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I, Michael Halliwell, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

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**Reflexivity in Leadership: Becoming an Ethical Practitioner**

Student's name: Michael Halliwell

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Gail Fairhurst, PhD

Committee member: Teresa Chandler Sabourin, PhD

Committee member: Heather Zoller, PhD



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Reflexivity in Leadership:  
Becoming an Ethical Practitioner

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Michael Halliwell

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### Abstract

Globalization and increasing levels of diversity within organizations have made adaptability and ethical leadership essential for today's leaders (Cunliffe & Jun 2005). Traditional leadership studies that prescribe particular leadership approaches and essentialize leadership characteristics can impede leaders' ability to adapt to unique and changing situations and complex issues within organizations (Cunliffe, 2002). Therefore, this study supports a more discursive, interpretive and situated view of leadership. Through interpersonal interviews and discourse analysis, this study investigates the leadership experiences of executives of a Fortune 500 manufacturing company. Specifically, this study examines *how* reflection, self-reflexivity, and critical-reflexivity manifest themselves in the characteristics and features of the interviewed leaders' talk. Further, instances of self- and critical-reflexivity are examined for the dominant Discourses upon which interviewees appear to draw. The purpose is to encourage a more conscious consideration of ethical practices within organizations by focusing on how leadership practitioners can engage in reflexive thinking from within leadership situations.



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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Globalization and increasing levels of diversity within organizations have made adaptability and ethical leadership essential for today's leaders (Cunliffe, 2002, 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Recent events have reinforced the need for more ethical leadership. In 2010, we saw corporate scandals and poor decision making that led to the deaths of twenty-nine men in a mining explosion in West Virginia; an oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico that killed eleven men and created a major environmental disaster; and a corrupt system of mortgage loan fraud that collapsed the housing market and played a large part in the economic recession. It has become painfully clear that organizational leaders who act on personal interests and fail to consider multiple perspectives and possibilities can make decisions, or fail to make decisions, which can result in extreme consequences such as environmental disasters, economic crises, and personal injury and death (Cunliffe, 2004).

But how should we define leadership? A common trend in the literature is to provide a definition for "effective" leadership. Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, and Ganesh (2011) point out that many of the definitions have tended to characterize leadership "as an influence process, which is inherently communicative" (p. 184). Cunliffe (2009a) adds that past research often focuses on defining leadership with "leadership principles, techniques, skills, and competencies" from a post-positivist perspective (p. 89). Here, a normative model reigns because certain leadership abilities are prescribed and encouraged above others; in other words, the goal is to develop a certain kind of leader with specific leadership abilities (Manz, 1986).

These studies are valuable as a starting point for understanding leadership, however, they are incomplete. The limitation of a normative or prescriptive approach to understanding leadership is that it can impede leaders' ability to adapt to unique and changing situations and complex issues within organizations (Cunliffe, 2002). This perspective is echoed by Kelly (2008), who notes that a growing number of researchers have "become disaffected by the research traditions laid down by leadership psychology" whose ultimate goal is to find that right and final view of leadership (p. 763). However, this perspective is challenged to the degree individuals (and analysts) vary in their interpretations of leadership (see Cunliffe, 2002, 2004, 2009a, 2009b). As a result, there has been a steady turn towards more socially constructed and attributional "eye of beholder" views of leadership (see Cunliffe, 2009a, 2009b; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Foster & Bochner, 2008; Tracy & Tretheway, 2005; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007).

Social constructionists acknowledge the ability of language to constitute reality (Foucault, 1995). From this view, leadership, or any other social phenomenon, is not an observable reality that can be objectively described; rather through language and social interactions, multiple interpretations for leadership may get constructed and become part of our social realities (Garfinkel, 1967). What leadership is or what it means to be a leader are concepts that are negotiated within day-to-day interactions that are situated within complex and changing socio-historical contexts (Fairhurst, 2007). In other words, social constructionists avoid assumptions that there are essential qualities necessary for leadership to be enacted because it obstructs other ways of thinking and communicating about leadership. As a result, it becomes difficult to provide a simple definition of



leadership from a social constructionist perspective because social constructionism examines the multiple meaning and interpretations of social reality, like leadership, that are constructed through language and communication (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). For this study, the Robinson (2001) definition that describes leadership as a form of communicating that is “exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” will be used (p. 93). This definition is preferred because it avoids privileging a single individual as a designated leader, and it recognizes the situated, task oriented, and socially negotiated nature of leadership.

Arguably, a social constructionist approach to leadership is similar to traditional leadership research in that, like theologians debating about their beliefs, they both have their own ideas about how leadership is or should be communicated. The difference is that social constructionists recognize that leadership should not be categorized as a single form of communication because that could limit our ability to recognize the multiple ways that leadership is interpreted and expressed through discourse (Alvesson, 1996; Kelly, 2008).

Further, the process of surfacing multiple interpretations of leadership in organizations calls for a critical perspective. Critical Management Studies (CMS) recognize that people act and make decisions based on socially constructed power differentials which reinforce taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations (Foucault, 1972 in Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 231). Cunliffe (2009b) utilizes the critical perspective to help practitioners become aware of the ways that they are both subjected to and responsible for dominant constructions of social reality. CMS highlights the privileged

and often unrecognized influence that authority figures and dominant discourses have on the ways that leadership interpreted by organizational members (Deetz, 2005). Following Foucault (1995), discourses are systems of thought, ideas, interpretations, and social norms that serve as resources for socially interacting and communicating (Foucault, 1995; Fairhurst, 2011). CMS critiques the underlying assumptions and dominant discourses that control organizational policies and practices in order to help leaders and managers become more aware of underrepresented perspectives in the organization (Deetz, 2005). By becoming more aware of their role in the construction of social realities, individual leaders and managers can make conscious efforts to change and incorporate multiple perceptions of those social realities (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

CMS approaches to leadership are useful for identifying and becoming more aware of the influences that discourse and power can have on our ways of thinking and behaving; however, there remains the challenge of putting this awareness into practice. One key aspect of CMS is its leap from theory to practice by encouraging a reflexive approach to leadership (Cunliffe, 2002, 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Many, like Fairhurst (2007) follow Garfinkle's (1967) lead and discuss reflexivity in terms of an actor's reflexive agency, which for a leader is the ability to critically examine their own communication and decision making based on a conscious awareness of organizational norms, practices and policies.

The current study adopts Cunliffe's (2009b) definition that describes reflexivity as unsettling the taken-for-granted assumptions for what constitutes "normal" or "good" organizational practices and policies in order to question our own relationship with and interpretations of the social world. Notice that this definition involves both an

examination of our individual interpretations and a questioning of the external social realities in an organization. Two main components of reflexivity address these related but separate lines of questioning: self- and critical-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity involves questioning our own ways of being and acting in the world, exploring our ways of making sense of our lived experiences, and examining whether we act responsibly and ethically (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 228). Critical reflexivity is “unsettling the assumptions underlying theoretical, moral, and ideological positions as a basis for thinking more critically about academic, organizational, and social policies and practices” (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 228).

Opening ourselves up to multiple ways of communicating and acting, as well as critically interrogating the reasoning and outcomes of organizational practices, are pathways to more ethical and moral decision making by leadership practitioners (Cunliffe, 2009b). Including multiple perspectives and voices in decision making means that ethical leadership in organizations is associated with core principles and values of a democratic management style and a critical management perspective (Cunliffe, 2009b, p. 120). Ethics and morality are also commonly associated with having a commitment to a set of laws and a code of justice, which are “created by the beliefs, values, actions and commitments of individual members” of an organization or social community (Cunliffe, 2009b, 115).

A CMS approach to ethics is especially useful here, because the critical lens would deconstruct whose values are being represented in ethical codes, and whose values are marginalized (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Deetz, 2005). It recognizes that taken-for-granted power relationships in organizations influence what is good and normal

(Foucault, 1972). In this way, there is intrinsic value in being open to multiple and sometimes competing value systems, or ethical codes, because it allows us to question the effects of normalized ethical codes that privilege some and marginalize others (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Deetz, 2005).

Engaging in critical and self-reflexivity in leadership provides a way for practitioners to recognize the socially constructed nature of management and leadership, which opens leaders up to different ways of thinking, organizing, managing, and communicating with other organizational members (Cunliffe, 2004). For researchers, studying reflexive thinking in leadership involves gaining access to leaders' internal dialogues (Cunliffe, 2002). In the recalled experiences of leaders and managers, researchers can begin to examine how reflexivity and dominant discourses manifest in the language use of leadership practitioners.

There have only been a few studies on reflexive approaches to leadership that demonstrate the ways in which leaders become reflexive practitioners (see Cunliffe, 2002, 2004, 2009a), but these studies have not gone so far as to examine the discourses of leadership practitioners within their organizational settings. Instead, previous studies have focused on teaching students in management courses about how to engage in reflexive thought processes. Given that the study of reflexivity in leadership is in its nascent stages, there is a need for continued research in this area to gain a deeper understanding for the ways that potentially more illuminating reflexive thought processes can be put into practice by leadership practitioners. Therefore, the following research questions will guide this study:

### **Research Questions:**

RQ1: After recalling a leadership experience, how is reflexivity demonstrated by the executives of a Fortune 500 company?

RQ2: What discourses best capture organizational executives' ability to be reflexive when recalling past leadership experiences, and how does the subject of ethics figure into these discourses?

### Expected Contributions

Leadership studies continue to evolve. The limitations of one approach to studying leadership inspire new ways of studying and thinking about leadership. To date, leadership researchers are placing increasing emphasis on studying the language of leadership, or leadership discourse (Fairhurst, 2007), in order to understand the ways that people use language to help them learn, think about, and enact leadership communication. This approach is both useful and more challenging than past leadership studies. The idea that social realities are created through “everyday interactions and conversations—” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 37) can be difficult to grasp. Further, there are various ways that researchers have attempted define and utilize the social constructionist lens to study leadership within organizations (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Together, these factors make it challenging to teach and understand the idea that multiple taken-for-granted assumptions of reality are produced through language and interaction with other social agents (Cunliffe, 2009a; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). This understanding is crucial for a social constructionist approach to leadership because it recognizes that “leadership” and what it means to be a leader is negotiated through the use of language and social interaction (Fairhurst, 2007).

