

[Kelly, S. \(2014\) 'Horses for Courses: Exploring the Limits of Leadership Development Through Equine Assisted Learning'. \*Journal of Management Education\*, 38\(2\): 216-233.](#)

## **Horses for Courses: Exploring the Limits of Leadership Development Through Equine Assisted Learning**

Dr Simon Kelly

University of Bradford School of Management  
[s.kelly5@bradford.ac.uk](mailto:s.kelly5@bradford.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

This essay draws on insights taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis to rethink and resituate notions of the self and subjectivity within the theory and practice of experiential leadership development. Adopting an auto-ethnographic approach, it describes the author's own experience as a participant in a programme of equine assisted learning or 'horse whispering' and considers the consequences of human-animal interactions as a tool for self-development and improvement. Through an analysis of this human/animal interaction, the essay presents and applies three Lacanian concepts of *subjectivity*, *desire* and *fantasy* and considers their form and function in determining the often fractured relationship between self and other that characterises leader-follower relations.

Keywords:

Desire, experiential leadership development, fantasy, horse whispering, Lacan, subjectivity

## Introduction

Richard Barker (1997) once asked the question ‘how can we train leaders if we don’t know what leadership is?’ This is a pertinent question and as Barker himself observes, the lack of an agreed upon definition or criteria for what leadership actually *is* does not seem to have prevented a whole global industry establishing itself on the basis of providing leadership development programmes, courses, qualifications, and solutions. There is also no shortage of paying customers with a recent figure estimating that in U.S. alone businesses spend around \$170 billion dollars a year on leadership training and development products and services (ASTD, 2012). It would seem then that our collective desire and fascination for the possibilities and promises of leadership and leadership development far exceed any concerns about a suitable definition or even some reliable criteria regarding its nature and effect. Yet to ask what leadership *is*, is perhaps not the point here. In fact it may be the wrong question to ask entirely. As this essay asserts, perhaps what makes ‘leadership’ so irresistible and seductive is not to be found in what it *is*, but rather in what it promises, and more importantly in what it lacks.

Drawing on themes and principles from Lacanian psychoanalysis, this essay begins with a provocation that ‘leadership’ has no content, definition, or meaning of its own because it is merely a floating or empty signifier (Laclau, 1996; 1991; Žižek, 1989). That is, it is a signifier that has no signified; a term that has no fixed meaning and so has the potential to stand for anything. Like similar empty signifiers such as ‘society’, or ‘the public’, ‘leadership’ serves as a linguistic and symbolic container for other things; for our hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears and desires. Therefore, it is what we use this container for – rather than its specific character – that becomes important. Indeed, one of the ways in which this particular empty signifier is put to use is to create an industry that seeks to satisfy our desire to understand and learn about leadership resulting in a search that might be lucrative for

trainers, but fruitless for the participant (Mole, 2004). Of course, the problem here is that empty signifiers, having no content or substance of their own, must be represented by something else and this is perhaps why the leadership development industry is constantly in a state of flux and transformation as one fashion is replaced with another. It may also be why the industry turns to increasingly esoteric and unusual developmental practices in a bid to fill this continually empty space of desire. In examining leadership as an empty signifier, this essay explores one particular attempt to provide leadership development with form and content. The technique and practices described here have one unique quality that sets them aside from others: Here the human participant must seek to learn about the self and leadership not through an interaction with other humans, but through the development of a leader-follower relationship with an animal – more specifically a live horse. Here the author's own experience of taking part in 'equine assisted leadership development' is used as a means of describing, analysing and reflecting on the problem of empty signifiers, desire and subjectivity in the theory and practice of experiential leadership development.

The structure of the essay is two-fold. First, to introduce the readers to this unusual and emerging practice of leadership development – including a description of its theory and method. Secondly, to provide a theoretical lens for analysing and explicating the lived experience of being a subject of outdoor experiential leadership development. The lens proposed is based on a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of our shared developmental experience and how my fellow participants and I encountered and navigated issues of mirroring, subject formation, desire and fantasy during the course of the exercise. Through this analysis it is possible to reformulate Barker's question into the following response: we *can* train leaders precisely *because* we do not know what leadership is. It is this very emptiness that creates and sustains our desire for leadership as a symbolic container for the promise of a better world and a better self. However, in flirting with the promise of empty

signifiers we also encounter the emptiness at the heart of our own experience of subjectivity. As with Lacan's infant gazing into the eyes of the other through the mirror, here participants are confronted with a similarly disconcerting dynamic between self and other in which discourses of leadership disrupt rather than affirm any sense of an authentic and stable self. The essay concludes by suggesting that when viewed through a Lacanian lens it may be possible to resituate leadership development as an ethical, rather than functional and utilitarian enterprise; one in which confronting empty signifiers and learning to live with lack, disruption and failure gains priority over an ability to gain power and influence over others.

