

# The Leader Label: Influencing Perceptions, Reality and Practice

By **J. David Zacko-Smith, M.P.A.**

---

*Academic Citation:* J. David Zacko-Smith, “The Leader Label: Influencing Perceptions, Reality and Practice,” Kravis Leadership Institute, *Leadership Review*, Vol. 7, Summer 2007, pp. 75-88.

*About the author:* **J. David Zacko-Smith** is a third year doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Seattle University, where he received his Master of Public Administration (MPA) Degree in 2004. His research focuses on leadership and education, and he is particularly interested in social constructionism, the power of language, and issues of social justice. Zacko-Smith has presented at numerous conferences, most recently at the International Leadership Association’s annual conference in Chicago, Illinois. E-mail: [jdzs@mac.com](mailto:jdzs@mac.com)

*Keywords:* leaders, leadership, language, social construction, metaphor, story

---

**Abstract:** Utilizing a social constructionist framework under which “leader” is a highly pliable construct, and is something created, enhanced, mitigated or destroyed via language, this research explores how the use of metaphor and story can alter leadership perceptions, framing a more flexible notion of leadership as being the most compatible with increasingly flat and interconnected contexts. Conventional understandings of leaders are themselves metaphorical in nature; the leader is actually in the lead, the first to move forward. This image is appropriate for certain circumstances, but may be less relevant today because it implies hierarchy, connotes exclusivity, and ignores the necessity of flexibility. This research challenges conventional leadership metaphors, reframes the construct of “leader” as available to everyone, and allows us to re-shape our individual and collective leadership stories.

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of the International Leadership Association’s most recent annual conference, which was held in early November, 2006 in Chicago, was “Leadership at the Crossroads”. This theme is metaphorical in nature (leadership is personified, and a “mental picture” is created) and its use highlights the fact that metaphor exerts a strong influence on how we understand our world. Our understandings, in turn, directly affect our lived reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and determine how we function within it. Metaphor is powerful because it allows us to see one thing in terms of another, permitting novel and multi-faceted views, and, quite often, allowing understanding that would have otherwise been impossible. The metaphor seen in this conference’s theme displays its power by directly challenging us on several levels; it requires that we make a choice regarding the direction that we want to go as leaders, leader educators, and as leader-mentors working in various professional arenas (Zacko-Smith, 2006). The metaphor positions us to take action, and thereby exerts a direct

and very real influence on our lives. The purpose of this article reflects the challenges present in the “Leadership at the Crossroads” theme, hopefully helping to prompt an individual and collective shift in our understanding about what leadership “is”. Since our perceptions create what we know to be real, altering our perceptions ultimately (and often automatically) alters our practice (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

In *The World is Flat*, Friedman (2006), suggests that the nature of our relationship with one another has been fundamentally changed, and that we are now being called to relate, and thus, by implication, also being called to lead, in ways that honor a new paradigm; this paradigm runs counter to hierarchical structure, embraces an ever growing interconnectedness, and acknowledges that leadership is not only the product of social interaction, but that it actually must be viewed this way if we are to thrive in increasingly “flat” contexts. Over the last two decades in particular, leadership researchers have been acknowledging the social and “created” nature of leadership at an increasing rate. For example, Heifetz (1994), admits that “. . . there is obviously a great deal of plasticity to many of our realities . . .” (p. 26-27), embracing the fluidity present in emerging social frameworks, and implying that functioning successfully in such frameworks requires understanding leadership in equally fluid ways. Thus, an increasingly interconnected society, if it is to witness progress (however one may define that concept), must not, primarily out of habit, but perhaps also out of fear and an addiction to power (Foucault, 1972) continue to cling to views of leaders and leadership practice that exclude, segment, silence, and exist in solitude. Ever changing societal contexts (and by this I mean the establishment of a society that is becoming hyper-diverse and more homogenous, primarily due to globalization, technological advances, and a more educated population) will no longer tolerate mismatches between form and function, but will require more flexible leadership approaches in order to progress. Far too many organizations pay lip-service to the social nature of leadership, changing neither the way they lead nor the organizational structure they lead within, leaving in place a practice and frame that are contrary to the emerging reality (Heifetz, 1994), and thus counterproductive. Understanding leadership and organizational life as socially constructed realities that are able to be created and re-created as deemed necessary, allows us to position ourselves and our organizations in ways that are compatible with how we are relating and achieving “productive excellence” in this new interconnected and globalized era.

