned my doctorate in sociology, it was only after a circuitous route that included many other fields, beginning with my undergraduate studies. I majored in both philosophy and psychology (with a minor in theology), then took a master's degree in history and phenomenology of religion, specializing in contemporary new religious movements. Among some of the late twentieth-century US alternative religious movements I researched were Hebrew Christianity (the subject of my thesis), a Bay Area variety of neo-paganism and an immigrant Buddhist community.

I then briefly taught religion at an all-male private high school; a daunting experience that drove me back into academia. My dissertation was a case study of tidal shift among US Catholic universities toward mainstream disciplinary curricula and away from sectarian content and student regulations in the mid twentieth century.¹ Eventually I constructed an early synthesis of this array of research interests and disciplines that included three components. These were the sociology of religion, the holistic qualitative research tradition championed at the University of Chicago, and an abiding nose for how thin the line between contemporary social practices and usually unacknowledged quasi-religious beliefs and practices can be.

After another short stint as a higher education administrator, I jumped at the chance to be the first faculty member hired to teach in a new leadership doctoral program at the University of St Thomas (UST), in Minnesota. The program was novel in many ways during a period – the 1980s – when the Carnegie Institution was calling for new models for practitioner-focused doctorates as an alternative to the traditional, research university approach. Without going much into the program itself, it sought

adult students with leadership experience but without a theoretical framework for making much sense of it. Its curriculum and faculty represented a broad swath of disciplinary backgrounds, while the program included a structured pathway for taking courses throughout the university's schools and colleges. The core curriculum emphasized critically reflective research and analysis, in at least some of the courses using "live" cases culled from the student's current or former actual experience. This method of case work differs markedly from most professional school approaches to case studies (e.g., in business or law). Instead of prefabricated (or historical) data and issues for analytic consideration, the biggest challenge my students face is deciding which types of data are most relevant, and what they suggest is the real issue in play.

The students' dissertations have generally consisted of nicely done case analyses of their own organizations' dilemmas. However, this outcome does not simply emerge full-grown. The courses serve as workshops for developing the necessary skills to accomplish this task. I designed and teach a number of these, and they have generated a wide spectrum of student responses. These have included frustration, fear, and confusion (that the literature on adult education sometimes terms "the imposter syndrome"),² but in the end the result for most is bemused acknowledgment of success. Unlike most other such programs at the time, the UST program did not emphasize K-12 school administration, although a significant percentage of its students hailed from this context. Instead the faculty learned over time to adapt their disciplinary backgrounds and research to assist students in the framing of their dissertations across a number of occupational sectors. This faculty willingness to encourage students to study a personally experienced problem of leadership practice represented another stark contrast with most doctoral programs in leadership at the time. A hallmark of graduates' account of the program's effects is its "transformational" results on their thinking.

Ultimately transformational or not, I struggled with how to best package the blend of interdisciplinary traditions and research techniques this "live dilemma" approach to the field of leadership required. No single text encompassed it, although I found individual texts that captured parts of it. The *Sociological Imagination* was one, and others emerge in the chapters that follow. It was only after an eight-year period as department chair that I decided I could not put off a bona fide synthesis of the content and research methods I had been using for almost 30 years.

Put as succinctly as possible, this book discusses the interdisciplinary blend of social science and history of religions that I have found captures the necessary balance between art and science in analyzing "messy" leadership dilemmas. As distinct from the usual topics discussed in organizational

theory, management, and administration coursework, messy dilemmas loom large and stormy on the immediate horizon. They often concern a major structural mismatch between an organization's stated goals and its everyday life; or the imminent discontinuity between organizational history and an uncertain future. In some literature – particularly concerning risk assessment – such events are often referred to as “black swans” because they occur so infrequently that there is no roadmap for predicting or negotiating them.

This book takes a somewhat similar stance on the biggest leadership dilemmas. Yes, they fit the general description of black swan events. However, they are much more frequent in organizational life than the leadership literature usually acknowledges.

Such dilemmas resist conventional leadership theory and maxims because they go to the core of an organization's structural DNA and shake it. As will become clear in the following pages, such dilemmas often most directly concern fundamental beliefs and revered practices, although their presenting symptoms appear as troubling financial or other conventional data. This means that truly messy leadership dilemmas contain an inherent element of morality; fundamental assumptions being violated or in the process of total collapse.

Put another way, this book addresses how to go about making sense of the kinds of situations that can easily become case studies in how not to be a real leader. Although written for academic researchers of such situations, I had my students in mind; many of whom will only use what they have learned to work their way out of such situations better when they encounter them. I plan to use it as a textbook while continuing to work with such students.

HOW THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS FIT TOGETHER

The main argument of Chapter 2 is that the definition and theoretical foundations of the field of leadership studies are wobbly. As virtually all literature on the subject admits, it has thus far even resisted a common definition of leadership. In its stead two broad schools of thought uneasily co-exist. One stresses its esthetic and humanistic side and the other mightily strives to pin it down to principles susceptible to conventional scientific modeling.

This book takes an in-between position on the best way to understand and study leadership. Building on those within the American philosophy tradition who have stressed the contextually grounded, pragmatic character of professional knowledge, it also espouses Bent Flyvbjerg and others

who have called into question the social sciences' abandonment of their core identities in favor of emulating the methods of conventional science. Harkening to Aristotle's rejection of his mentor Plato's reliance on abstract theory over empirical observation, Flyvbjerg has proposed an Aristotelian middle way for social science suggested by Aristotle's argument for a type of knowledge in between scientific truth and skillful (craft) practice. After discussing Aristotle's argument for such in-between knowledge, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the scientific versus humanities-informed approaches to leadership. It concludes by echoing Flyvbjerg's call for a contemporary version of *phronesis*. It foregrounds power, which is usually consigned to the realm of irrelevant "extraneous variable" in conventional science.