### **The Subject of Leadership Development**

We use horses because they are such an effective mirror of people's energy levels, leadership and communication skills [...] Above all they are brilliant at judging the authenticity of a leader.

Andrew McFarlane, *LeadChange*<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the notion of using horses to train leaders might be easily dismissed as a mere novelty – yet another fad or fashion in an already overcrowded corporate training marketplace (Abrahamson, 1991; 1996, Huczynski, 1993, Newell, Robertson and Swan, 2001). This assessment is understandable given that the use of animals does add a certain esoteric 'unique selling point' when competing with other forms of indoor, outdoor and experiential training products and services. As observed elsewhere, the growth of new and ever more creative approaches to management and leadership training marks a further shift towards a new kind of work ethic underpinned by forms of spirituality seeking to fill a void left by an increasingly marginalised religious moral order (Bell and Taylor, 2003; 2004;

Heelas et al, 2004). It is here that the natural world and the non-human animal may provide a potentially appealing, accessible, and suitably secularised form of authentic spiritual developmental experience that can be transposed on to any number of settings and circumstances. Yet while one could certainly include horse whispering as part of this new age movement, to do so in a dismissive manner risks reducing it to just another novelty offering and overlooks a potentially important difference: Unlike 360 degree feedback, role playing, outward bound adventures, fire walking, yogic singing and any number of similar human-centric experiential practices, here we are confronted with the living animal other quite literally *looking back*.

The problem is of course that we can never know what the animal other is thinking or perceiving and we can only hazard a guess from our human perspective. Yet in asking this unanswerable question we open up the possibility for critical reflection of a different kind in which the question of the 'subject' of leadership development becomes a central concern. In recent years the emphasis in leadership studies has shifted from an individualist concern with developing 'leaders', to a collective focus on the development of 'leadership' (Day, 2000; Drath et al, 2008). Indeed, as Barker (1997) has argued, there is perhaps even a need to privilege an entirely new leadership paradigm in which the *ship* is emphasised over the *leader* and through which collaborative or 'leaderful' relationships (Wood and Ladkin, 2008; Raelin, 2011) are understood as the everyday practical content of leadership work (see Crevani et al, 2010; McCall, 2010; Mole, 2004). This move to leadership as plural and collective also marks a shift from technical skills based individual learning to the growing popularity of facilitative group learning and teamwork. An example of this are outdoor leadership and management development programmes in which participants are required to work collaboratively to achieve a specific task or goal whilst gaining experience of an unfamiliar and challenging environment. This may involve hill walking, rafting, learning outdoor

survival skills, or more spiritual practices such as meditation, fire walking, drumming, or singing. Whatever the task, it is important that it provides a provocative experience in which the completion of the task is secondary to the development of feelings of collaboration, overcoming adversity, or engaging in personal reflection (Bell and Taylor, 2004; Jones and Oswick, 2007; Perriton, 2007). In short, this is about providing a personal (but shared) *experience*; one that excites the imagination and potentially transforms individuals through shared crucible moments (Bennis and Thomas, 2002). It is here that the mind and body of the participant becomes an important focal point for temporarily fixing these multiple sites of development by creating new possibilities for subject formation and subject development in the name of leadership (Ford and Harding, 2007). Taken together, this is what Driver (2010) and Perriton (2007) have recently referred to as a ‘subjective turn’ in organisational learning in which the site of development is the *subject* rather than the mastery of a specific skill under instruction.<sup>2</sup> This subjective turn also brings with it a need ‘re-turn’ to questions of subjectivity within discourses and spaces of leadership development (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks and Yanow, 2009; Probert and Turnbull James, 2011). Although leadership development is primarily about the development of the subject, the nature of subjectivity is rarely an explicit topic of discussion in either the leadership development or experiential literatures. Instead, notions of subjectivity are replaced with structural and epistemological accounts of how learning occurs. The most famous of these being Kolb’s experiential learning cycle along which subjects must travel in order to gain insights into how their experiences might assist in integrating personal and social knowledge (Hayes, 2002; Kolb, 1984). These stage-based linear accounts provide a valuable theory of learning, but they stop short of exploring the ontological nature of the experiencing subject itself and it is here that Lacanian psychoanalysis might have a valuable contribution to make.