The challenges of understanding social constructionism make it difficult to apply an awareness of the socially constructed nature of reality to our own dialogical practices (Cunliffe, 2002). Reflexive thinking could alleviate these challenges by providing a way for us to become more critically aware of multiple interpretations, our own ways of relating to others, and underlying assumptions of reality that are discursively constructed. By becoming aware of our role in the social construction of leadership, we are able to

consciously influence and change those realities and interpretations through language and social interactions with others (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

In this study, my goal is to provide examples of how leadership practitioners communicate self- and critically-reflexive thought processes from within leadership situations. These examples can be used to develop a better understanding for (a) the role of communication in shaping organizational members perceptions of leadership and social realities within an organization, and (b) ways in which leadership practitioners can think reflexively to communicate and make decisions that are more open to the multiple and underrepresented perspectives of other organizational members. A greater awareness for multiple ways of thinking and communicating and how that awareness can be put into practice would ideally encourage more ethical, responsive, critical, and responsible actions of leadership within an organization (Cunliffe, 2009a).

In an effort to further the evolution of leadership studies to a point where practitioners can begin to move from an outside intellectual critique and towards a more linguistically expressible and reflexive account of leadership “from within experience itself” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 38), this study will need to examine the discourse of leadership practitioners from within their own leadership experiences. Therefore, this study will use personal interviews in order to explore both self and critical-reflexive thought processes that occur during the leadership experiences of administrators and managers of a Fortune 500 company.

### **Chapter 2**

#### **Literature Review**

Leadership is one of the most commonly studied topics by organizational scholars (Cheney, et al., 2011). The ancient Greeks, Egyptians and the Chinese have all contributed to discussions of leadership (see Fairhurst, 2007). Today's leadership studies have a long and rich history dating back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when industrialization in the United States brought about a concern for effectiveness and productivity in the workplace. Scientific management came about as a way to increase production and efficiency by discarding human relations factors and focusing on a standardized way of doing work (Taylor, 1911). In addition, males dominated the workplace, and early leadership studies excluded gender differences and reflected the dominant status of males in leadership positions (Fairhurst, 2007).

As leadership studies progressed into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers began focusing their attention on uncovering the leadership behaviors that would most effectively influence followers (see Cronbach, 1955; Stogdill & Coons, 1957). Other early studies assumed that high levels of productivity could be accomplished with the right combination of rules and regulations implemented by managers and leaders in a bureaucratic organizational structure (Weber, 1968). For the most part, whether leadership studies focused on organizational structure or leadership behaviors, they were still primarily interested in identifying theories for leadership effectiveness (see Fiedler, 1967, 1971). However, following Foucault, (1971, 1972) and others writing in a social constructionist tradition, other scholars turned their attention to studying the language, or



discourse used by leaders in order to gain a better understanding for the effects of power and authority on other organizational members.

As in previous discussions of leadership, leadership studies that focused on dominant discourses were centered on the language and behaviors of the leadership actor. In other words, the behaviors, goals and concerns of leaders and authority were the primary objects of inquiry, and the voices and perspectives of followers were left largely unrecognized (see Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). As a result, more linguistic, interpretive, discursive and socially constructed views of leadership have characterized more recent organizational leadership studies in order to gain a broader, more inclusive understanding of the various interpretations of leadership in organizations (see Fairhurst, 2001, 2007, 2011; Jian, Schmisser, & Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Critical and reflexive approaches to leadership have accompanied the linguistic turn, which has emphasized a greater concern for ethical decision making in leadership.

To better understand reflexivity in leadership, a further discussion of this history is necessary. This chapter will begin with a review of leadership psychology followed by more recent social constructionist and discursive views of leadership and then critical management studies (CMS). The latter two help explain the study of reflexivity in leadership. Discursive views of leadership, along with critical examinations of power and authority influences in organizations, helps explain how language and behavior can be studied as a way to unsettle and become more reflexive to the underlying assumptions that influence the ways we think, communicate and act. Finally, a reflexive approach to leadership will be introduced as a way of using language and CMS to encourage more

ethical and responsible practices of leadership within organizations, which will be followed by the research questions.

### Leadership Psychology

Many of the past studies of leadership have been focused on identifying ways that foster successful leadership. These leadership studies are psychology-based because they tend to operate with a focus on individuals (until recently, only leaders) and their cognitive operations. They generally try to describe what constitutes “good” leadership and “one best way to lead” (see Fiedler, 1971; Stogdill, 1974; Lord, Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Yukl, 1994).

Early leadership psychology theories focused on traits and styles (Stogdill & Coons, 1957), situational characteristics (Mitchell, Larson, & Green, 1977), or contingency theories (Fiedler, 1971) to categorize and define leadership. More recently, leadership psychologists have introduced transformational and implicit leadership theories as alternatives to the traditional leadership psychology theories (see Bass, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Seltzer & Bass, 1990; Nutt & Backoff, 1997; Bass, 2008). What follows is a review of some of the more prominent leadership psychology theories.

*Traits and styles approaches* have generally sought to define the qualities and behaviors that are essential for effective leadership. More specifically, these studies focus on categorizing individuals based on psychological tests that determined their personality traits, intelligence, and behaviors (Stogdill, 1974). However, rather than identifying characteristics and traits that measure leadership effectiveness, these studies

often identify characteristics that lead to someone being viewed as a leader (Cheney, et al., 2011). For example, Lord, Vader, and Alliger (1986) identified intelligence, assertiveness, dominance, and masculinity as traits that people from Western cultures generally associate with those they perceive as leaders. Other researchers have added that people with good communication skills are often associated with leadership (Zorn & Violanti, 1996).

The styles approach studies patterns of language and behaviors of a leader in order to classify their style as being either democratic, autocratic, or laissez-faire (Cheney, et al., 2011). The goal is to identify ways to enact effective leadership behaviors. Similar to the earlier traits theories, the styles enacted by leaders are influenced by the behaviors that embody a leader's individual characteristics and ways of communicating (Cheney, et al., 2011). In other words, collaborative communicators could be more prone to a democratic style of leadership, while directive communicators could enact a more autocratic leadership style. This is often tied to gender stereotypes that classify behavior as being masculine or feminine. Masculine communication styles are described as those aimed at controlling others, while feminine communication styles are characterized as more collaborative and empathetic (Eagly, 1987).

The results of leadership studies that focused on traits and styles helped identify leadership emergence and selection (Cheney, et al., 2011), yet they lacked consistent results concerning leadership effectiveness. As a result, leadership researchers began to give more consideration to *contingency and situational factors*. Contingency and situational studies argue that individuals using different leadership characteristics can be more or less effective depending on the context (Cheney, et al., 2011). Contingency

approaches assume that individual leaders have a fixed set of traits that are better suited for specific kinds of situations (Fiedler, 1967). Situational approaches argue that leaders can make their own decisions about which styles and behaviors to enact in order to be more influential to their followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 2008).

*Transformational leadership* theories have risen to prominence in more recent years as a way for leadership to bring about change in organizations to keep up with the growing competition of a globalized economy (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Bernard Bass and colleagues have been the major proponents of transformational leadership, which they distinguish from transactional leadership, which is similar to a model of economic transactions where leaders motivate followers by exchanging rewards for effort (see Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Seltzer & Bass, 1990; Bass, 2008). Transformational leadership studies tend to emphasize charisma in the form of an organizational vision. They focus on intellectual stimulation as a way of motivating and inspiring followers to share a vision and work towards making that vision a reality (Conger, 1991). They focus on interpersonal consideration as well. Thus, the transformational leader is one who uses charismatic traits to inspire, intellectually stimulate and give individualized consideration to followers (Bass, 1985).

The vision created by the transformational leader has been described as a way of communicating the values, identity, history, individual self-worth, personal and organizational goals, and organizational expectations in a way that focuses on the positive aspects of the future path of the organization. The emphasis is thus on certain behaviors and ways of communicating that foster positive organizational change by inspiring a positive shared vision and empowering followers to feel like they are an

important part of organizational processes (see Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Seltzer & Bass, 1990; Nutt & Backoff, 1997; Bass, 2008).

*Implicit Leadership Theories* are one other major group of leadership theories emphasizes the role of cognition in determining how to judge and enact leadership roles. For example, Lord and Maher (1991) have argued for Implicit Leadership Theories, which are described as an automatic and cognitive categorization process that individuals may or may not consciously use in order to interpret leadership behaviors (see Cronbach, 1955; Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Weiss & Adler, 1981). They promoted the idea that by becoming more aware of the socially constructed nature of things, leaders can more effectively influence others' expectations (Cheney, et al. 2011). These studies suggest that people develop expectations or self-schemas for situations such as leadership through social interactions (Schneider & Blankmeyer, 1983). Markus, Smith, and Moreland (1985) have described self-schemas as "sets of cognitive structures that provide individual expertise" for behavior within social contexts (p. 1495). The schemas are then used to judge or enact leadership behaviors in a way that meets personal and social expectations (Lord & Maher, 1991). In addition, Engle and Lord (1997) have speculated and argued that individuals vary in the degree to which they find meaning from implicit leadership schemas. Implicit leadership schemas tend to use categories to generalize the characteristics, behaviors, and situations that individuals associate with leadership (see Lord, Foti, & Vader, 1984), which makes them similar to other leadership psychology theories that essentialize certain aspects of leadership.

### *Limits of Leadership Psychology*

One of the limits of leadership psychology theories are that they attempt to objectify a social reality that is constantly changing and being renegotiated. These theories essentialize the leadership process. For example, trait theories essentialize leadership by arguing that it resides in the person. Situational theories of leadership argue that it resides in the situation, while contingency theories focus on person and situation interactions such as when a strong leader and a crisis coincide (Grint, 2000, 2005). By essentializing leadership, these leadership psychology theories attempt to attribute an 'essence' to leadership that exists within the leader, the context, or both. An essence implies an assumption that people and situations have a true form that can be objectively and consistently identified

Leadership psychology theories tend to argue for a single definition of leadership and that there is one best way to be a leader. Further, leadership psychology theories tend to view communicative practices as secondary to individual and cognitive operations (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 16). That is, communication is viewed primarily as subsidiary to individual cognition, and is important as a way of studying the ways that individual communication impacts the cognitive operations of others (Fairhurst, 2007). The emphasis is on the individual rather than the context, or system (Fairhurst, 2001). Even transformational leadership theories, for all their emphasis on enabling and empowering followers (see Kouzes & Posner, 1987), still essentialize leaders' actions and behaviors in order to achieve effective leadership (Conger, 1991).

These studies provide one way of viewing leadership, yet they do not explain how leaders individually interpret leadership or decide how to communicate and behave

within complex leadership situations. Cunliffe and Jun (2005) explain that the generalizations, categorizations, and theories that come from these types of leadership psychology studies are a means of understanding objects and situations; however, they add that this type of understanding does not question the ends, means, relevance, and basic underlying assumptions of administrative practice. Alvesson (1996) adds that a grand theory and “definition of leadership is not practically possible, would not be very helpful if it was, and does not hit the target and may also obstruct new ideas and interesting ways of thinking” (p. 458). Questions of ethics are also left unanswered by leadership psychology theories, which is one of the main goals of encouraging a reflexive approach to leadership. A deeper discussion of the reflexive approach will be discussed in a latter section of this literature review.