In researching various definitions of pluralism, I found myself admiring the definition of “cultural pluralism” put forward in 2004 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It succinctly stated,

In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential that persons and groups having plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities should live together in harmonious interaction and proper accord. Policies that seek the integration and participation of all citizens are an earnest of social cohesion, vitality of civil society and peace. Defined in this way, cultural pluralism is the policy offshoot of cultural diversity. Since it is inseparable from a democratic context, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and the flowering of the creative potential that sustains life in society.

This definition of pluralism is linked directly to notions of human creative potential, inferring, though perhaps indirectly, that our creative abilities are what “sustain life in society”. This

notion of creative potential is at the heart of this research. Social Constructionism, which will be discussed in more detail shortly, holds that our reality is born through our individual and collective perceptions, which, in turn, are shaped by interactions with other people, with our environment, and ultimately by the language we use. This fact has myriad implications for all segments of society, from the theorist to the practitioner, from the philosopher to the CEO. In particular, here in the United States, where individualism is celebrated “cowboy style”, we are finding that leadership is now steeped in what can only be described as a set of inappropriate metaphors. These metaphors often fuel competition instead of collaboration, are predetermined instead of emergent, and position us to act in ways that are unmatched to increasingly interconnected environments.

The epistemology of social constructionism, which Patton (2002) identifies as one of 8 theoretical traditions in qualitative inquiry, is the framework upon which this research is based. It is one of three parts of a linkage that will be outlined as we progress; the other two parts of the linkage are metaphor and story-making, which I have merged into a single concept termed “metaphorical story-making<sup>(i)</sup>” (Zacko-Smith, 2006). This concept can be described, quite simply, as the creation of a personal story around a metaphor or set of metaphors. This linkage serves as a tool that leadership practitioners, researchers and educators can use to influence perceptions, and thus to alter the lived reality that results from them. The power of language is virtually limitless in influence, and in the present time and well into the future, being a “leader” will require an understanding of the power of language, and the conscious recognition of just how language influences our notions of what is or is not real. Social Constructionism allows us to understand leadership as a flexible concept; it can help us match our actions to the demands of changing, diverse and interconnected contexts, and, ultimately, it permits the re-creation of the contexts themselves if we deem it beneficial. As Heifetz (1994) acknowledges regarding his own work, this exploration “...represents theory-building – an effort to provide a powerful and practical conceptual framework from which to launch more focused empirical research” (p. 8). This article should be seen as sharing this goal; theory generates practice, and practice, in turn, helps us to influence and refine theory. This is a creative relationship none of us could live without.

## BACKGROUND

In *Mind and Matter*, Schrodinger (1958) stated, “every man’s world is and always remains a construct of his mind and cannot be proved to have any other existence” (p. 52). Assertions such as this one prompt serious reflection; and in this case we are required to focus specifically upon the implications of such assertions for a world as dominated by diversity as the one we are witnessing right now. Relationships are becoming increasingly connected, myopic approaches are proving unstable or untenable, and limited perceptions are being challenged by demands for increased flexibility and inclusion.

These types of challenges require that we look beyond what has worked in the past, actively seeking new explanations of how we author our lives. For instance, educational leadership researchers Bishop, Foster and Jubala (in Capper, 1993, pp. 173-202), discuss the concept of the social construction of disability in education, broadly inferring that the conceptualization of “disability” rests much more with the perceiver as a result of the boundaries established by society than it does with the individual who has been “labeled” as such. They contend that if

the boundaries that define disability were broadened, we might discover those formerly perceived to be “disabled” were, in fact, just as “able” as all of those “non-disabled” people around them. To put it another way, the authors are asserting that those we would refer to as disabled have been subjected to social construction; the perception of disability is non-existent without its socially created and accepted parameters. Viewed from this perspective, disability is an empty label. During substantial research on social constructionism prompted by this notion, it became apparent that we may be overdue in using it as a base from which to examine leadership, too.