## A Lacanian Perspective on Leadership Development

Lacan's work is useful here as it offers a working notion of how subjectivity operates at an ontological rather than epistemological level. Unsurprisingly this process of subjectivity or subject formation begins not in the training room, but at birth with Lacan's notion of the mirror stage in the formation of the self, or the '*I*' during infancy (Lacan, 1977a). According to Lacan, once the human infant is able to recognise its own reflection in a mirror it gains its first understanding of the *self* as a separate and distinct being in a socio-symbolic world. This moment of recognition is both a cause of enjoyment (*jouissance*) and unease as the infant must reconcile this newly discovered sense of separateness and agency. The self is now not locatable in one place (i.e. inside the body), but is dependent upon the social world to recognise and acknowledge it. What we come to call the *I* – or the experiencing subject – is therefore an uncomfortable and irreducible conflation of imagined *I* (i.e. who we *imagine* we are) and the socio-symbolic self that this reflected back to us either through a literal reflection, or later through our relationships with others (see also Cederström and Hoedemaekers, 2010; Stavrakakis, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

Desire forms the second part of our working Lacanian analytic vocabulary of the subject and stems from this fundamental fracturing of the '*I*' between the imaginary and the symbolic. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire is an expression of the subject's impossible drive to find *something* that might assist in suturing the lack created by the schism between imaginary and symbolic orders first experienced in early infancy. As lacking and partial subjects, we set ourselves the task of finding suitable objects of desire (*object a*) to fill this gap in our subjectivity. In our adult lives, one of these potential sources of resolution might take the form of self-help books, therapy, or self-development training courses. Similarly these objects might be located in our personal relationships, the development of our minds and bodies, our accumulation of wealth and possessions, career, status and so forth. However, as

this is a fundamental or primordial fracturing or lack of wholeness that we have lived with since birth, this lack in the *I* can never really be satisfied by any *thing* or person since these are products of our socio-symbolic world; products that we already know contribute to our fractured subjectivity through our experience of the mirror stage. This realisation leads to a schism or paradox that is central to the Lacanian account of the subject, in that there is no means of addressing or resolving our fractured subjectivity in either the imaginary or symbolic orders. Instead, we can only learn to live with unending desire and impossible lack (Driver, 2009; 2010). In language we are able to temporarily overcome this lack through the production of empty signifiers that provide fragile, but productive symbolic surfaces through which we can converse with others and so make sense of the world despite the limitations of our ability to fully articulate all that we are and all that the world is (Laclau, 1991; 1996).

For leadership scholars who are perhaps more familiar with a normative and positive account of the subject as a stable conscious individual comprising certain personality characteristics that can be developed and improved, this account of a fractured and lacking subject of desire might seem remarkably bleak (Driver, 2009). However, it is these notions of frustrating impossibility in our account of the Lacanian subject that provides a final and valuable contribution to our understanding of the subject of leadership development. For if the subject can never know completeness, and if its object of desire in the socio-symbolic world is always either out of sight, unsatisfying, or prohibited, then the subject must turn to another order of reality as a possible balm for these daily traumas and schisms. For Lacan, this soothing and smoothing act is carried out by the subject's engagement with *fantasy* (Stavrakakis, 1999; Žižek, 1989). This is not fantasy as illusion, but fantasy as a productive means of making up for the limits of our ability to know ourselves and the world we occupy. For example, if subjectivity (our sense of who we are) is always located somewhere between the imaginary self and our lived socio-symbolic self, then fantasy provides the productive



glue that enables us to function in the world by giving us the *appearance* of wholeness. In both individual and collective form, then, fantasy provides the productive, but temporary and fragile connective tissue that fills the spaces, cracks, lacks and gaps that persist between our imaginary and socio-symbolic orders. Most importantly, fantasies of impossible objects of desire also teach us *how* to desire and so provides a means of temporarily bolstering our own subjectivity. In this way, the three themes of *subjectivity*, *desire*, and *fantasy* provide a productive theoretical lens for analysing those managerial and organisational practices in which the nature of subjectivity is called into question or placed under scrutiny, and through which we are required to construct or encounter empty signifiers. In the following, my own experience of working with horses in a space of experiential leadership development is described. Here I provide the reader with a first-hand account of becoming a subject of leadership development and how this unique form of human-animal interaction – as well as its unintended consequences – might be understood through a Lacanian analytic lens.

### **Horses on Leadership Development Courses**

The following is an account of equine-assisted leadership development – or horse whispering – drawn from fieldwork materials collected from a larger ethnographic study of the everyday practices of leadership in the UK education sector. The study aimed to capture the lived experience of leadership by following senior managers in five separate educational institutions over a 12 month period as they went about their everyday work. Here I examined the ways in which ‘leadership’ became an important index, or signifier, for describing and accounting for other kinds of work. As part of this study a group of middle and senior managers were accompanied as they attended a government funded leadership development programme. Run by a business school in the United Kingdom, the three day programme

formed one stage of an ongoing government strategy to address a succession crisis in the sector by encouraging managers to take on leadership roles in their own institutions. The three day programme billed as a *Personal Leadership Journey* was to provide middle and senior managers with a launch pad for transforming themselves into potential sector leaders. My intention as a researcher was to simply observe this development programme from the sidelines. However, I was informed by the organisers that the presence of observers would distract participants and so I must instead become a participant myself. My status as a researcher was explained to the participants and I was allocated to one of eight workgroups made up of six participants each. As such, what was intended to be a period of non-participant observation became what Burgess (1984) describes as ‘participant as observer’ in which my fellow group members were aware of my position as a researcher, but through which I worked alongside them in their group activities.<sup>4</sup>