Critiques of leadership psychology theories have led other scholars to embrace meaning-centered views of communication and study leadership from a more discursive and socially constructed perspective (Fairhurst, 2001, 2007). Thus the following section emphasizes the interpretive and linguistic turn to studying leadership.

### **Discursive, Social Constructionist Leadership**

Increasingly, more social and cultural views of leadership are surfacing (Cunliffe, 2009; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). These studies take a *social constructionist* approach to leadership in order to become more open to the ways that leadership is a situated accomplishment—as Kelly (2008) describes it, a series of language games sharing a family resemblance. Specifically, this is the interest in ways

that language and communication create multiple interpretations and meanings for leadership. While previous leadership psychology theories don't dismiss communication, they tend to view communication as secondary to cognition, and it is often of a transmissional nature (Fairhurst, 2007).

More discursive and social constructionist leadership scholars view communication as a primary factor in understanding the ways that meaning is negotiated through social interaction (Fairhurst, 2007). Fairhurst argues that we should pay attention to discourse on two levels. First is the level of language in social interaction or little "d" discourse. Second is a view of discourse following Foucault (1995) or big "D" Discourse, which examine systems of thought. These are constellations of logics, ideas, assumptions, and values, rooted socio-historically, that serve as resources for communicating actors (Fairhurst, 2011).

Discursive leadership is grounded in a social constructionist approach. This includes studying leadership as co-constructed and meaning-centered, recognizing the influence of dominant Discourses, aiming for the production of local knowledge, and examining the capacity for reflexive agency in leadership actors. Each is described in more detail below.

### *Leadership as Co-constructed*

First, unlike leadership psychology, the behaviors of individual leaders are not the sole focus in studying leadership from a social constructionist approach. Rather, the voices and thoughts of followers or other stakeholders are important in gaining an understanding for the ways that leadership is played out in various organizational



situations (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). For Kelly (2008), leadership has often been studied with preconceived notions and theories about what leadership is, and assumptions that leadership lies within the person of the leader, which can limit our ability to understand the multiple ways that leadership is played out between other organizational members in different organizational contexts.

For example, when managers' accounts of leadership departed from theoretical characteristics of leadership in a study by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), the researchers argued that leadership itself seemed to disappear. However, had they considered other organizational members' social interactions and interpretations, they may have found that leadership can be constituted through different forms of language within different organizational activities like e-mails, team meetings, or everyday ordinary work (Kelly, 2008, p. 770).

Foster and Bochner (2008) add that communication is a mode of representing and constituting reality. From this view, "leadership" could be a type of language that people create and use in order to represent and develop expectations for a particular phenomenon in the social world. In other words, leadership becomes a socially constructed reality through communicative practices with others.

Similarly, Kelly (2008) views leadership as sets of language games that are played out between organizational members in multiple "forms of life", or work activities. Language games could be understood as sets of ever-changing ways of communicating about a concept, like leadership, which shape and are shaped by taken for assumptions about what is normal or "sensible" within an organization. The day-to-day ordinary work activities, or forms of life, are precisely where Kelly (2008) says

researchers should give closer consideration to the different ways that organizational members socially interact. In those social interactions, researchers can begin to illuminate the multiple ways of communicating, or language games, that organizational members use to orient themselves to the concept of leadership. Rather than trying to generalize the way a person or group of people should think about leadership, social constructionists are more interested in the inconsistent and sometimes contradictory ways that varieties of organizational members interpret, enact, and negotiate meanings for leadership (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

### *Influence of Dominant Discourses*

Being open to multiple interpretations and ways of thinking about leadership in organizations includes being open to examining the underlying assumptions that source and influence interpretations of organizational policies and practices (Cunliffe, 2004). Underlying assumptions are shaped by dominant Discourses of the day. As described above, they are general systems of thought anchored socio-historically. Social constructionists help to illuminate that people are exposed to dominant forms of *Discourse* in nearly every part of their daily lives, and that those dominant Discourses influence the way people think, behave, and internally interpret and construct meaning. The co-construction of meaning that occurs within social interactions with others is informed by socially agreed upon codes (Anderson & Ross, 1998, p. 73), or dominant Discourses. As a result, the way we think about ourselves, or our sense of “self” is also an ongoing relational construction that is informed by dominant Discourses (Anderson & Ross, 1998).

For example, Foucault (1995) discussed the ways that laws and prison systems work as dominant forms of Discourse to influence what is perceived as acceptable ways of enacting systems of crime and punishment. Foucault compared penal systems in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with those in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and found that systems of punishment changed from public torture of the body to more veiled disciplining of the mind. Some of the reasoning for the disappearance of the public spectacle is that the savagery of the punishment became ridiculed for being equal to or worse than the crime itself. The act of public execution became associated with such violence that it seemed to reverse the roles of criminals and judges, making the criminals into victims and the judges into murderers. As a result of these criticisms, public punishment was no longer an effective way to discourage crime. As spectators distanced themselves from violent acts of public punishment, the sovereign changed from a king to “the people” and so new forms of discipline were needed (Foucault, 1995, p. 9).

Most importantly, while the methods of disciplining changed over time, both systems functioned to divide the permissible from the forbidden (Foucault, 1995, p. 17). By disciplining and punishing certain behaviors, those behaviors are discouraged and made abnormal and inappropriate, which then influences what is perceived as normal and appropriate (Foucault, 1995). Social norms, government laws and regulations, textbooks in classrooms, scientific articles, as well as organizational policies and procedures are forms of dominant Discourses that shape the way people communicate and interpret the world around them.

Leadership training workshops provide examples of the ways that dominant Discourses influence the ways that leadership is interpreted and communicated in

organizations. During the leadership training process, certain leadership abilities and styles are highlighted and encouraged above others (Manz, 1986). In other words, leadership training generally seeks to develop a certain kind of leader who will use certain leadership skills over others (Manz, 1986). In skill-building, dominant interpretations of leadership are justified as a way to foster a more positive and cooperative workplace and thus, a more productive and efficient organization (Prussia, Anderson, & Manz, 1998). In this way, leadership training acts as a dominant Discourse to influence taken for granted assumptions about what leadership is, how it is discussed, and how it should be enacted in organizations.

Foucault (1995) adds that the majority of dominant Discourses stem from those in positions of power. Politicians, news media, parents, police officers, bosses, and teachers all provide dominant interpretations of reality. These authoritative sources “suggest”, in both subtle and overt ways, what things mean and how they should interpret social and natural phenomena (Foucault, 1995). Likewise, Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) concur in recognizing that some voices carry more weight than others. As such, Discourses that carry more weight are often enacted by those who are in privileged positions, or positions of authority (Foucault, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). It should be noted though, that positions of power are themselves created by dominant Discourses that construct and reinforce expectations of authority. As a result, those in authority positions are informed by the same Discourses they create and reinforce.

As mentioned earlier, alternative meanings and interpretations that are played out in day-to-day language and social interaction have been referred to as little “d” *discourses* (Foucault, 1995; Kelly, 2008; Fairhurst, 2007). However, dominant

Discourses simultaneously constitute and are constituted by the day-to-day language and interaction, or little “d” discourses that people use to interpret and describe the world around them (Fairhurst, 2007).

Further, dominant Discourses in one situation may not be universally applicable. That is to say that values, expectations, and social norms that influence ways of communicating and behaving are context dependent. For example, on a local level, the expectations and norms within a professional organizational setting are likely to be different from acceptable ways of communicating in informal social settings with close friends or family. Likewise, debating with friends or family members might be more acceptable than getting into an argument with a police officer.

On a broad scale, “normal” behaviors and ways of communicating in Western cultures are likely to be different from the expectations in other cultural settings. Americans are accustomed to speaking their minds and having the freedom to peacefully oppose government policies with rallies, protests, strikes, and social movements. These ways of communicating and behaving are acceptable in the U.S. because norms are reinforced through dominant Discourses such as the U.S. Constitution that directs government policies, like the First Amendment of our Constitution. However, those democratic ways of thinking and communicating are not part of dominant Discourses in mainland China, where the Chinese Communist Party silences vocal opposition. For example, the 2010 Chinese Nobel Peace Prize winner, Liu Xiaobo was sentenced in 2009 to eleven years in Chinese prison for drafting a manifesto titled *Charter 8* that calls on Chinese officials to respect human rights and adopt a multi-party democracy (BBC, 2010).

A key idea in these examples is that an awareness of dominant Discourses allows individuals to act and communicate more consciously within them (Deetz, 2005). Xiaobo would not have been able to write his manifesto to oppose the policies of the Chinese Communist Party if he did not have an awareness of those policies and their influence on the way people behave and communicate. Further, without an awareness of the influence of dominant Discourses, we are less open to multiple and potentially more ethical ways of communicating and behaving (Cunliffe, 2002; Deetz, 2005).

Ethical leadership and the influence of dominant Discourse is directly related to the interests of critical management studies (CMS) and reflexivity, both of which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections of this literature review.

### *Local Knowledge*

One of the primary differences between discursive approaches to leadership and the leadership psychology studies that preceded them is in the goals of the research and the object of inquiry. While leadership psychology theories attempt to generalize leadership, a social constructionist approach uses interpretive and qualitative methods in order to produce an account of localized knowledge (Fairhurst, 2007). Where leadership psychology generally seeks a statistical analysis of connections among variables, social constructionists study texts and contexts in order to know “how leadership is brought off in some here-and-now moment of localized interaction” (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 15).

Variables such as traits and behaviors, or specific leadership situations, are used by leadership psychologists to define specific classes of behaviors (Fairhurst, 2007) and

situations which can take on different values depending on how they interact with other variables.

In contrast, the texts studied by social constructionists and discursive leadership researchers are generally studied through the analysis of conversation, written communication, interview transcriptions, or spoken discourse. The goal is not to develop a theory that generalizes leadership in all organizational situations; rather, social constructionist approaches to leadership consider socio-historical contexts to gain insight into the various ways that organizational members talk about leadership within a given time and place (Fairhurst, 2007). In other words, they assume that it is impossible to gain an objective and generalizable account of situations and leadership because there are multiple interpretations for what qualifies as a “situation” or “leadership,” and that those interpretations change across different times and places (Grint, 2000). At the same time, we shouldn’t be too quick to dismiss the heuristic value of contextualized studies that help to build more general knowledge.

Multiple taken-for-granted interpretations of reality and truth are produced through social interactions with other social agents (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Following this line of thought, social constructionists assume that these multiple meanings and interpretations can be examined in the ways people talk about their perceptions of reality. Thus, it is the language, or day-to-day little “d” *discourses* used by leaders and other organizational members in various situations that becomes one of the objects of inquiry for social constructionists studying leadership (Fairhurst, 2007).