There have been a number of researchers who have explored the social construction of reality, in particular since the treatise *The Social Construction of Reality* by Berger and Luckmann (1966) established the use of the epistemology in the field of sociology, and Kuhn (1970, cited in Patton, 2002) established the use of constructionism in the realm of science with the publication of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The comparison of the perception “disability is essential” versus “disability is constructed” that was touched upon a moment ago, greatly increased my personal interest in the concept of social constructionism (which is seen as a child of post-modernism<sup>(ii)</sup>), and led me to examine the epistemology in light of emerging views about leadership.

For the purposes of this article, post-modernism is a concept first popularized by social theorist Lyotard (1979/1984) after the translation of his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which is based, in part, on his 1979 report to the Universities Council of the Government of Quebec. In this report, Lyotard indicated that the “big picture” view of society taken by modernism was being replaced by a “whole range of ‘competing small stories’... [which makes it] very hard to mount a modernist universal call for justice and truth when so many cannot agree over what these things are or indeed over whether they exist at all” (O’Farrell, 1999, p. 9). In essence, under postmodernism, subjectivity is elevated to primacy over objectivity, with the acknowledgement that multiple competing viewpoints are replacing the pursuit of any singular truth. This embrace of subjectivity means that many of our traditional understandings regarding leaders may be seen as being called into question. Hence, I found myself asking how leadership practitioners and educators might be able to alter understandings of what leaders “are” if they were seen as socially constructed and thus had no essential nature or inherent properties. And, how could such changes in understanding affect our larger society?

As Gergen (1999) stated when discussing the failure of narrow, objective and modernist systems and called for new ways of comprehending the world, “. . . the grand institutions of science, religion, government, education - designed for the benefit of all - have not only fallen dramatically short of their aims, but often seem to generate oppression, environmental degrading, and armed warfare” (p. 4). We need leaders and leader educators who recognize that the old systems, those grounded in individualism and essentialism, are no longer viable on their own.

Morgan (1997) echoes the need to be able to question, in particular during times of rapid contextual flux like many of us are experiencing today. He states, “in times of change it is vital to be in touch with the assumptions and theories that are guiding our practice and to be

able to shape and reshape them for our different ends” (p. 376). Implicit in this discussion is the notion that as leaders we must be fluid, and as teachers and leader mentors we must train future leaders in the value and need for such fluidity. Traditional leadership, management, and other perspectives often “lock us into fixed [perceptual] frameworks. They offer a way of seeing that in effect says, ‘this is *the* way to see’. As a result, we often get trapped by the metaphors on which they are based” (Morgan, 1997, p. 376). Social Constructionism, and as will be seen, metaphor and story-making, offer one way to escape this limiting myopia. Taking a constructionist approach allows us to see the value of viewing leadership as being a result of social processes. In examining how such processes influence leadership perceptions, we escape the focus on the traits, behaviors, and individual relationships of those engaged in it, as has been seen in the more “traditional” (for example, trait centered) leadership research. We are able to realize that leadership emerges in a full range of ways, and that it is not confined to any singular context, approach, or perspective, reliant on a multitude of specific and/or pre-defined personal or environmental traits, or subject to static and inflexible societally defined frameworks.

While he outlined what leadership “is and has been” in the twenty-first century, Drath (2001) suggested that many people are confused about leadership and what, exactly, leaders “are”. In his view, this confusion is primarily due to the fact that our ways of both understanding one another and interrelating have changed so dramatically in recent years. He suggests that our perceptions of leadership have been handed down from the past, and are, essentially, now mismatched with the contexts they exist within. Since we now face any number of circumstances where understanding leadership simply as something a person possesses or “does” simply doesn’t make sense, it is clear that many of the traditional approaches may be too stunted to be workable or, worse yet, singularly embraced. Societal complexity has necessitated a revolution regarding how leaders and leadership are viewed (Sjostrand, Sandberg, & Tyrstrup, 2001).

## CONCEPT TRANSFER

It was easy to transfer the concept of the social construction of disability to leadership; after all, is the term and concept of “leader” not also a label created by society, not also a socially constructed perception born of interaction, which does not actually exist without the societal parameters that serve as its skeleton and skin? If you strip away the socially imbued meaning behind the word “leader” itself, is there anything left? In social constructionist terms, just like was the case with disability; we may decide that “leader” is, in fact, an empty label.