On day three of the programme my group of six stood in the parkland surrounding the business school looking at a large white adult male horse eating grass inside a circular steel training pen. Our instructor for the day was a female horse trainer who explained that today we would learn a style of ‘horse whispering’ that she herself had learned from famed ‘horse whisperer’ Montgomery ‘Monty’ Roberts. Through this method we were told that the human learns to recognise and imitate the sensory and bodily signals used by horses in the wild to establish dominance and maintain the order of the pack (see also Roberts, 1996; 2001). A first step towards gaining this dominance involved a two-part exercise created by Roberts called ‘join-up’ and ‘follow-up’ in which we would individually take turns to enter the training circle and use our body position movement, and other senses to guide the horse around the training space. Before we engaged in the exercise ourselves, however, we were given a demonstration of ‘join up’ and ‘follow up’ and it is through this exercise that we

began to appreciate the subtle ways in which our relationship with the animal might also influence our sense of self.

### *Demonstrating Join Up and Follow up*

Horses are considered to be 'flight' animals by humans, and as our trainer demonstrated, to establish a dominant relationship with the horse it is first necessary to trigger the animal's 'flight response' by walking, shoulders square and eyes facing front, towards the horse. As the exercise takes place in an enclosed steel ring or 'round pen' of around fifteen to twenty meters in diameter, this flight can only propel the horse around the perimeter of the space in a circular motion. Our trainer then demonstrated how using our bodies to 'press' the horse by continually stepping forward from the centre of the ring towards (but never touching) the horse's hind quarters results in a continued flight around the circle. Halfway through this process the trainer then demonstrated how aiming our 'press' towards the front of the horse can also act to block its path and encourage it to change the direction of its flight. Changing the direction of this flight at will was the first phase of join up.

Stage two of join up requires the horse to first show signs that it is growing tired of fleeing and would like to 'negotiate' with this seemingly benevolent human predator. These signs are initially indicated by the horse's ear moving to focus on the presence of the human in the centre of the training circle. This action is followed by the horse bowing its head as it continues its flight and eventually culminating in licking and chomping its mouth as the horse begins to slow down. At this point the horse can then be brought to a halt by again moving or 'pressing' towards its head and then finally by approaching it using a semi-circular motion, but without making eye contact. If eye contact is made accidentally, or if the horse distrusts its new human pack leader, then it will once again go into flight around the training circle.

As our trainer demonstrated, she was able to move easily towards the now stationary horse and arrive at its nose on her first attempt – upon which the horse was given a reassuring stroke on its nose and neck. This, we were told, is the completion of join up and is immediately followed by the third stage of the exercise ‘follow up’. To commence follow up our trainer promptly turned her back to the horse and walked purposefully across the training circle. To our collective amazement the horse followed her across the circle until its nose was inches away from the back of her shoulder.<sup>5</sup> This we were told, is a sign that you have purposeful, but balanced energy and through this have gained the horse’s trust in that it now *chooses* to follow you. The trainer then turned, stroked the horse’s nose once again and announced that we were all to attempt this exercise individually under her instruction.

### *Attempting to Join Up*

Before entering the round pen we were all reminded that ‘...the horse is like a mirror, everything we do, everything we bring into the training space is reflected back to us through the horse’s actions.’ To gain therapeutic benefit from the exercise we were also asked to think of a problem in our personal or work life and to take this with us into the training circle. The behaviour of the horse would then tell us something about how we feel about this problem and so provide a possible insight into how it might be addressed. I was the first in our group to attempt join-up and I donned the necessary protective helmet and nervously entered the training circle, trying all the times not to make eye contact with the horse and accidentally triggering its flight response. I then followed the instructions of our trainer (who was now standing outside of the pen) and stepped towards the horse which had the effect of making it flee around the perimeter of the circle. The sound and feeling of a powerful horse running in a circle because of my physical presence was at first incredibly intimidating and then quickly thrilling as I learned to direct the flight of the horse in both directions using the ‘pressing’

action demonstrated earlier. Following the instructions given to me, I then brought the horse to a halt, stepped towards it, and in so doing triggered its flight once again around the circle. After three failed attempts to approach the horse, I was finally able to move in semi-circular movements (with eyes cast down) towards the horse and to give it rewarding stroke on the nose. I was then instructed to turn my back and walk away to complete follow up. I did this exactly as I was told and I walked purposefully across the training area, mimicking the actions that the trainer had demonstrated earlier. As I reached the edge of the training circle, I turned around to see the horse's nose inches away from my shoulder. It had chosen to follow me just as it had done with the trainer!