### *Reflexive Agency*

The fourth and final component of a discursive and constructionist approach to leadership that will be discussed here is its capacity to study the reflexive agency of its actors (Fairhurst, 2007). Essential to understanding reflexivity is the view that actors are knowledgeable agents. Garfinkel (1967) argues that leadership actors are not unwitting dupes who act as the tools of capitalism, but rather that they are knowledgeable agents who make thoughtful observations of social life and conscious decisions about how to act within their social setting. Importantly, Garfinkel's (1967) position stems from his ethnomethodological argument that actors are active participants in producing and managing their social settings. Further, the inside view of the actor allows them to knowledgeably make sense of their social settings; they are not "unwitting dupes." Similarly, Giddens (1984) espouses a view of leadership actors as agents who consciously act from within leadership contexts and who can knowledgeably explain their actions. He adds that knowledgeable agents are able to reflexively manage the tensions between agency and constraint (Giddens, 1984). This means that those enacting leadership are constantly and consciously reorienting themselves in relation to "specific norms, rules, procedures, and values" that guide their interactions with others in an organization (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 14). Leadership actors' awareness of the physical and social structures that exist within an organization, as well as how to orient their communication and behavior to those structures, forms the basis of reflexive agency.

This view should not be taken as though leaders have an omniscient view of all that occurs, or should occur, within an organization, but rather that they have some awareness of the constraints that limit their agency when acting and communicating



within an organization. For example, the availability of manufacturing technologies could constrain the level of production a leader or manager can expect from other employees. Further, the desire for a paycheck and a steady job could inhibit leaders' willingness to challenge the unethical practices of a superior or the unjust policies of the organization. In this way, brute facts of the physical world and social contexts and power relations within institutions can constrain the agency of leadership actors (Fairhurst, 2007; Cunliffe, 2009b). Discursive approaches to leadership can open up the extent to which leadership actors are knowledgeable of those constraints. Further, the language use of leadership actors can highlight leaders' ability to consciously act and communicate to manage the tension between individual agency and organizational constraints (Fairhurst, 2007).

Through the analysis of leadership discourse, social constructionist approaches can illuminate the extent to which leaders practice reflexive agency. Specifically, reflexive agency refers to actors' level of knowledge about and ability to adapt to social expectations, organizational procedures, norms, and influences of dominant Discourses (Fairhurst, 2007).

However, we can further this argument by turning to critical management studies (CMS). Issues of authority and power and the influence they have over the ways people think, behave and communicate tend to go unrecognized (Deetz, 2005), which limits our ability to think and act reflexively and ethically. As a result, a critical lens would help surface the underlying and taken for granted assumptions that guide organizational policies and practices, which is the subject of the next section.

### Critical Management Studies (CMS)

A critical approach is an additional lens for a discursive approach to studying leadership and to reflexivity, in particular. Referring to the previous discussion of power and Discourse, CMS focuses on surfacing the multiple, taken for granted assumptions that guide people's thoughts and behaviors (Deetz, 2005). In organizational settings, bringing these taken for granted assumptions to the surface can provide leaders and managers with a way to engage in reflexive agency. Becoming open to multiple perspectives and reflexively interrogating our own internal dialogues, or thinking reflexively, encourages more ethical and responsible decisions among leaders within an organization (Cunliffe, 2002). This is because values can be clarified, conflicts can surface rather than be sequestered, assumptions can be tested, and leadership actors can become conscious of more options for communicating and acting responsibly within the organization (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Further, surfacing taken for granted assumptions and constraints that often go unrecognized in organizations puts individual leaders in charge of their own decisions by providing an opportunity to more consciously question the means and ends of organizational practice (Fairhurst, 2007; Cunliffe, 2009b.)

According to Deetz (2005), critical theory "assumes that power and authority relations and their impact on decision making are real, gendered, classed, institutionalized, and evoked/enforced by specific others in specific ways" (p. 16). Deetz (2005) adds that critical theory seeks to reform the power/authority relations in a way that acknowledges and considers the voice of under-represented perspectives in an organization. In organizations, critical theorists seek to investigate exploitation, repression, social injustice, distorted communication, and misrecognition of interests

(Deetz, 2005). Adler (2002) adds to this idea when he argues that a concern with exploitation and domination is not justified unless researchers believe that a better form of society is possible. Specifically, critical theory seeks to provide some understanding of how a wider variety of perspectives can be brought into the process of decision making and development of organizational procedures.

Notably, Adler (2002) seems to criticize postmodern perspectives that don't justify their concern for exploitation and domination with the belief that better practices are possible. However, this would imply an assumption that researchers actually have an objective sense of what better practices would be. The deconstructionist interests of CMS provide an opportunity for reformation, but that may or may not actually lead to a better formed organization. In other words, Adler's argument reflects his desire for one possible outcome of a critical postmodern approach.

The most basic goal of CMS is to include a wider variety of perspectives in the decision making processes in organizations (Deetz, 2005), which does not necessarily imply any value beyond the desire to make more informed decisions. Of course, it must be recognized that the goal of encouraging more critical thought processes is itself an ideologically inspired position reinforced through this study (Cunliffe, 2009a). However, whether the outcomes of critical thinking are good or bad ultimately depends on the decisions and actions of organizational leaders and the perceptions of organizational members, not necessarily CMS researchers. For example, taking multiple perspectives into consideration could simply be used as a way of placating other organizational members by telling them what they want to hear. On the other hand, from Adler's (2002) and Cunliffe's (2009b) more optimistic view, it could lead the organization to reform

their practices in ways that are better for organizational members who are underrepresented, silenced or exploited by the influence of power and authority relations in an organization.

More authority means having more influence over prescribing policies and procedures that guide organizational practices; however, those in leadership positions are also subjected to underlying assumptions, or dominant Discourses, that operate within an organization. Critical theorists recognize that power involves ideologies, knowingly or unknowingly, that guide people's thoughts and behaviors (Deetz, 2005). Ideologies, according to Deetz (2005), denote the presence of implicit values that direct thinking and action. He says that these values and socially accepted ways of thinking/behaving can remain unknown and closed off from discussion. Also, critical theorists recognize that people act and make decisions based on socially constructed power differentials which reinforce taken-for-granted assumptions of ideologies (Foucault, 1971). This illuminates the hegemony involved in the creation and perpetuation of certain Discourses. Further, Giddens (1984) notes that dominant ideologies reinforce power differentials and are a way of legitimizing the interests of those in authority positions (p. 33). In other words, those in leadership positions, or those in power, are often responsible for consistently enforcing socially accepted ways behavior and/or thought, but they themselves and their positions are formed by power.

Cunliffe draws on CMS to encourage reflexivity in public administration (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Specifically, CMS helps illuminate the social construction of reality, the influences of dominant Discourses, and the over-simplification of managerial

processes (Cunliffe, 2009b.), which ties back to the interests of socially constructed and discursive views of leadership in three ways.

First, the critical perspective is crucial for managers and leaders to understand that they play a part in the construction of their social and organizational realities (Cunliffe, 2009b). In other words, our social realities, such as what “management” is or what “leadership” is, are brought about through language and social interactions (Fairhurst, 2007). In line with interests of discursive approaches to leadership, Cunliffe (2009b) draws on Garfinkel (1967) to recognize that these concepts are not something that exists “out there” in reality to be objectively observed and defined; rather, they emerge from within dialogue and interaction. The aim here is to use a critical perspective to destabilize taken-for-granted assumptions about management and “examine alternative conceptualizations and practices” of management and leadership within organizations (Cunliffe, 2009b, p. 25).

Second, Cunliffe relies on a critical perspective to note that individual interpretations of social reality are influenced by dominant models and definitions that try to simplify and categorize patterns of social reality (Cunliffe, 2009b), which highlights the influence of dominant Discourses and the political nature of management. Norms that regulate acceptable practices in organizations tend to go unrecognized because we are the products of those normalizing processes (Deetz, 2005; Cunliffe 2009b). In other words, we may not always realize that just acting “normal” in an organization is the result of dominant Discourses that work to regulate what we think is “normal”. It isn’t until we step outside of the organization and enter a different context, like another organization,

that we begin to realize our interpretations were taken for granted (Cunliffe, 2009b, p. 26).

For example, in Peter Weir's (1998) movie "The Truman Show", Jim Carrey plays a man who realizes his entire life has been a TV show. From the day he is born, Truman's (Jim Carrey's) world and what he thinks is normal has actually been constructed around him by television producers. His hometown: a giant studio; his friends and family: all actors. It isn't until he tries to travel outside of his hometown that he realizes his perception of reality and his view of "normal" had actually been shaped by someone else.

The political nature of management and organizations implies a certain amount of bias for the goals of those in authority positions, which is often tied to the goals of capitalism (Cunliffe, 2009b). This view recognizes that power and authority operate to privilege those in authority positions, like managers and owners, while dominating other organizational members (Cunliffe 2009b). Importantly, CMS is interested in the ways that power and authority constitute and control organizational members, including those members in management and leadership positions. By becoming more aware of the influence of dominant Discourses, leadership actors can more consciously question and possibly resist the normalizing processes that often go unrecognized in organizations (Cunliffe, 2009b).

Third, CMS provides a way to critique management studies that simplify management and leadership with prescribed principles, practices, goals, and techniques that are justified with rationality (Cunliffe, 2009b). Prescriptive or essentialist views of management do not acknowledge the "complex, ideological, political and social

processes” that dictate organizational norms and expectations (Cunliffe, 2009b, 27).

Over-simplified ideas of management may also limit leaders’ ability to act and communicate within unique and extenuating circumstances that might occur in an organization. By using a critical perspective to surface and question the rationality of standardized organizational practices, managers and leaders can engage in more critical thought processes to develop alternative and creative ways of managing that can be both more responsive and responsible (Cunliffe, 2009b).

Discursive leadership studies have highlighted the possibilities for multiple interpretations of leadership (Fairhurst, 2007), and they have provided an alternative to the normative approach to learning about and teaching leadership (Cunliffe, 2002). Critical theorists have also helped raise awareness for the ways that leaders can create and reinforce dominant Discourses that can overlook the voices of under-represented perspectives in an organization. However, the ways that practitioners might use this awareness requires further examination (Cunliffe, 2002). Thus, in the following section, reflexivity will be presented as an avenue for applying critical theory to practice in leadership.