Facing the prime fallacy that social constructionists seek to address when debating those who hold opposite views about how reality is created<sup>(iii)</sup> (Burr, 2003), we find an argument based upon the “innate versus constructed” duality. Thus, to those who perceive leadership as something that comes from “within”, perhaps an aspect of personality or some internal or genetic predisposition or gift, I would suggest that there has been a misattribution. Burr (2003) states that most concepts which society has assigned an internal locus are actually socially constructed and external, and she points out that “most ‘personality’ words would completely lose their meaning if the person described were living alone on a desert island. Without the presence of other people, can a person, for example, be said to be friendly, shy, or

caring” (p. 32). When removed from a relationship with others, is the concept of being a leader not just as meaningless as the concept of being “friendly”, not just as empty as the notion of being “disabled”?

## THE NEED FOR EVOLUTION

In *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership*, (Bass, 1990), we are provided with an introduction to leadership theory in a section titled “The Meaning of Leadership”. Here we see a substantive overview of what the concept of leadership “is” (e.g., how it is defined, what it means, and what characteristics it has). The outline given to the reader is based upon the vast amount of research that has taken place on the subject of leadership in the last century. The section begins by stating,

Although the Oxford English Dictionary (1933) noted the appearance of the word ‘leader’ in the English language as early as the year 1300, the word ‘leadership’ itself did not appear until the first half of the nineteenth century . . . and that the word did not appear in most other modern languages until recent times (Bass, 1990, p. 11).

Thus, we can witness not only the beginnings, but the evolutionary nature of leadership theory by examining Bass and Stogdill’s (Bass, 1990) work. Starting in the early 1900’s, leadership was seen as a focus of group processes, then as an aspect of “personality”, as the art of inducing compliance or of exercising influence, and finally as an actual act or specific set of behaviors. Next on the leadership time-line came the view of leadership as a power relationship, then an instrument of goal achievement, followed by an explanation of leadership as an effect of followership. Most recently (Bass, 1990), leadership has been studied and defined as a “combination of elements” (pp. 11-19), which at last embraces multiple theories and viewpoints, and is somewhat more flexible than prior descriptions. The Bass and Stogdill Text’s introduction ends by concluding that leadership is an “evolving, expanding conceptualization”, which agrees with Yukl (1981) in that “leadership research should be designed to provide information relevant to the entire range of definitions, so that over time it will be possible to compare the utility of different conceptualizations and arrive at some consensus on the matter” (p. 5). So, at least among these well-established leadership theorists, how leadership is defined and what it “is” is apparently left up to informed choice, which is to be guided intelligently by the purposes of the inquiry. Increased flexibility is certainly evidenced here, but these efforts still fall short. Contingency theory (Fiedler, 1967), Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey, 1984), as well as recent transactional and transformational models (Avolio and Bass, 2002), also all remain too inflexible to be of optimum use as we move into an era of heightened interconnectedness.

Noticeably absent in the discussions about leadership in most if not all of the leadership literature reviewed for this research, is the mention of the concept of the leader as a social construct, and of leadership as a socially constructed reality. Theoretically, at least through the 1990’s, the closest related concept seems to be “leadership as an emerging effect of interaction” (Bass, 1990, p. 15), where leadership is seen as a product of interaction. Here leadership “happens” as a result of social processes, which makes progress by taking us away from notions of individualism or traits, but, once again, it simply doesn’t go far enough to be

suitable. Additionally, this description also fails because its theoretical base is passive, as Bass (1990) pointed out by stating, “An individual often emerges as [a] leader as a consequence of interactions within the group that arouse expectations that he or she, rather than someone else, can serve the group most usefully by helping it to attain its objectives” (p. 16). Passivity runs counter to flexibility because it requires that leadership is primarily emergent, which limits its usefulness significantly.

I have referenced Bass and Stogdill’s work so extensively because it is seen in the field as being highly representative of the literature and thought on the subject of leadership well into the last decade. As such, it should be expected to provide a solid historical baseline against which to compare where it is we are going with where the field has been in the past. In examining the history of leadership theory, the niche we are trying to help fill through this effort should now be more evident. And, indeed, examining the literature of the period between 1990 and 2007 shows that, while progress has been made and more inclusive and holistic leadership theory has been found useful, much work can still be done. There remain a lack of leadership theory and leader education approaches that operate from the premise that leaders and leadership are socially constructed realities, and that perceptions of these constructs can be altered, resulting in new realities for those involved. This, however, is changing quickly too.