My immediate feeling was one of elation and surprise that the exercise had actually worked. However, as I left the training circle, I found that this feeling was quickly replaced with a growing doubt over whether I had really achieved anything other than following the instructions of my trainer. In fact, to make sure the exercise worked I had deliberately avoided thinking of any personal or work problems that might detract from the task and instead focused on the sequence of steps I had been taught. My reward for adopting this methodical and compliant strategy was that the horse appeared to choose to follow me, but *why* it did this and what this meant for me was less clear. Did this mean that I was a good leader worth following? Was I an authentic person? Was I a tyrant and a bully? Or was I just good at taking orders and doing what I was told? As there was no debriefing following this session my group and I were left to privately reflect upon what this exercise might mean for us as 'subjects' of leadership development.

## *A Disrupted Sense of Self*

My own experience of this exercise left me feeling ambivalent as to what I had learned. In particular, rather than providing an insight into my inner character, the ‘horse-as-mirror’ metaphor provided by our instructor now felt more akin to a kaleidoscope as my sense of self was fragmented into competing interpretations of who I was and how I might be perceived by others. The narrative surrounding equine assisted learning is that an experience working with horses will reveal something of your true self. As the quotation earlier in this essay stated, horses ‘are such an effective mirror of people’s energy levels, leadership and communication skills [...] Above all they are brilliant at judging the authenticity of a leader.’ This is a perceptive on subjectivity and self-development that is perfectly aligned with experiential learning theory described earlier: the belief that self-discovery and improvement can be achieved through a linear cycle of personal reflection and a successful merging of personal and social knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Yet the actual experience of working with the horse seems to challenge this view. Instead of a cumulative and reflective experiencing of self as a dialectic of the personal and social – inner and outer – working with the horse in the training space served to call into question the nature of my subjectivity by revealing the many ‘I’s’ that I might choose to be. This was subjectivity as experienced through a temporary unravelling rather than cyclical growth and it was an experience also shared by my fellow programme participants.

For example, one of my fellow group members was Colin, a tall man in his mid-fifties who works as a Finance Director at an A-level college in the North of England. After receiving his instruction from the trainer he entered the training circle and stepped purposefully towards the horse. This movement immediately caused the animal to rear up clearly frightened by Colin’s direct approach. Colin then instinctively reached for the short length of training rope that was still attached to the horse’s bridle and pulled the horse back down. This created a tug

of war between the two at which point the trainer stepped in and brought the exercise to a halt. Colin looked visibly shaken and was taken to one side by the trainer to discuss what had happened. Following this discussion I asked Colin what he made of the experience. He had been told by the trainer that he had accidentally ‘squared up’ to the horse projecting an overly aggressive and masculine energy. Still upset by the experience, he added:

‘[The trainer] said that apparently the horse freaked because I gave off a threatening presence. It’s got me thinking about the way other people see me. I mean, I’ve always thought of myself as really approachable, but now I’m thinking back to how some people act around me in the college and I’m just wondering if I’m actually quite an intimidating bloke to deal with. It’s got me thinking.’

A second of our group, Maria (a local education authority administrator in her late thirties), had a very different experience. As someone already familiar with horses, Maria was able to press the horse into a run, make it change direction, and then approach it and provide a rewarding stroke on the nose. However, when attempting ‘follow up’ Maria appeared hesitant and rather than walking in a straight line across the training circle, took several short steps and glanced behind her. The horse meanwhile seemed to have had lost interest in the exercise and lowered its head to eat grass. This, the trainer, explained, was because Maria had merely *performed* authority in achieving join up, but did not demonstrate enough ‘self belief’ to encourage the horse to follow her. As Maria added in our discussion after the exercise, the problem she had taken with her into the training area was a concern that she has a tendency to try to control people and situations at work. As she excitedly claimed when leaving the training circle, ‘...they’re always telling me that at work that I’m always trying to over-manage everything.’

During this training exercise, then, we had all certainly experienced something that could be described as emotional and insightful, but these insights seemed to centre on what we lacked rather than what was enhanced. For example, my own worries that I had just followed instructions and shown little autonomy; Colin's anxiety that he might unknowingly intimidate and project a hostile masculine energy; and Maria and others in our group who found that they lacked the appropriate expression of authority to influence the horse and complete the task. In short, even though our individual experience in the training pen had only lasted for around fifteen minutes each, even this short period of equine training had raised questions over our status as complete and purposeful leadership subjects. Yet without a formal period of reflection or debriefing we were left to make sense of this exercise in private. This left me with the nagging question as to how I as a leadership researcher might have assisted in this reflection and what intellectual resources I might have drawn upon to provide myself and my group with a means of understanding and living with our various equine experiences.