### **A Reflexive Approach to Ethical Leadership**

Social constructionist perspectives have become increasingly useful in leadership development and, in particular, in studying reflexive thinking as a way to encourage more mindful and ethical decision making among leaders. Reflexivity provides a way of becoming more open to other ways of understanding ourselves, the world around us, and

people with whom we interact (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 228). Reflexivity means “interrogating the taken-for-granted by questioning our relationship with our social world and the ways in which we account for our experience” (Cunliffe, 2009b, p. 45). Defining reflexivity in this way means that by recognizing our role in the construction of our social realities, we can begin to recognize our ability to change those realities through everyday interactions and language (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 230).

Reflexive thinking is more commonly discussed from a social constructionist and critical management perspective. From a critical/social constructionist approach, reflexive thinking becomes a way of questioning the means, ends, relevance, and underlying assumptions of administrative practice (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Giddens (1984) discussion of structuration theory is relevant here because its focus is on the understanding of human agency. Specifically, structuration theory emphasizes the duality of structure. This means that the “rules and resources that are drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction” (p. 19). In other words, a duality of structure means that our social lives are formed and reformed in the ways that we interact in our day-to-day lives. Giddens (1984) rejects the position that humans are not in control of the forces that influence their behavior and recognizes that people can consciously use language for structuring and restructuring their social lives.

Reflexivity also has roots in the “action science” tradition of Argyris and Schön (1978), which moves away from positivist research methods to study organizational change in a way that encourages self-corrective learning processes to modify behavior as knowledge is gained from trial and error. “Double-loop” learning is discussed in action



science as a way of questioning organizational policies, procedures, norms, goals, and structures (Argyris & Schön, 1978), and thus has some compatibility with the concept of reflexivity.

In addition, reflexivity shares some common themes with Srivastva and Cooperrider's (1986) description of "appreciative inquiry", which is an extension of Argyris and Schön's (1978) action science approach to studying organizational change. Specifically, appreciative inquiry recognizes that organizational members shape their social world through their own ideas and interpretations, and it encourages collaboration between the researcher and organizational members in order to gain a better understanding of the social potential of organizational life (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1986). Further, appreciative inquiry is interested in encouraging organizational members to critically deliberate the values of their organization and actively take part in guiding organizational change (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1986).

Cunliffe (2009a) also discusses the connection between phenomenology, reflexivity, ethics, and leadership. First, phenomenology takes an interpretive approach to studying the nature of experience, identity, and awareness (Cunliffe, 2009a). In becoming more familiar with our own identity, we are encouraged to question our own ways of being and to hold ourselves accountable for our own actions. For leadership, this emphasizes the notion of moral responsibility and ethical decision making (Cunliffe, 2009a). Second, Cunliffe (2009a) adds that phenomenology tends to suggest thinking of ourselves from an external perspective in order to consider ethical ways of being, which tends to remove personal responsibility. Instead, Cunliffe (2009a) recommends questioning our assumptions and actions from within. This approach is also related to

discussions of authentic leadership, which encourage, among other things, being yourself and leading with a self-awareness of personal values (Cunliffe, 2009a). Notably, having a self-awareness for personal values and being yourself requires us to deconstruct the dominant Discourses that influence our sense of “self” (Anderson & Ross, 1998).

In describing such questioning, Cunliffe differentiates between reflection and reflexivity and two types of reflexivity as the sections below demonstrate.

### *Differentiating Reflection and Reflexivity*

The action science and appreciative inquiry approaches discuss reflection as a way to become more open to multiple ways of questioning and changing behaviors in an organization (see Argyris & Schön, 1978; Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1986). However, Cunliffe (2004) makes a distinction between *reflective analysis* and *reflexivity*.

Reflective analysis is similar to Weick, et al.’s (2005) sensemaking process. Specifically, reflecting is a way of retrospectively making sense of something that happened in the past and planning for future actions. Reflection is also defined as a way of recalling what actually happened, or what was said or thought, without actually questioning the assumptions underlying the actions (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). It stands to reason that all leaders are reflective to some degree—this is, of course, central to the human experience (Fairhurst, 2007). However, following Cunliffe (2009b), this study makes a distinction between simple reflection and reflexivity. Reflective analysis is consistent with the more post-positivist leadership psychology theories that assume “that there is an objective reality that we can analyze using logic and theory” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 414).

Reflection assumes that individuals are logical and rational beings who consciously develop statements that accurately describe the outside world (Cunliffe, 2009b).

Reflecting on personal experiences can be way of learning and making sense of the world around us, but it does not question the means, ends, and relevance of organizational practice, which are the main goals of reflexivity (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

In contrast, a reflexive thought process eschews assumptions that there is an objective reality and instead embraces the socially constructed nature of reality to question subjective, multiple, and sometimes contradicting realities that we socially construct (Cunliffe, 2004). In this way, reflexivity goes deeper than reflection because it questions the taken-for-granted ways in which we account for our experience and relationship to our social world (Cunliffe, 2009b).

### *Self- and Critical-Reflexivity*

Cunliffe discusses self-reflexivity and critical-reflexivity as means for engaging in reflexive thinking. *Self-reflexivity* provides leaders with a way to “question our ways of being and acting in the world, question our ways of making sense of our lived experience, and examine the issues involved in acting responsibly and ethically,” (Cunliffe, 2009a, p. 93). In this way, practicing self-reflexivity provides a way for exploring how our personal actions can become more responsible and ethical (Cunliffe, 2009b).

*Critical-reflexivity* draws from the commitments of critical theory to destabilize and unsettle assumptions of power and authority in organizations. The goal is to recognize the multiple and under-represented voices within the organization and incorporate a wider variety of perspectives into the decision making processes of

organizational leaders (Cunliffe, 2009b). More specifically, critical-reflexivity provides a way of unsettling and examining the taken-for-granted assumptions of social policies and practices, as well as the “responsibility for ethical action at the organizational and societal level,” (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 228).

To engage in critical-reflexivity means to question the ends, means, and relevance of administrative practice (Cunliffe, 2002). In practical terms, this means thinking about and questioning the reasoning behind organizational policies and norms, thinking about how those practices and policies might adversely impact other organizational members, or how administrative practices might exclude the opinions and voices of other organizational members (Cunliffe, 2009b, p. 48). For example, we might engage in self-reflexivity to examine and justify why we respond defensively or openly to criticism from others. And in my own personal experiences, critical-reflexivity could be used by coaches on college sports teams to recognize that decisions they make for the good of the team tend to exclude the opinions and voices of individual team members, which could have the unintended effect of decreasing team morale and lowering team and individual performance levels.

Some of the main ways for engaging in self- and critical-reflexivity described by Cunliffe (2009b, pp. 45-48) are highlighted in Figure 2.1.

Self-Reflexivity	Critical-Reflexivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposing how, in our conversations with others, our assumptions, words and responses influence meaning and help shape organizational realities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deconstructing Truths, ideologies, language, overarching narratives, single meanings, authority, and disciplinary practices.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning the limitations of our assumptions and our sensemaking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revealing and interrogating assumptions that privilege particular groups.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning whether we respond defensively or openly to people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing multiple perspectives rather than imposing an ideology or worldview.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning the multiplicity of meanings and voices we may or may not hear in our relationships and interactions with others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning organizational decisions that are made solely on the basis of efficiency and profit.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring multiple meanings and interpretations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning how organizational practices might impact people and exclude them from active participation in organizational life.</li> </ul>

Figure 2.1

By using self-reflexivity to question our own ways of being, relating and acting, and to consider multiple perspectives, we become more aware of the ways that our own actions and ways of communicating play a role in constituting our social and organizational realities as well as those with whom we interact. For example, reflexive thinking could open up Steve Jobs, the figurehead of Apple, to the possibility that the way he communicates and interacts with other organizational members becomes part of the dominant Discourses used by organizational members to describe what it means to be a part of that organization. It could also help him become aware of the ways that his communication shapes his own interpretations of what it means to be the CEO of Apple. In addition, by using critical-reflexivity to question underlying assumptions that guide organizational practices and policies, leaders might be able to create a more honest and open dialogue among organizational members (Cunliffe, 2009b). In this way, “self and

critical reflexivity are crucially tied to ethical management and leadership” (Cunliffe, 2009b, p. 48).

### *Ethics of Reflexivity*

Cunliffe and Jun (2005) have called for reflexive thinking in public administration in order to encourage more ethical and responsible actions of leadership. The critical focus of reflexivity provides a direct link to more ethical and responsible ways of acting and communicating in a leadership role.

For example, Seeger (1997) characterizes a set of four specific moral codes that usually guide ethical organizational leadership: (1) honest and open discussions of organizational problems issues; (2) allowing other organizational stakeholders to participate in open discussion of those issues; (3) giving equal consideration to the perspectives of all positions in the organization; and (4) being cognizant of the responsibility and influence that comes with their position as an authority figure and the trust that is placed in them by followers and stakeholders (p. 183).

Cunliffe (2009b) notes that decisions about what is good or bad, right or wrong, and just or unjust is open to interpretation and generally dependent on culture. However, engaging in reflexive thinking gives leadership practitioners a way of bringing multiple cultural Discourses to the surface in order to more consciously weigh their ethical implications (Cunliffe, 2009b). In other words, reflexivity encourages leaders to ask questions that help them “become more conscious or mindful of desired values and standards” (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 142).

Cunliffe's (2009b) main point for encouraging reflexivity is to recognize "that managers are responsible for managing in ethical and moral ways and for creating responsive, ethical and 'just' organizations" (p. 111). Specifically, the goals of CMS are to bring a wider variety of perspectives into the decision making process (Deetz, 2005), which is the foundation of ethical decision making that is enabled through reflexive thought processes. That is, thinking critically and reflexivity to become more mindful of desired values and standards can help leadership practitioners "actively resist the temptation to surrender to self-interest at the expense of other stakeholders whose interests may be every bit as legitimate" (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 6).

For the large part, making ethical decisions in an organization seems to be concerned with how we treat other organizational members, how our communication and decisions impacts the larger social community, how organizational policies privilege some members and alienate others, and how we hold ourselves accountable for the decisions and outcomes within an organization. For Seeger (1997), leaders should be especially concerned with ethics and morals because they are directly involved in determining and communicating the core organizational values to other organizational members (p. 181).

Encouraging a reflexive approach to leadership means going beyond an outside intellectual critique of leadership to one that examines a critical questioning of leadership within practice (Cunliffe, 2002). Therefore, to create a more communicative context where power would be suspended or held in check so that creative and representative decisions can be made (Deetz & Simpson, 2004), this paper encourages a reflexive

approach to studying and practicing leadership that incorporates both self- and critical-reflexivity.

However, this brief review of literature suggests that we do not know enough about these two types of reflexivity and how they could be applied to leadership. For example, one study by Cunliffe (2002) encouraged reflexivity in management; however, it was an MBA class assignment and thus somewhat removed in time and space from the enactment of leadership itself. Perhaps for this reason, they showed a capacity for reflexive thinking, but were notably lacking in critical-reflexivity.