Drath (2001) specifically uses the social constructionist theory of Gergen (1999) to study leadership, defining what he terms “relational leadership forms”. As opposed to “personal leadership forms”, which focus on personal traits, a relational form focuses on “the whole system of relations . . . as the creative ground for leadership” (Drath, 2001, p. xv). In his work, Drath fully acknowledges that leaders (and followers) are socially constructed and communal.

Sociologist Deutscher (1970, as cited in Patton, 2002) made the following statement which provides a perfect summarization of the theoretical backbone that underlies this work,

We knew that human behavior was rarely if ever influenced or explained by an isolated variable; we knew that it was impossible to assume that any set of such variables was additive . . . we knew that the complex mathematics of the interaction among any set of variables was incomprehensible to us. In effect, although we knew they did not exist, we defined them into being (p. 33).

Contrary to common understanding, we create, or, in Deutscher’s terminology, we “define”, our own reality. Thus, we define a leader into being just as we define disability into being. I say that this is contrary to our common understanding because contained in much of our current thinking, and indeed in how our everyday reality is thought to be constructed as well as the way that knowledge is created and shared, are concepts like “essentialism”, “realism” and “objectivity”. I agree with Lakoff and Johnson (1980) that “such a view of reality – so called objective reality – leaves out human aspects of reality, in particular the real perceptions, conceptions, motivations and actions that constitute most of what we experience” (p. 146). This allows us to ask just how real is a reality that does not take human perceptions into account when asserting itself upon us.

The issue here is not one of truth or fiction regarding traditional concepts of leadership, but that anchoring leadership in an essentialist framework creates an unnecessary, and as will be

revealed, also untrue, “either/or” dichotomy, making the role of leader available to some, but not to others. Leadership becomes anchored at the extremes, and its practice and study moves directly into the realm of the outdated.

The effort to move away from traditional essentialist-based concepts of leaders and leadership, and from primarily objective inquiry, and thus to re-define the role of leader as being available to everyone in any situation, is grounded by two things. The first is a concept, social constructionism, as touched upon earlier, which serves as the base from which to begin examining leadership. It acts as a lens and assists us in seeing leaders in a novel way (Burr, 1995). This ability is, in itself, metaphorical in nature. The second is a tool (Morgan, 1997) that we can use to influence perceptions of leaders, and this tool will be referred to here as metaphorical story-making<sup>(iv)</sup> Prior to discussing the relationship between the concept and the tool, a brief exploration of the three areas of primary importance in this linkage (social constructionism, metaphor, and story-making) will be conducted. Ultimately I will show how the tool of metaphorical story-making can provide us with the opportunity to alter perceptions of leaders, altering our leadership realities in the process.

## OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

### *Social Constructionism*

We can identify four basic assumptions of a social constructionist epistemological position (Burr, 2003): first, it takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge; second, it establishes historical and cultural specificity; third, it sustains knowledge through social processes (particularly discourse and language); and forth it asserts that knowledge and action go together (discourse positions actors). Using a social constructionist lens, we see that a high level of subjectivity is evident when examining any construct, whether it’s the disabled or the leader that’s the subject of examination. We see that the existence of any absolute definition or essential truth regarding basically everything<sup>(v)</sup> is quickly called into question, and may be, in fact, completely impossible to find. In the case of leadership, we see that there is no “real” leader possible because, by following the logic of the four basic assumptions outlined above, we are left with a subjective, historically and culturally specified discourse-generated examinee. As a post-modernist epistemology, social constructionism rejects the notion of any “overarching orderly schema and explanation...[and it] frees society at least to some extent from the tyranny of one voice, one ideology, and one set of meanings” (O’Farrell, 1999, p. 9).

This is not an attempt to assert the value or lack of value of any particular social construct, or to critique and debate social constructionism itself. It is, however, an attempt to show how adopting this epistemology while showcasing a specific social construct, in this case the one known to us as “leader”, can enhance or diminish that construct by prompting the actor to take or avoid taking certain actions. As a construct that fully owes its existence to social definition, a leader can be created or destroyed using the tools central to social constructionism; interaction and discourse<sup>(vi)</sup> In her text *Social Constructionism*, Burr (2003) comments skillfully on the power and nature of discourse, stating,

A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event, person or class of persons, a particular way of representing it in a certain light. If we accept the view . . . that . . . a multitude of alternative versions of events are potentially available through language, this means that surrounding any one object, event, person, etc there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the object in question, a different way of representing it to the world (p. 64).