### **Rethinking Subjectivity and the Limits of Leadership Development**

In different ways, each of our experiences seemed to call into question the notion that experiential development results in linear and productive cycles of learning through inner reflection. This is an epistemological reading of learning, whereas our experience of working with the horse resulted in an altogether more complex ontological and ethical encounter between self/other, human/animal; an uncomfortable experience that was more of a fractured kaleidoscopic image than simple mirrored reflection of a coherent self. With this in mind, one of the many possible readings of the above exercise is that in dominating the horse and gaining authority (garnered through entrapment and intimidation) we are able to have *power over* nature and so perhaps use this experience to have *power over* our work colleagues by



violently resolving this self/other distinction. This reading of leadership is certainly available to us, but this essay advocates an alternative reading, one that moves away from feudal and leader-centric paradigms (Barker, 1997) and towards a new paradigm of leadership studies based on subjectivity as an experience of *otherness* and it is here that a Lacanian reading of the exercise might offer some intellectually productive insights. In particular, the notion of animal-as-mirror demands further scrutiny.

As we saw with Lacan's mirror stage, mirrors have the power to reflect, but this reflection is not a simple feeding back and validating of someone's true nature. Just like the infant gazing into the mirror at its reflection for the first time, this animal/mirror reflected back a reminder of the fragility of my own fractured sense of self. Rather than satisfying my *desire* for a more coherent and authentic self in the join up/follow up exercise I encountered displacement, disruption, and incompleteness when faced with the other looking back. As if to assist with my attempts to make sense of and reconcile our experience my fellow group members and I were also provided with the backdrop of an idealised *fantasy* of authentic leadership in the form of the programme agenda and course content. Yet these structured fantasies made available by the programme created their own mirror-like tensions with my group's own personal fantasies of demonstrating our ability to be a leader. For instance, my fantasies of being in control were reflected back as a possible act of compliance; Colin's affability into threatening machismo; and Maria's consideration into indecision. Whether the horse had decided to follow us or not, we were all potentially revealed as failing or lacking leadership subjects in need of further development. Yet if equine leadership development confronted us with the limits of our own subjectivities, then perhaps the broader fantasy of learning to 'whisper to horses' promised by the programme also draws attention to the limits of leadership development itself.

For instance, we might argue that our own personal difficulties also mirror the fundamental contradictions underpinning leadership development more generally in that any form of developmental activity invariably requires subordinating oneself to the rules and edicts of the programme and thus learning to follow the instructions of others (Ford, et al, 2008; Mole, 2004). In other words, the lesson of leadership development programmes is often that *in order to learn to lead, you must first relinquish the freedom to act*. As Gabriel (2005) has suggested, the outcome of this is a form of leadership and management education is that it produces lieutenants rather than generals; compliant followers rather than dynamic and responsible leaders. This certainly captures my own experience in that to successfully complete the task of join up I first had to learn to follow instructions and then carry them out without error. My desire to complete the task correctly became indistinguishable from my desire to demonstrate my leadership skills, and yet achieving this came at the cost of my own autonomy.

Yet in giving over our freedom to act, we were all arguably drawn into a more rewarding experience through our ‘fantasmatic’ connection with the animal other. Indeed, one of the lasting contributions of Lacan’s notion of subjectivity is that subjects are not formed through a process of individuation through internal or cognitive reflection, but in and through the image of the other (Hayes, 2002). In the same way, the horse that we encountered in the training space may not have really acted as a mirror of our ‘true’ or authentic selves, but this fantasy of a mysterious totemic mirror that has the power to gaze into the human soul does serve to draw attention to the importance of mirroring of a different kind in the production of fractured subjectivity. It is here that more valuable experiential lessons might be learned through an engagement with leadership as an empty signifier. This is not leadership as a symbolic means of gaining power over the self or the other in some individualist sense, but rather as a means of engaging in rich and complex relationships with the other through the

forging of shared ‘leaderful relationships’ (Raelin, 2011).<sup>6</sup> For me, it was not always clear who was leading who in the exercises described above. Was it me, the horse, the trainer, or the organisation of the discursive and material spaces in which we were all located? Where traditional notions of leadership might look for the singular human causal factor – the lone general on the field of battle – the experience of equine assisted learning as viewed through a Lacanian lens suggests that there may never really be any reducible site of leadership power, and that there may not be any causal connections between leaders and followers; humans and non-humans. Instead, there are the necessary fantasies and seductive empty signifiers that provide a temporary means of making sense of and living with the disrupted sense of self that accompanies the practice of leadership. The developmental challenge is then perhaps in how we choose to interpret those relationships, actions, and outcomes, and which empty signifiers and fantasies we decide to indulge and which we reject. It is here that an understanding of the politics and functions of subjectivity (both human and non-human), and a subjective turn based on an ethical relation of self/other might prove an invaluable theoretical and practical resource for the further development of experiential leadership development in both theory and in practice. It is also here that the inclusion of the animal as training partner may provide an unlikely means of confronting both the limits and possibilities of leadership as both empty signifier and as an embodied and shared collective practice.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has considered what it might be that the animal other in the training space sees when it looks back at its human training partner. One answer to this is that of course we cannot know. After all, the horse does not know that it is participating in a leadership development course and it may not be interested in making humans better leaders, or more