Another study by Cunliffe (2004) called on managers and leaders to become reflexive practitioners, yet like the previous study, it too relied on the pedagogy of reflexivity. The responses and examples of reflexivity that were provided came from students in a management class and were based largely on the experiences they had working in groups with other classmates—hardly the entrenched context of most leadership situations. In a third study by Cunliffe (2009a), the focus was again on teaching reflexivity to students in an Executive Leadership course. While the article is useful for explaining and asking questions that promote reflexivity, it offers little in the way of a discourse analysis of reflexivity in leadership.

To add to this literature body and gain a deeper understanding of how reflexivity functions for practicing managers, the following research questions were posed:



### Research Questions

RQ1: After recalling a leadership experience, how is reflexivity demonstrated by the executives of a Fortune 500 company?

This question is intended to understand *how* reflexivity does or does not manifest itself in the interviews with the executives.

RQ2: What Discourses best capture organizational executives' ability to be reflexive when recalling past leadership experiences, and how does the subject of ethics figure into these Discourses?

This question aims to answer how one or more Discourses, including ethical Discourses, may inform the reflexivity shown by leaders.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methods**

This chapter describes the methods used in this study to investigate interviews with executives of a Fortune 500 manufacturing company. The chapter discusses the sample, data collection and data analysis.

#### **Sample**

In order to explore a sufficient range of reflexive experiences for practicing managers, the goal was to involve 15-20 participants. Participants were selected based on their position as an executive employee of a Fortune 500 textile manufacturing company in western Kentucky. It should be made clear that my ability to gain access to the company and executives was due largely to the fact that I have a personal history with the company and a number of the executives. I am not permitted to outline the specific nature of the relationships because it would violate contractual obligations to keep the identity of the company and the executives confidential. However, as a result of my history with the company, a list of executive employees with their e-mail addresses was provided by a member of senior management in the company upon my request.

Executive employees were then contacted via e-mail and informed of the upcoming study and the opportunity to participate. Executives were also provided with a recruitment information letter that explained basic information about the purpose of the study as well as the PI's contact information. Specifically, the executives were told that the purpose of the study would be to investigate what they were thinking about during some of their recalled leadership experiences. The recruitment information letter also informed the

executives that participation was voluntary, that there were no material incentives for participating, and that they could refuse participation without penalty.

Executives who were interested in participating were instructed to e-mail or call the PI to sign up for a day and time to be interviewed by him. Executives who wanted to volunteer chose a time to be interviewed from a list of dates and times that I would be at the facility. There were initially 20 executives signed up to participate in the study. However, in the final weeks of data collection, 2 executives were unable to participate because they were out of the country. As a result, there were a total of 18 executive members of a Fortune 500 company that participated in this study. The positions of the executives included Department Heads, Directors, Vice Presidents, Senior Vice Presidents, and Executive Vice Presidents. Age, race and gender were not included in the criterion that was examined in this study because it could have limited the already small number of executives that were available to participate in the study. However, for contextual purposes, only one participant was female, and all 18 participants were Caucasian.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews that lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. After contacting the company through e-mail, it was determined that interviews would take place in a small private conference room on site at the company headquarters. Participants were also given the option to be interviewed at a location of their choosing, but they all chose to use the conference room. All interviews were

conducted face-to-face, and 17 were audio recorded. One participant declined to be recorded during the interview.

Due to the busy schedules of participants and my limited availability, it was imperative that interviews did not last longer than sixty minutes. To ensure that there would be enough time for each interview, participants were e-mailed a copy of the consent form prior to the interview. This gave participants more time to review the consent form and ask questions before the interview started. They were asked to bring the consent form to the interview where they would grant consent by signing the form. If they forgot to bring the consent form, then a blank copy was provided for them. This process saved time and provided more opportunities for questions during the interview process.

At the start of the interview, individuals were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and that all name-related or identifying information would be removed from data analysis and reporting to protect their anonymity. During the semi-structured interviews, the PI followed an interview protocol that was designed to explore both self- and critical-reflexive thought processes that occurred during the individual leadership experiences of the company executives. Specifically, after some basic background questions, executives were asked to recall an experience where they felt they were successful as a leader or manager, followed by a series of questions that tried to get at the thought processes and internal conversations the executive could recall having during that experience. They were then asked to recall a time when they felt they were less than successful as a leader or manager, followed by a set of questions that encouraged them to

discuss the thought processes and internal conversations they could recall from that experience.

While the same basic protocol was used for every participant, some flexibility was allowed to provide participants with the chance to give as much or as little information as they wished when answering the questions. The interview protocol, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cincinnati, can be found in Appendix A. It was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cincinnati. Similarly, a copy of the adult consent form that was reviewed and signed by all participants was also approved by the Institutional Review Board, and it can be found in Appendix B.

Observations of day-to-day activities made by the PI while on site at the company headquarters were also recorded in field notes to help provide context for the interviews. Specifically, I made note of some of the company's values and operating principles that were posted on the walls. Further, examples of acceptable ways of behaving and communicating were observed in a number of the social interactions I witnessed between organizational members. Certain responses in the interviews are also a helpful way to gain insight into some of the recent events in the organization's history.

### **Data Analysis**

A "reflexive-interpretive qualitative approach" (Alvesson, 1996, p. 481) was used to analyze the discourse of organizational executives and the context within which those discourses occur. A reflexive approach to data analysis considers the role of the researcher in the co-construction of reality that took place during the interviews. This

approach involves a situational focus in that the purpose is to explore and learn from particular situations rather than focusing on an entire cultural system (Alvesson, 1996). This means that I will be trying to gain access to a number of individual leadership situations by encouraging leaders to reflect on their past experiences in order to find one or two that leaders can concentrate on during the interviews. Thus, to avoid over-generalization, the results of this study are recognized as localized accounts of reflexivity in leadership and are not expected to generalize to other leaders or leadership situations.

Recorded interviews were selectively transcribed and analyzed in order to pay particular attention to the self and critical-reflexive thought processes of the executives. The characteristics of self- and critical-reflexivity described by Cunliffe (2009b) in Figure 2.1 of Chapter 2 are reproduced below as they served to develop a kind of preliminary template or approximate coding scheme for analyzing the discourse of participants.

Table 3.1

<b>Self-Reflexivity</b>	<b>Critical-Reflexivity</b>
1. Exposing how, in our conversations with others, our assumptions, words and responses influence meaning and help shape organizational realities.	1. Deconstructing Truths, ideologies, language, overarching narratives, single meanings, authority, and disciplinary practices.
2. Questioning the limitations of our assumptions and our sensemaking.	2. Revealing and interrogating assumptions that privilege particular groups.
3. Questioning whether we respond defensively or openly to people.	3. Recognizing multiple perspectives rather than imposing an ideology or worldview.
4. Questioning the multiplicity of meanings and voices we may or may not hear in our relationships and interactions with others.	4. Questioning organizational decisions that are made solely on the basis of efficiency and profit.
5. Exploring multiple meanings and interpretations.	5. Questioning how organizational practices might impact people and exclude them from active participation in organizational life.

*Simple reflection* was characterized by discourse that recalled a participant's experience without questioning the assumptions and underlying motivations for actions (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). As can be gleaned from column 1 of Table 3.1, *self reflexivity* was characterized by executives' statements about understanding why they hold certain values, why they act and communicate in certain ways during social interactions, how their communication influences other organizational members, and how they balance their own values with the values of the organization. By contrast, *critical reflexivity* in the second column of Table 3.1 was characterized by executives' dialogue about justifying organizational practices and policies, considering who has the authority to make decisions in the organization and why they might not always consider the perspectives of other organizational members, and imagining how other organizational members might be affected by typical organizational practices and policies.

In this exploratory study, coding reliabilities were not calculated. However, for purposes of establishing a defensible identification and categorization of the three discursive phenomena of interest, a "trial run" interview was conducted with an academic department head lasting approximately 65 minutes. The PI and co-PI independently coded several selected transcriptions from this interview to establish criteria for judging reflection, self-reflexivity, and critical-reflexivity. Instances of agreement are noted, and instances of disagreement were subject to further discussion and clarification until agreement could be reached.

RQ1 was addressed by examining *how* reflection, self-reflexivity, and critical-reflexivity manifest themselves in the characteristics and features of the interviewed leaders' talk. Wherever possible, parallels to and departures from the descriptions of

self- and critical-reflexivity offered by Cunliffe in Table 3.1 will be noted. Of course, it should be noted that the presence or absence of reflexive thought processes could be the result of the questions that were asked, the PI's own interpretations, or something as simple as the mood of the executive on the day of the interview. In other words, the results of this study are distinctly context dependent.

For RQ2, instances of self- and critical-reflexivity were examined for the dominant Discourses upon which interviewees appear to draw. Following the work of discursive psychologists (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998), these Discourses can be identified through familiar terminology, metaphors, or story themes, habitual forms of argument, and the like. The presence of ethical Discourses will be discerned through familiar-sounding values clarification, moral positioning, and articulation of principles endemic to ethical behavior in modern society. The familiarity of these language forms "mark" the presence of one or more dominant Discourses that, in effect, source the communicating actor (Fairhurst, 2011).

Dominant Discourses that describe personal and organizational practices and values could most likely be identified in the simple reflection processes of the executives; however, my goal is to surface practitioners' capacity to be reflexive towards those Discourses, not to simply recall them. In other words, reflecting on dominant Discourses does not question the moral justification for those Discourses, so the presence of ethical Discourses will be examined from within *reflexive* thought processes of the executives, not from simple reflection.



### Chapter 4

#### Results

The purpose of this chapter is to present some dialogue from the interviews with the executives in order to think about how reflection, reflexivity, dominant Discourses and ethics might emerge in the thought processes of leaders and managers from within their own recalled leadership experiences.

Recall that analyzing the thought processes that occurred within the leadership experiences described by the executives was guided by two main research questions:

RQ1: After recalling a leadership experience, how is reflexivity demonstrated by the executives of a Fortune 500 company?

RQ2: What Discourses best capture organizational executives' ability to be reflexive when recalling past leadership experiences, and how does the subject of ethics figure into these Discourses?

For RQ1, I referred to Cunliffe's (2009b) and Cunliffe and Jun's (2005) characterizations of *simple reflection*, *self-reflexivity*, and *critical-reflexivity* to understand *how* reflexivity is or is not manifested in the interviews with executives.

RQ2 focuses specifically on surfacing dominant Discourses from within the self- and critical-reflexive thought processes discussed by the executives. I am particularly interested in understanding how ethical considerations are expressed in the Discourses that inform the reflexivity shown by the executives.