Chapter 3 discusses Emile Durkheim and his students, the theoretical foundation that informs the leadership imagination. This school is often characterized as rejecting traditional religion in favor of a hegemonic secularism. However, in reality its proponents have studied the essential presence of myth and ritual discourse – acknowledged or not – in all groups' construction of a collective identity. While not a believer himself, the theory Durkheim constructed continues to support analysis of overt and unacknowledged religious patterns manifested in many arenas. Moreover, Durkheimian analysis works well at much smaller scales of social action than Durkheim himself studied.

Chapter 4 discusses power as framed within three subsequent theoretical traditions key to understanding and using the leadership imagination in research. The first of these is that of Erving Goffman, an American sociologist who fused Durkheimian theory with the microinteractionist tradition often identified with the Chicago Department of Sociology (see note 1 on page 76). His work emphasized the small scale and performative structure of everyday life.

Bruce Lincoln's opus comprises the second tradition discussed in Chapter 4. His unorthodox approach to the history of religions results in an interpretation of discourse that emphasizes its power dynamics. Lincoln's injection of Marxian premises into Durkheim's theory of cultural representations becomes particularly useful in analyzing the quasi-mythic discourse that often goes unnoticed in group life.

The third theorist considered is Pierre Bourdieu. He was a polymath who developed a number of useful concepts for analyzing the situated character of social actors and activities. His work further strengthens the application of Durkheim and Marx to smaller group settings than either theorist directly addressed.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the methodological premises for the kind of leadership research I have in mind. It does so in an unor-

thodox manner; more as an opinionated commentary than conventional methodological discussion as found in a journal. Rather than restate the usual assumptions and strategies used in case research, this chapter accents certain approaches that prove particularly useful in leadership imagination research. The resultant methodological orientation best aligns with this book and its mode of analysis, which is formally termed “taxonomic leadership analysis.”

Chapters 1–5 concern the theoretical and methodological premises of the leadership imagination approach to studying leadership. Chapters 6 through 8 provide extended examples of how the resulting analysis work and why. Chapters 6 and 7 each provide an illustrative case study of contemporary dilemmas with deep historical roots. They also include discussions of suggested implications for leadership responses set for specific organizational contexts of leadership. These chapters serve to make concrete the ultimately practical goal of the book, which is to increase the percentage of messy leadership dilemmas that get successfully resolved. The case studies also underscore the interlocking character of messy leadership dilemmas. Even in a setting seemingly far removed from international or national issues, a leader exercising the leadership imagination needs to understand the history that informs a specific situation. It can become the crucial difference between successfully resolving it or not.

Chapter 6 focuses on the USA and its continuing struggle with the racism built into its national history. The chapter begins by discussing how combating lingering racism became identified with public school busing, and how by the end of the twentieth century that strategy had become untenable. It then analyzes the national political discourses that addressed racism and other key social issues. After a brief period of intense federal mobilization to redress lingering racism and widespread poverty during the “Great Society” legislation and policies of the 1960s, civil rights and other welfare programs gradually receded until actively resisted by Reagan era New Republicanism. This latter set of political and economic beliefs consigned civil rights and welfare programs to the purported virtues of the free market. The chapter concludes with specific implications for leaders at two levels of organizational life. The first is regional and national policy, and the second a hypothetical urban secondary school.

Chapter 7 analyzes global terrorist violence. While it originally focuses on the Islamic Fundamentalism with which such acts are usually associated, the discussion moves beyond consideration of it to include other varieties of contemporary fundamentalism. Although often phrased in highly religious terms, contemporary fundamentalisms’ real enemy is the disruptive changes wrought by unregulated global capitalism. The chapter analyzes the logic of anti-globalism mythic discourse. After the initial

international focus, Chapter 7 discusses how these trends present themselves in the specific nation-state of contemporary France.

This focus serves two purposes. The first is to observe how core elements of Durkheim's theory – which is closely connected to the motifs of the French Revolution – have played out in France. Second, situating the analysis in France affords the opportunity to consider that country's response to accommodating its restive, mostly Algerian, Muslim immigrants. The chapter concludes by discussing implications for those in leadership positions at three organizational levels. These include international financial agencies and organizations, the French national government, and a Parisian secondary school.

Finally, Chapter 8 provides a summative overview of how the leadership imagination informs a distinctive form of leadership analysis. It quickly outlines how the methodological tips presented in Chapter 5 are manifested in the case studies discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. It also recapitulates how the interlocking theories were used in the analyses. Finally, it discusses how the same principles apply to the scale of a specific business, non-profit, school or other organization.

Before concluding here, some final words on how to read this book. Since the theory on which the leadership imagination relies does not neatly fit within any one college (or even graduate level) university curricula, the subsequent chapters may at first appear a bit dense. In anticipation of that likelihood, Chapter 3 begins by framing the work of Durkheim and his school within its historical milieu. Chapter 4 does so as well concerning each of the three theorists discussed. Meanwhile, should you yearn for a visual representation of how the various theories work together – as I would – check out Figure 4.1. You might even want to do that now.

NOTES

1. See LaMagdeleine (1977, 1984). The first references my master's thesis and the second my dissertation.
2. See Brookfield's *The Skillful Teacher* (1990, pp. 44–5).