coherent subjects, yet it in this unusual setting the horse temporarily co-exists alongside the human as a fellow training participant: a subject/object of leadership discourse that itself may demand further critical and ethical consideration in future studies and evaluations of experiential leadership development. A second answer to this question is that in the reflection of its gaze, the horse projects back to the human the lacking subject of desire and the lacking object of leadership as empty signifier. The task of join up and follow up may not have been a self-affirming experience and it may not even help one to become a better leader in the traditional and normative sense, yet in experiencing this fracturing of subjectivity, the exercises described here may enable the subject to learn to live with lack (Driver, 2009; 2010) and this in itself may be a valuable leadership quality. Similarly living with lack may be more bearable if we learn to confront the limits of our objects of desire and the fantasies that sustain us and them. Indeed, perhaps the most important lesson to take from our group experience, and from this essay, is that a more ethical kind of leadership development programme may one that actively produces lacking subjects, examines desire, and interrogates the seductive, but impossible fantasies of leadership into which both human and animal subjects are thrown.

## Notes

1. Taken from an interview in Watts, R. (Nov 2003) 'Horse sense', *The Telegraph Online*: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/2869068/Horse-sense.html>. Accessed on 29/04/09. This quotation is illustrative of the promotional materials and media surrounding equine assisted leadership development. The horse here acts as a kind of training resource that the human participant can somehow exploit for their own purposes. As this essay demonstrates, however, the lessons to be taken from this encounter with the animal may be altogether more complex.
2. The 'subjective turn' is a term originally developed by Heelas et al (2005) to describe a shift from a mode of being as 'life as' based on duty, position and responsibility, to a mode of being as 'subjective spirituality' in which individual well-being, feelings and personal experience are given priority. For Heelas et al, the move from 'life as' to 'subjective spirituality' is evidenced in the decline in the West of organised religions and locations of faith and a growing interest in personal spiritual journeys located in practices of self-development often drawing on Eastern meditative traditions and practices. This is a shift arguably paralleled by a similar subjective and spiritual interest in experiential and outdoor leadership development activities.
3. We are reminded of the limits of this fantasy when we see ourselves in photographs or in videos that present a subtly different image of ourselves than we see every day in our mirrored reflection. The mild shock we feel when seeing this (un)familiar other represents a temporary disruption in our ordinary fantasies of the self.

4. Due to the physical and outdoor nature of the exercises it was not possible to digitally record conversations and so data consisted of observations and short unstructured interviews that were collected using handwritten notes made before, during, and after each activity and which were then written up at the end of each day.
  
5. It is worth restating here that although the horse has a bridle on for safety purposes (and occasionally a short training rope), once in the round pen it is not physically handled or guided using any restraining devices of any kind. During 'follow up' it is the horse that appears to decide to follow the human without any physical encouragement or coercion.
  
6. Raelin (2011) uses the term 'leaderful' over 'leadership' to make a distinction between simple acts of influence between leaders and followers versus a more complex relationship in which all parties are engaged in a collective and equal act of leading and directing. This has many similarities to the DAC ontology as used by Drath et al (2008) with its emphasis on collective endeavour and democratic and shared leadership values.

## References

- Abrahamson, E. (1991). Managerial fads and fashions: The diffusion and rejection of innovations. *Academy of Management Review*, 16(3), 586-612.
- Abrahamson, E. (1996). Management fashion. *Academy of Management Review*, 21(1), 254-285.
- ASTD (2012) *State of the Industry Report*. American Society of Training and Development
- Barker, R.A. (1997). How can we train leaders if we don't know what leadership is? *Human Relations*, 50(4), 343-362.
- Bell, E. and Taylor, S. (2004). From outward bound to inward bound: The prophetic voices and discursive practices of spiritual management development. *Human Relations*, 57(4), 439- 466.
- Bell, E. and Taylor, S. (2003). The elevation of work: Pastoral power and the new age work ethic. *Organization*, 10(2), 329-49.
- Bennis, W.G. (2007). The challenges of leadership in the modern world: An introduction to the special issue. *American Psychologist*, 62(1), 2-5.
- Bennis, W.G. and Thomas, R.J. (2002). Crucibles of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, September, 80(9), 39-45.
- Burgess, R. (1984). *In the Field: an Introduction to Field Research*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Carroll, B. and Levy, L. (2010). Leadership development as identity construction. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(2), 211-231.