Evidenced here is not only commentary on discourse of a general nature, but specific mention of the use of story and metaphor in the creation of an object, and direct inference to the power of language to create alternate versions of reality.

In the field of psychology, social constructionism is generally traced back to Kenneth Gergen's 1973 paper "Social Psychology as History", where we find the first major arguments promoting the concept that all knowledge is historically and culturally specific, and that there really is no point in looking for any one particular "truth", since social life is continually changing and thus, so are the meanings associated with words, concepts and things. Social constructionism calls upon us to question, analyze and ascertain the truth for ourselves. We are urged to take a pluralistic view that embraces the simultaneous existence of multiple versions of reality, and to see that there is no single way of defining or understanding anything, be it disability or leadership. As O'Farrell (1999) asserts in her embrace of post-modernism,

Perhaps we need to go beyond the notion of any rigidly fixed social identities, no matter how counter-cultural these might be, and to engage in an on-going and open-ended process of negotiation. The aim of this negotiation would not be the kind of vague consensus which is the modernist ideal, but a negotiation which recognizes (rather than merely tolerates) differences of all kinds and not simply those which are the current flavour of the month (p. 6).

Thus we see a challenge to move beyond the accepted boundaries that define leadership (evidenced by modernist systems), and are given direction to establish new techniques that are to be applied in new ways.

Several psychological and sociological researchers, as well as those studying organizational development, have used one particular area of discourse as both an aid to understanding and thus an aid to construct creation; this area, touched upon earlier in this article, is metaphorical story-making. Gareth Morgan (1996) uses the metaphorical story to enhance our understanding of organizations by showing us various "lenses" through which an organization (itself a social construct) can be viewed. For example, he discusses organizations as organisms, metaphorically giving them life, and at the same time building our understanding of what an organization actually "is". As a tool of discourse, metaphor presents us with a powerful opportunity to create, enhance, mitigate, or destroy social constructions, including the one known as "leader". Rainier Hulsse (2003) asserts that metaphors construct reality by projecting everyday life-worlds onto abstract phenomena (and the extensive efforts to study

leadership certainly reflect it's abstract nature), and that not only do we construct a reality by what we say, but also by how we say what we say. Using metaphor is a unique way to make understandable what needs to be understood in a given circumstance; it can serve as a crucial link in the communication equation, and thus act as a conduit for construct creation. Metaphor can be used to reinforce and even fully construct (or reconstruct) an individual's self-conceptualization.

### *Metaphor*

For the purposes of this article, metaphor is defined as understanding and experiencing one kind of thing (for example organizations, emotions, or objects) in terms of another kind of thing (Zacko-Smith, 2006). In their work *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) provide a highly detailed account of just how we, as both a society and as individuals, use the constructive power of metaphor to shape our lives. In essence, they assert that what we “do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (p. 3) since our conceptual system (how we understand the world) plays a central role in creating our everyday reality. And, since metaphor contributes to and structures that conceptual system, metaphor can be said to create reality.

We can clearly see how metaphor works creatively; thinking of arguments in terms of war, love in terms of a journey, or personifying inflation to get a handle on an otherwise abstract concept are all commonplace, and occur in many instances virtually automatically. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) indicate that “. . . metaphors that are imaginative and creative . . . are capable of giving us new understanding of our experience . . . they can give new meaning to our pasts, to our daily activity, and to what we know and believe” (1980 p. 139). Again, what Morgan (1996) did with metaphorical story-making for the construct known as “organization” is a prime illustration of Lakoff and Johnson's assertions. Morgan examined organizations using metaphorical frames, helping us to understand them in very specific and perhaps novel ways. The realities created could, of course, become “lived realities” if acted upon; though I would put forward that simply gaining a new understanding of an organization (or of a similar construct like “leader”) *automatically* alters what we see as real because it changes what the construct means for us, and it changes our perceptions even before we are able to act on them. Changes in perceptions then propel changes in practice.

