

## Box 11 Leadership and Projection

Sources that stimulate projective responses in leaders

- 1 **The Institution and Context:** In my case this is the University, which carries with it the history of academia and elite knowledge, which I represent in the 'here and now' when standing in front of a lecture theatre. Each leader will have a specific context that 'speaks through them'.
- 2 **'Embodied and Cultural Self':** For example, my whiteness, my sexuality, being British, my accent denoting class and region, my maleness, age, 'able-body', each individual carries in their embodied self a cultural self that stimulates reactions in others.
- 3 **Personality:** Personality traits, 'charisma', 'quietness, calmness, intellectual capability, elements that make us distinctive. Each personality will trigger some people's feelings in powerful ways, positive and negative, and in others they will have a bland reaction.
- 4 **Expertise:** I teach Coaching at Master's level, drawing on my psychoanalytic and systemic background. Coaching and therapy can carry the mystique of the 'shrink' or of a secular priesthood, and with it the fear/curiosity of being able to read the hidden unconscious, or people will expect me to be a caring, holding figure for them. The expertise signifies meanings: a physics or maths lecturer will stimulate different reactions, an engineer or nurse different reactions again.
- 5 **Role Power:** As Course Director I have the power and authority to assess students, and position power and influence in the lecture theatre: my voice may be given more weight than others. Leaders must recognize power relations if they are to overcome bias discussions or worse, 'silent organizations', i.e. organizations with employees who speak but in public say nothing of importance or do not voice their dissent.

Leaders and followers should reflect on these five areas when in role at work, to begin to understand what they carry with them, how they use it, what biases they have, and how others react to them.

People respond to me differently, depending on their own social and historical location. In my case, mature executives with little academic experience can be daunted by 'the University'. This can be very displacing, moving from an important role, to a role where you feel like you know very little, and you do not understand the language, the academic writing rules, and the higher educational systems such as the library. They can respond by becoming infantilized very quickly. In a teaching context this is sometimes projected onto me, sometimes as anger, when they feel important, or they can become very dependent and needy towards me, and I can feel like a 'nursing mother' or 'all-knowing Gurn'. Other students I supervise, from China and Korea, often come to me with great deference. Their approach is clearly not about me personally, but about me in a role and their cultural normative response to the student/professor relationship. My subject expertise impacts on others, and this links to my personal teaching style. I work differently to many professors, drawing on my experience as a psychotherapist; I deal with emotions and the unconscious in the classroom. I am also aware of the classic 'patient/analyst' relationship as one of dependency and how easy/dangerous it is to enjoy projections of idealization. Having some awareness of my own social location gives me more room to mediate on how I deal with different individuals. I do not take their anxiety and projections personally and can distance myself from them, protecting myself from the feelings of omnipotence or from being paralysed by negative projections. Being able to reflect on the biases and projections with my students is an important learning experience, and we explore diversity in way that makes it part of the whole rather than an add-on at the end of the course. I ask students to observe their own responses and we agree on a learning contract: 'this classroom is a learning laboratory, all experience is data for learning ... including your feelings ... be aware of your responses to each other and to me.' For leaders this ability to understand projections and the idea of social location is very important when dealing with difference.

A fundamental principle that applies to leaders is that too much followership dependency undermines critical and innovative thinking, and creates a climate that eradicates dissent, or even the exploration of difference. It may feel good to a leader to have a dependent followership, but it is not a healthy or sustainable dynamic. Without critical thinking, awareness of role, social location, the issues of power, patriarchy and diversity will never be addressed.

## Space Invaders

Nirmal Puwar's book *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (2004) eloquently describes this process that marks establishment spaces, and excludes those bodies that are not part of this space. We particularly notice 'otherness' when difference transgresses normal spaces. My own experience alerts me to this as I have transgressed normative gender boundaries, working as a nurse at a time when it was a 95% female profession, and as a home-parent walking into mother and toddler groups in the early 1980s as the sole male figure. My experience of this was that I was not treated as 'me' the subject, but as an 'object' either to be feared – a threat of contamination to the homogeneous group (asked to leave some nursing lectures on gynaecology, not being allowed to work on female wards) – or in the mother and toddler group to be treated as an exotic sexualized object to be flirted with, or an object of pity to be 'mothered'. Puwar cites Winston Churchill's reaction to Nancy Astor, the first woman MP to enter the House of Parliament:

I find a woman's intrusion into the House of Commons as embarrassing as if she burst into my bathroom when I had nothing with which to defend myself, not even a sponge. (Winston Churchill cited in Vallance, *Women in the House*, 1979; in Puwar, 2004: 13)

Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* writes about arriving in France in 1950, from Martinique, a French colony, and describes his experience of transgressing boundaries and the effect of the 'gaze' of the other:

The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense that a chemical solution is fixed by a dye ... sealed into that crushing objecthood the look imprisoned me.'

He relates this experience to a 'Historic-racial schema ... a racial epidermal schema'. He was assigned ethnic characteristics, through which, he says:

I was battered down by tom toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships ... I was told to stay within bounds, to go back to where I belonged ... dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes, I am fixed. (Fanon, 1970: 109–16, in Puwar, 2004: 39)

Fanon's accounts are visceral and insightful from the perspective of how people react to 'otherness' and how this becomes internalized. One of the most important issues when dealing with leadership and diversity is to look at the spaces in the workplace. Who inhabits which spaces? Who is excluded and what happens if the space is transgressed? What happens when a woman walks into a boardroom full of men? What happens when a black person enters an all-white establishment? Does the 'other' have to be assimilated? Do they have to learn to be like the majority group, women executives proving their maleness, or black executives their whiteness? Is there a negotiation and co-existence tacitly agreed whereby the 'other' conforms to the norm whilst becoming the 'exotic other' and performing 'otherness' for the majority? (See Said, 1973.)

Diversity is truly complex, and even those of us committed to equal opportunities, to working with difference, even those in minority groups striving for equality, get tripped up in dynamics that reproduce normative behaviours. Being politically correct can also propagate hidden discrimination. Leaders should reflect deeply about what happens in their workplace, what language is used, how they and their teams react to difference, when a 'strange body' enters their work space.

Puwar finds that in Britain our colonial past stays with us like sediment:

Black bodies are represented as coming from uncivilised spaces, wildernesses where people are savages and need taming ... whites are associated with spirit and mind, representing the flight from the body. (Puwar, 2004: 21)

Whilst ground has been made on these issues, unconscious gender, sexual, disability and racial stereotyping is still very much with us.