- Carroll, B., Levy, L. and Richmond, D. (2008). Leadership as practice: Challenging the competency paradigm. *Leadership*, 4(4), 363-380.
- Cederström, C. and Hoedemaekers, C. (2010). *Lacan and Organization*. London: Mayfly.
- Contu, A., Driver, M. and Jones, C. (2010). Editorial: Jacques Lacan with organization studies. *Organization*, 17(3), 307-315.
- Contu, A. and Willmott, H. (2006). Studying practice: Situating *Talking About Machines*. *Organization Studies*, 27(12), 1769-1782.
- Crevani, L., Lindgren, M. and Packendorff, J. (2010). Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 26(1), 77- 86.
- Day, D.V. (2001). Leadership development: A review in context. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 581-613.
- Drath, W.H., McCauley, C.D, Palus, C.J., Veslor, E.V, O'Connor, P.M.G and McGuire, J.B. (2008). Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19, 635-653.
- Driver, M. (2009). Struggling with lack: A Lacanian perspective on organizational identity. *Organization Studies*, 30(1), 55-72.
- Driver, M. (2010). Learning as lack: Individual learning in organizations as an empowering encounter with failed imaginary constructions of the self. *Management Learning*, 41(5), 561-574.
- Fink, B. (1997) *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. London: Harvard University Press.



- Ford, J. and Harding, N. (2007). Move Over Management: We Are All Leaders Now. *Management Learning*, 38(5), 475-493.
- Ford, J., Harding, N. and Learmonth, M. (2008). The psyche and leadership. In J. Ford, N. Harding and M. Learnmonth, *Leadership as Identity: Constructions and deconstructions* (pp. 139-161). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gabriel, Y. (1997) Meeting God: When organisational members come face to face with the supreme leader. *Human Relations*, 50(4): 315-342.
- Gabriel, Y. (2005). MBA and the education of leaders: The new playing fields of Eton. *Leadership*, 1(2), 147-163.
- Hayes, D.C. (2002) Experiential learning and its critics: Preserving the role of experience in management learning and education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 1(2): 137-149.
- Heelas, P., Woodhead, L., Seel, B., Szerszynski, B. and Tusting, K. (2004). *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Huczynski, A. A. (1993). *Management Gurus: What makes them and how to become one*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, P.J. and Oswick, C. (2007). Inputs and outcomes of outdoor management development: Of design, dogma and dissonance. *British Journal of Management*, 18, 327-321.
- Jones, C. and Spicer, A. (2005). The Sublime Object of Entrepreneurship. *Organization*, 12(2), 223-246.

- Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Lacan, J. (1977a) The mirror stage as formative of the function of the *I* as revealed in psychoanalytic experience. In *Ecrits: A Selection*. Fink, B. (trans.) (pp. 75-81). New York/London: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Laclau, E (1991) The impossibility of society. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Science* 15(1/3): 24-27.
- Laclau, E (1996) Why do empty signifiers matter to politics? *Emancipations*. London: Verso, 36-46.
- McCall M.W. (2010) The experience conundrum. In N. Nohria and R. Khurana (eds.) *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice* (pp. 679-707). Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Miettinen, R., Samra-Fredericks, D. and Yanow, D. (2009). Re-turn to practice: An introductory essay. *Organization Studies*, 30(12), 1309-1327.
- Mole, G. (2004). Can leadership be taught? In J. Storey (ed) *Leadership in Organizations: Critical issues and key trends* (pp. 125-137). London: Routledge.
- Newell, S., Robertson, M. and Swan, J. (2001). Management Fads and Fashions. *Organization*, 8(1), 5-15.
- Perriton, L. (2007). The personal becomes polemical? The problematic second generation of facilitative practice. *Management Learning*, 38(2), 155-171.
- Probert, J and Turnbull James, K (2011). Leadership development: Crisis, opportunities and the leadership concept. *Leadership*, 7(2), 137-150.

Raelin, J (2011). From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice. *Leadership*, 7(2), 195-211.

Roberts, M. (1996). *The Man Who Listens to Horses*. London: Arrow Books.

Roberts, M. (2001). *Horse Sense for People*. London: HarperCollins.

Stavrakakis, Y (1999) *Lacan and the Political*. London: Routledge.

Sveningsson, S. and Larsson, M. (2006). Fantasies of leadership: Identity work. *Leadership*, 2(2), 203-224.

Wood, M. and D. Ladkin (2008) The Event's the Thing: Brief Encounters with the Leaderful Moment. In K. Turnbull James and J. Collins (eds.) *Leadership Perspectives: Knowledge into Action* (pp. 15-28). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zizek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.

### **About the Author:**

Dr Simon Kelly is Lecturer in Management at Bradford University School of Management, UK. His research interests include the critical analysis of leadership and leadership development, and the application of critical management studies, post-structuralism and interpretive sociology to the study of everyday organization and management practice. His work has been published in journals including *Human Relations*, *Organization*, *Culture and Organization*, and *Leadership*.

Contact Address: School of Management, Faculty of Management and Law, Emm Lane Campus, Emm Lane, Bradford, West Yorkshire, BD9 4JL, United Kingdom.