It should be evident then that, by itself, metaphor allows us to create reality in addition to reconceptualizing it (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). I am not insinuating, however, that it is necessarily an easy thing to change our metaphorical conceptualizations, in essence redefining some aspect of our reality, yet alone to re-define it entirely. However, the power inherent in the knowledge that reality is constructed and thus pliable (through language) provides each of us with an opportunity to make changes in our lives, either piecemeal or all encompassing. Changes that occur “in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 146).

As leaders, leader mentors and leadership educators, we can harness the power of metaphor by using it to aid understanding about the leadership role we all have the ability to play in our daily lives, and using it more formally in educational and training contexts. The simple

sharing of the “leader as social construction” metaphor (Zacko-Smith, 2006) can be a powerful experience, generating not only discussion and debate, but opening the door to the creation of new personal realities for those involved. This tool allows everyone to be a leader, and as discussed in earlier sections of this article, assures that our leaders and organizations have the flexible nature necessary to meet the challenges that diversity and our increasingly interconnected contexts present to us.

### *Story-Making*

In a way similar to metaphor, stories are capable of adding to our understanding by offering structure to what would otherwise be incomprehensible or more difficult to relate to. Additionally, stories highlight our interconnectedness; they allow us to see our lives in terms of the lives of others, showcasing our sameness while pointing out differences. They are similar to metaphor in these ways as well. For example, metaphors allow us to understand something in terms of something else, just as stories allow us to see our lives in the lives of others. Metaphors, by their very nature, highlight certain aspects of something, while leaving others in the shadows. Stories do the same, bringing a specific topic into our consciousness and the present moment, but excluding details that do not serve the purposes at hand. Stories and metaphors simply go together, and I would actually assert that metaphors create stories by default. Take the “argument is war” metaphor discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Doesn’t seeing arguing in terms of war not automatically create images in the mind? Doesn’t it bring multiple associations into our consciousness, tapping into both our past experience as well as our future thinking on the subject? A story takes shape. Look at the metaphorical personification “inflation is an adversary”, and we’re allowed to develop an entire story around the conceptualization easily in our minds. For example, we’re now allowed to “declare war on inflation”, tapping into conceptualizations we have about war. Understanding inflation in this way automatically lends itself to story-making, hence the use of the metaphor in politics. A story can be built around it that justifies, provides a rationale, and “rallies the troops” all at once!

In the afterward of their book on mentoring and leadership titled *Learning Journeys*, Goldsmith, Kaye and Shelton (2000) indicated that “in such a simple fashion, stories can convey much that other forms of communication cannot” (p. 206) and that stories are capable of “...making complex ideas understandable and even actionable.” (p. 206). Similar assertions are ascribed to metaphor. Stories can make things not only understandable, but also palatable because they provide not simply a context in which to understand, but impart believability that mere facts may not. In essence, when we envision our own experiences as similar to those of others, we often find an understanding of ourselves that may have been obscured.

Numerous other leadership researchers have used story-making as the tool that it is. For example, in *Leading Minds*, Howard Gardner (1995) asserts “leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate” (p. 9) and goes on to tell the stories of notable leaders of recent times, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi. Gardner uses each story to create a leadership reality for the individuals in his study, allowing the reader to create a better understanding of both whom each is as a leader and what leadership is and can be. Hagadorn and Rae (2004) indicate,

Human narrative...[provides] the capacity to assign new meanings to the past and imagine multiple possibilities for the future. This opens the door to regard life as a work of fiction, not in the pejorative sense of falsehood but in the ennobling sense that one can become the creative author of life and, by extension, organizations and society” (p. 55).

Like metaphor, stories are tools we can use in our daily interactions to empower those in our organizations and lives to do everything from accept change to pursue loftier production goals.