I will start with providing some examples of reflective dialogue. Then, I will give some examples of self- and critical-reflexive thought processes that were expressed in my discussions with the executives. Finally, I will examine some of the executives' reflexive dialogues in order to look for dominant Discourses that were expressed and to consider how ethics are involved in the ways that these executives think about leadership and/or management. A general discussion of the results and how they addressed the aims of the research questions will then be covered in the following chapter.

### Simple Reflection

As previously noted, simple reflection recounts an experience without asking questions about the means, ends, relevance, or underlying influences that might be involved with the experience (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). This is shown in an example of one practitioner who discussed his experience with taking on a management role in a new facility:

So what had happened when I went over there is that we had a tardy issue. And so in the attendance area there was really no verification process. So what time are my people really getting here? And what had happened is people kind of shifted to where it wasn't really being here *at* 8:00, it was being here *around* 8:00. And what's around 8:00 to some people was two or three minutes before or after; other people it was five or ten minutes before or after.

In this experience, the executive recalls what he saw as an attendance problem in the organization. While his recollection explains what happened in the situation, it does not appear to express any thought processes that might be associated with reflexivity. In other words, in this example the dominant influences of authority that inform and justify the attendance policies are not questioned. Further, when making this observation, the

executive is not questioning how his own perspective and past experiences might influence the ways that he perceived and thought about the attendance issues.

Another executive talked about an experience he had with trying to reorganize the way materials were purchased for products made by the company. Instead of making one individual responsible for purchasing the materials needed to manufacture a single product, he wanted to consolidate related products into broad categories that could still be handled by one person. However, he explains that it didn't go exactly the way he hoped:

And I feel like it failed the first time around. And the reason it failed was because I feel like I had included too many categories. I included things that were kinda unrelated, and it made it so complicated for the plants to know who to call. So it became painfully obvious that it was going to fail, or was moving that direction, so we went back to the way it was.

Here again we see an example of simple reflection. It is a step-by-step explanation for what happened and why he saw it as a failure. It does not examine power structures that might have influenced his decision to reorganize the way materials were purchased. This example also leaves out a questioning of the subjectivity of the categories that the products were placed in. It was not as if certain products were objectively associated with certain categories. A more reflexive examination would highlight that the assignment of certain products to certain categories is the result of a socially negotiated process.

Simple reflection also functions to make sense of something that happened by referring to our own past experiences (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 413). In other words, it is a way for us to justify our actions based on what we learned from similar past experiences. One

of the executives showed this concept when he recalled a time that he negotiated the purchase of a new piece of manufacturing equipment for the company:

I've been with the company for so many years that I know most all processes, and that helped me negotiate the type of equipment, I knew how it was going to finish, etcetera. So that helps me determine what is best for the company. And then once we set our goals there we went ahead and made the purchase with the experience of knowing what to look for.

In this example, the executive uses his past experience to explain the way he handled the situation he described. There is no doubt that learning from the successes or failures of past experiences helped many of the executives explain the way they handled some of the situations we talked about in the interviews. Certainly, this was a point that came up in more than a few of my discussions with other executives. Not only did it help some of them make sense of past experiences; it also helped them plan their future actions. For example, one executive explained how he learns from past experiences to develop expectations for how to act in the future:

I try to, again, try to apply everything that I learn. Every day, as you grow and you develop professionally and even personally, you try to assimilate your experiences and the things you learn and translate those to the next time that you're in that situation. So you react either in the right way, if that's how you reacted, or you make modifications to improve.

This is a good example of how managers and leaders might reflect on past experiences to prepare themselves for the future (Cunliffe, 2004). This could be described as an expected script for learning; similar to scripts that are developed in Weick et al.'s (2005) sensemaking process. It assumes that a right response in one situation will still be the right response for the same situation in the future. Conversely, it also assumes that the

wrong response for that particular situation would be wrong in another other similar situation. The executive in this example does not question the multiple ways that situations can be interpreted and appears to assume that the situation will be the same when he finds himself in it again. In other words, this comment highlights the assumption that we can modify our actions, like the variables in an algebra problem, to achieve the desired results when we find ourselves in situations we perceive as unchanging.

Another executive reflected on past experiences to help the company make better decisions about the risks involved with expanding their business to other countries:

That was a truly educating experience. Because when you go into these countries, for example in that country, on every corner you have armed policemen; everywhere are military. You're like you're in the 60s, and it's kinda like it seems like it's ran by the mafia. But there's a lot of crooked governments, so you've gotta be careful. And the more we look at them, we try to make sure we don't get into areas where there's crooked governments...or issues that are going to affect us.

This comment comes from an interesting conversation with an executive about an experience he had when his management team tried to partner with a small manufacturing company in South America. After providing the small company with expensive manufacturing equipment, the foreign company later declared bankruptcy and \$3 million in equipment was repossessed by that country's government. From the perspective of organizational profit, the executive eventually chalked up the investment as a loss, but not without learning a valuable lesson that is reflected in the comment above.

Again, reflection is a useful exercise, but in this case it could lead to an assumption that crooked governments don't exist in countries that appear to be more developed, or that the company would not be affected as long as they avoid doing business in countries with crooked governments. The perspectives of the foreign company's organizational members are also left largely unconsidered, which could be helpful in making more informed decisions. Further, like the previous comments, it could assume that a crooked government will stay crooked, or that an honest government stays honest, or that we objectively judged the government to be crooked or honest in the first place.

Contextual factors like time, place, the people involved, goals, emotions, organizational policies, authority influences, and even our own knowledge, values and perspective can change over time. As a result, while simple reflection can be important for helping us make sense of and develop new understandings for situations, it might also limit our ability to explore multiple perspectives and adapt to unique and changing situations. Therefore, in order to become more open to these possibilities, Cunliffe (2009b) recommends a more reflexive approach to thinking about our experiences and decision making. To understand how reflexivity can be expressed in leadership situations, the following sections will provide some examples of self- and critical-reflexive thought processes that occurred in the situations discussed by the executives.

### Self-Reflexivity

Many of the executives I spoke with seemed to exhibit a capacity to be self-reflexive in regards to their leadership experiences. Drawing from the first column of table 3.1, self-reflexivity is a way of questioning our own ways of being and making sense of our experiences.

1. Exposing how, in our conversations with others, our assumptions, words and responses influence meaning and help shape organizational realities.
2. Questioning the limitations of our assumptions and our sensemaking.
3. Questioning whether we respond defensively or openly to people.
4. Questioning the multiplicity of meanings and voices we may or may not hear in our relationships and interactions with others.
5. Exploring multiple meanings and interpretations.

Self-reflexive thinking can help us recognize the limits of our own assumptions and become more open to the perspectives of others. Further, to describe another self-reflexive process, the following excerpt comes from an executive who showed a particular awareness for the influence that his interactions had over shaping the perceptions and organizational realities of other organizational members. He said,

It's the same way with a leader; it's how can you be the best leader you can be no matter whether you've got one person or you've got fifteen people, or you've got fifteen thousand people. It's 'What kind of way do I need to conduct myself and how?'...Because that's setting the example and expectations. If you want people to conduct themselves in a certain way then it starts with yourself.

This excerpt followed a discussion about a time when the executive felt he had successfully created a more positive atmosphere for the people working in one area of the organization. He mentioned that a previous manager allowed an atmosphere where organizational members were not held responsible for inappropriate comments or unprofessional behavior. This led him to consider the ways his own interactions and behaviors could shape the organizational reality perceived by the other organizational members. In this case, the organizational reality he shaped was an atmosphere that was perceived as more enjoyable, professional, and respectful.

One of the other executives incorporated self-reflexive thinking into an experience where he oversaw a restructuring of the organization's purchasing processes. He noted that some organizational members did not support the plan because the shift in responsibilities threatened their job security. The excerpt below shows the way he initially wanted to handle the situation:

You know, if you want someone to come to the same conclusion that you want them to come to, there's a real easy way to get them there. You know, it's 'This is the way it's going to be.' But is that the right way to get them there? Probably not. Sometimes I'm an impatient person and it's something that I've got to work on.

In this case, the people who were worried about their jobs were assigned new responsibilities in the organization. However, the executive's initial thoughts did not involve giving a full explanation to those who would be affected by the restructuring. Like the first example of self-reflexivity, this executive recognized that he could influence the perceptions of others with his communication. However, in addition to recognizing the way his communication could shape the realities of other organizational



members, self-reflexivity also helped him to think about his own ways of interacting with others and to consider the limitations of his own assumptions and sensemaking.

The next excerpt highlights the thought processes an executive had when other organizational members were resistant to his goals after he was charged with deploying new technology systems in the organization. This is a good example of some specific self-reflexive thoughts that helped the executive make decisions about how to act and respond in that situation:

What I'm trying to do is, in the decision points I run through,...is I don't have a lot of patience for convincing folks of things that are obvious. After I've explained it, asked for questions, and gotten lots of peoples' concurrence, then I really don't have time for obstinance and I'm not very patient about it. So I guess the thought process I go through is, 'Be more patient. Try to see it from their perspective. Assume that there's something you're missing, not something they're missing.' And that's probably to the detriment of progress, the speed of progress.

In addition to considering the limitations of our own assumptions and sensemaking, Cunliffe (2009b) explained that some of the other thought processes involved with self-reflexivity are questioning the ways we respond to others during social interactions and exploring multiple meanings and interpretations. All of these characteristics appear to be involved in the thoughts described by this executive in one of his past leadership situations.

In another example of self-reflexivity, one executive discussed his role in managing a project that focused on developing a new measuring process for preventing and replacing a particular piece of manufacturing equipment before it fails. After presenting the project to upper management, he explained the reactions of management and how he responded to them:

So it was something that was new and they were excited about, and my name was on it because it was my project, but of course I wasn't the only one working on it. So when they were saying, 'Well did you see that project that (he) had? (He) did a good job on that project.' Every time that was said, I guess—you talk about emotions, my first thoughts and emotions aren't 'Hey look at me, yeah I did a good job. It's 'Hey guys, I wasn't the only one that did this; (it was) with the help of this person, and this person, and this person, and this manager.' And that's kinda my first instinct is 'Hey hey, it's not just me. Yes I probably drove the process and did the majority of the work on it, but without these people it would have taken a lot longer or never happened'.

There are a few different self-reflexive processes that we can see in this example. First, he explored multiple interpretations by recognizing the perspectives of upper management. He felt that, from their point of view, they thought he deserved credit for the project because they saw him as project leader. There was also a reflexive examination of how he responded to those managers during those interactions. His initial reaction to this situation was to give credit to other people who worked on the project. Further, he recognized his own limitations when he explained that the project may not have been finished without the help of others.