## SUMMARY

Dominant leadership paradigms are not based upon perceptions of leaders as pliable social constructions (Zacko-Smith, 2006); the traditional approaches tend to take a more individualistic, interactionally passive, and/or trait-based view. And, while some recent theories allow for more flexible notions about leadership, they do not go far enough, and thus tend to be more limited, and may still be seen as hierarchical, exclusive and inflexible. It is time to see leadership through new eyes. We must continue to push for a transcendence that will take us beyond inflexible and outdated paradigms. Continuing to explore the linkage between social constructionism, metaphor and story can change leadership, making obvious the highly pliable nature of the construct “leader”, and allowing it to be seen as available to everyone in all contexts in which they may find themselves. Leaders are social constructions, and are thus malleable. Metaphor and story-making are compatible on many levels, and can be combined, creating an even more powerful tool (the metaphorical story) that can assist us in altering our leadership realities. As Drath (2001) indicated,

If a person is not a leader simply on his or her own but as a result of participation in some relational process, then we have a new and potentially powerful tool for recognizing leadership and for making it happen. We need not confine ourselves to teaching, training and developing individuals to become leaders (although we will want to do this as well), we can begin to teach, train, and develop whole communities, whole groups, whole organizations, in how to participate in various leadership processes . . . (p. 24).

---

## FOOTNOTES

- i. The author of this paper originated this term.
- ii. Social constructionism is seen by various theorists as embodying post-modern concepts such as the questioning of assumptions and the validity of multiple perspectives. Under this framework, subjectivity is valued and inescapable.
- iii. I am referring to those who advocate the primacy of concepts like realism and essentialism, and those who favor the singular use of, or over-reliance on, positivist research approaches.
- iv. Though metaphorical story-making is actually composed of two parts, metaphor and story-making, these two parts are highly complimentary, and as is shown here, are perhaps even theoretical twins.
- v. Social constructionists do not deny the existence of a physical reality.
- vi. This article specifically addresses the language aspect of discourse.

## REFERENCES

- Avolio, B., Bass, B. (2002). *Developing potential across a full range of leadership: Cases on transactional and transformational Leadership*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bass, B. (1990). *Bass and Stogdill's handbook of leadership*. New York: The Free Press.
- Berger, P., Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bishop, K., Foster, W., & Jubala, K. (1993). The social construction of disability in education. In C. Capper (Ed.), *Educational Administration in a Pluralistic Society* (pp. 173-202). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Burr, V. (1995). *An introduction to social constructionism*. New York: Routledge.
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism*. New York: Routledge.
- Capper, C. (1993). *Educational administration in a pluralistic society*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Deutscher, I. (1970). Words and deeds: Social science and social policy. In W.J. Filstead (Ed.), *Qualitative Methodology* (pp. 27-51). Chicago: Markham.
- Drath, W. (2001). *The deep blue sea: Rethinking the source of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fiedler, F.E. (1967). *A Theory of leadership effectiveness*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archeology of knowledge* (A.M. Sheridan-Smith, Trans.). New York: Pantheon. (Original work published 1969).
- Friedman, T. (2006). *The world is flat: a brief history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century* [updated and expanded edition]. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gardner, H. (1995). *Leading minds: An anatomy of leadership*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gergen, K.J. (1973). Social psychology as history. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26, 309-320.
- Gergen, K.J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Goldsmith, M., Kaye, B., Shelton, K. (2000). *Learning journeys*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing.

- Hagadorn, S., Rae, G. (2004). Refiguring personal narrative as a path to leadership: a global perspective. In N. Huber & J. Wren (Eds.), *Building Leadership Bridges 2004* (p.54-61). Baltimore: International Leadership Association Publications.
- Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hersey, P. (1984). *The situational leader*. San Diego, CA: Center for Leadership Studies.
- Hulsse, R. (2003). Language is more than argumentation: On the reality constituting role of metaphors. *Zeitschrift fur Internationale Beziehungen*, 10(2), 211-246.
- Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lyotard, J. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. (G. Bennington and B. Massumi, trans). Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press. (Original work published in French in 1979).
- Morgan, G. (1997). *Images of organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Farrell, C. (1999). Postmodernism for the uninitiated. In D. Meamore, B. Burnett and P. O'Brien (Eds.), *Understanding education: Contexts and agendas for the new millennium* (pp. 11-17). Sydney: Prentice-Hall.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schrodinger, E. (1958). *Mind and matter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sjostrand, S.E., Sandberg, J., & Tyrstrup, M. (2001). *Invisible management: The social construction of leadership*. London: Thomson Learning.
- Yukl, G.A. (1981, 1989). *Leadership in organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Zacko-Smith, J. D. (2006). *The leader label; Using metaphorical story-making to influence the leadership perceptions of graduate business students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Seattle University, Seattle, Washington, United States.