The previous excerpt highlights the tendency for some of these executives to engage in multiple self-reflexive thought processes during their recalled leadership experiences. We can see a similar dialogue happening in the next example. This executive spoke of a time where he was in charge of training an employee on how to operate a new tool for tracking production within the manufacturing facilities. This process involved operating a forklift to pick up a single pallet before scanning that pallet into a tracking database. After going through the training process with one particular employee, the time came to bring upper management in for a demonstration. He recognized that something was wrong when the employee began fork-lifting two pallets

at a time instead of just one. This excerpt highlights his thoughts when things didn't go as planned:

And it was readily and obviously and painfully embarrassingly obvious to me that I failed to ask the right questions. And of course, part of the thought process was, I was immediately angry at her. You know, (I was thinking) 'Why the hell didn't you tell me you never pick up one, you pick up two?' And what occurred to me as I was thinking through that—and I was trying to save face I'm sure—was that she probably would have said, 'Because you never asked me, you smart-ass corporate guy. If you would have just asked me I would have told you how it's done.'

Right away, this comment stood out to me as highly self-reflexive. The executive is thinking about the multiplicity of meanings and voices he thinks about in his interactions with others; he is immediately recognizing the limits of his own sensemaking and assumptions; he explores his emotions to understand why he acts and communicates in certain ways during social interactions; and he seems to recognize that there are multiple meanings and interpretations for how to think of this situation. He was likely thinking about the situation from multiple perspectives, because by saying his mistake was *embarrassingly* obvious, it shows at least part of his reaction was based on what he thought others perceived.

The simple reflection and self-reflexive thought processes of some of the executives also led them to consider broader organizational influences and expectations that might have been at play during their recalled leadership experiences. Therefore, in the next section I will present some examples of the critically-reflexive dialogue that was expressed during the interviews with the executives.

### Critical-Reflexivity

Like self-reflexivity, thought processes that unsettled organizational policies and practices were more complicated than simple reflection. Referring to the second column of Table 3.1, critical-reflexivity could be summarized as unsettling assumptions about the means, ends, and relevance of organizational practices.

1. Deconstructing Truths, ideologies, language, overarching narratives, single meanings, authority, and disciplinary practices.
2. Revealing and interrogating assumptions that privilege particular groups.
3. Recognizing multiple perspectives rather than imposing an ideology or worldview.
4. Questioning organizational decisions that are made solely on the basis of efficiency and profit.
5. Questioning how organizational practices might impact people and exclude them from active participation in organizational life.

Part of those thought processes include recognizing the limitations of overarching organizational policies and practices, which is seen in the following excerpt from a discussion with one of the executives.

In this first example of a critical-reflexive thought process, an executive discussed his role in assuring the quality of the products being manufactured. As the following discussion shows, one of his goals was to train the plant managers and other workers to handle quality issues on their own so that they could function when he was not available:

We try to establish very well-defined SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) that are understandable, that can be executed at 3:00 in the morning when that shift is

out there—and hopefully I’m getting a good night’s sleep and will not have to worry about it—but you know, those still fall short; no matter how hard you try there’s always going to be exceptions to those rules...So we would have a discussion and analyze what the particular defect is and come to agreement that ‘yeah, this isn’t what we would normally do, but it’s not a mission critical type defect’, so we’d probably roll the dice and say ‘let’s ship it’, or ‘no we’re not going to ship it’.

This may not be a completely critical thought process because it implies that they might still ship products with minor defects; however, the executive does seem to be aware of the limitations of overarching organizational policies. This executive is not only describing one of the organization’s overarching narratives and dominant Discourses—the SOPs—but he is also deconstructing those Standard Operating Procedures when he explains that they can fall short and that there are exceptions to those rules. The SOPs are basic sets of principles and procedures that guide daily operations and processes in the organization. There are SOPs for attendance, manufacturing processes, ensuring product quality, purchasing products and materials, disciplinary practices, and most any other situation that might occur in the organization.

Another way of applying critical-reflexive thought processes involves considering how other people are affected by organizational expectations and practices. In this next example of a critical-reflexive thought process, one of the executives talked about some of the strategies and thoughts he had during a decision making process about getting “buy-in”, or agreement for a new manufacturing process:

Anything that was complicated or I guess not popular in the decision process, if we made those in closed doors and didn’t involve the people around us and just came back and handed it out as an edict, personnel and people in general don’t react well to that because it’s almost like they’re being forced to make the change....and we couldn’t have you know, fifty people in every meeting and every discussion, it just doesn’t work that way; you’ll never get anything done.

So we had to make sure we had small enough groups to reach consensus and make progress, but at the same time we kept trying to come back to our managers in those function areas and talk to people and say, 'Okay, this is kinda where we are, this is our thought; do you have any ideas or suggestions?' And then we try to incorporate that into what we were doing, and continue to get that dialogue back and forth.

We could draw a few critical-reflexive thought processes from this excerpt. First, he recognizes that some organizational members can be excluded from groups that are involved in the decision making process, which also highlights that some organizational members are more privileged than others. Further, he talks about how other organizational members are influenced by decisions that are dictated to them when he says that they don't react well to things that they feel forced into doing. This executive also seems to recognize multiple perspectives rather than imposing an overarching ideology, which is inferred by his efforts to include others in the decision making process and by his thoughts about how organizational members are impacted by those decisions.

In another situation, one of the executives explained his role as project manager for implementing manufacturing processes throughout the organization. Further, he mentioned that implementing these processes was usually part of a corporate mandate. This executive also explained that people at some of the facilities resisted the changes, which meant the way he decided to implement a system at one facility might be different at another facility. I asked him if there were any standard procedures to help him make decisions when people were resistant to implementing new manufacturing systems at different facilities. This was his response:

Well, clearly we have human resource policies and professionalism policies, safety and environment policies...But they're not really part of, well, they're not really part of the primary decision making process; those are all things that are

just check-lists essentially...In every business, particularly this one, there's stated policies in terms of supervisorial or management or corporate behavior towards employees, and then there's the unwritten policy. And we're very very very, it's very important at (this company) not to be overtly critical. We are critical, we just do so in a much more roundabout and generally private manner. And I think that's a tendency that comes from management's style; it comes from being in the South versus the North, or versus Russia or versus China. There's different cultural impacts.

Again, we can see a number of critical-reflexive thought processes going on. Noting that there are unwritten policies to consider certainly seems like a deconstruction of overarching ideologies. Overarching ideologies are also unsettled when he says that the standard organizational policies are not part of his primary decision making processes. Further, he seems to recognize that different places and cultures have different expectations and perspectives, which eschews the imposition of an overarching ideology. Finally, he also seems to reveal the privileged position of management by recognizing the influence that management style has over organizational norms, such as avoiding overt criticism.

It seemed that there were a few executives who were more aware of and more open to questioning the influences of authority in this organization. For example, one executive made the observation that some of the decisions and traditional processes that are enforced by corporate management don't always make logical sense. The following excerpt describes his initial thoughts when he found himself in such a situation:

You go through in your mind, the "Why do we do it this way?" And then you have to try to rationalize the effectiveness and the overall benefit to the organization. And sometimes you cannot get there. There's some things that it's just because that's the corporate direction, that's what I've been told to do, and in my position it's my responsibility to carry out the goals and initiatives of the company.

In this example, the executive makes a critical assessment of overarching directives that are being handed down from authority positions in the organization. However, while he notes that corporate direction may always not seem rational or beneficial for the organization, he still feels obligated to carry out those directives. This demonstrates both a critical-reflexive questioning of—and a self-reflexive awareness for—the dominant Discourses of corporate authority, or overarching systems of thought in the organization that pressure him follow corporate direction, and in turn to reinforce those Discourses.

Related to questioning overarching ideologies, critical-reflexivity also questions organizational decisions that are made strictly based on efficiency and profit. This is exemplified in the critically-reflexive thought processes that helped one executive make a decision about the kind of equipment that needed to be purchased by the company:

Again, experience makes a lot of difference. If some new people were to come in and look at some of this equipment and say, ‘Well alright, that’s cheaper. Let’s go with that,’ then they would have gotten really hurt because the quality and the safety of the machinery that’s out there...could get somebody hurt.

This statement may not immediately seem very complicated, but there are actually a few critical-reflexive thought processes at work. He starts by imagining how other people might respond in this situation, which could mean that he recognizes multiple perspectives rather than dogmatically applying a single ideology. Further, instead of a primary concern for profits, the executive appears to be thinking of how his decision might impact other organizational members in a harmful way. Two dominant Discourses also make an appearance in the reflexive thinking that was in this situation. Specifically, quality and safety seem to be associated with a set of values that guide the decisions and ways of thinking described by this executive.



As some of the interviews with executives have shown, reflexive thinking can be a way to expose underlying influences of dominant Discourses that shape our decision making without us realizing it. Further, exposing dominant Discourses and thinking from multiple perspectives and interpretations can open up the possibility for a more conscious consideration of ethics. Therefore, the following section will explore and add to some of the Discourses already noted in the excerpts above in order to see how the subject of ethics figures into those Discourses.

### **Dominant Ethical Discourses in Reflexivity**

Previous literature has described reflexive thinking as a window to more ethical and responsible decision making in organizations (Cunliffe, 2004; Cunliffe, 2009b). To identify ethical Discourses, I looked for executives' dialogue about clarifying values, moral positioning, and having a concern for the well-being of others in lieu of acting on self-interests (Fairhurst, 2011).

Some of the previous dialogues with the executives exposed reflexive thinking as a way to surface taken for granted influences of dominant Discourses such as corporate directives, Standard Operating Procedures, quality, and safety; some of which can be associated with the selfless interests of ethical Discourses. A number of dominant and ethical Discourses can also be discerned from the next excerpt, in which one executive discusses an experience leading a group of managers to assess and implement new methods of transportation in the organization. The experience required multiple meeting and conversations, which involved thinking about some of the values discussed below:

I think it's very important to involve everybody in the group and to make sure that we have representation; to be very fair; to be open to listening to all the ideas;...to help facilitate that same demeanor or respect for all the team members; make sure that we're all giving everybody equal footing to discuss what concerns or ideas that they have, and to give everyone equal consideration and make sure that we're thorough with all the ideas.

First, this excerpt could be an example of both self- and critical-reflexivity. In terms of self-reflexivity, being open to the ideas of others is a way of exploring multiple meanings and interpretations. Similarly, for critical-reflexivity, she is recognizing multiple perspectives as the manager of the group instead of imposing a single overarching worldview. The dominant Discourses that emerged from within the discussion about this executive's leadership experience appear to be values-based ethical Discourses. In other words, the dominant systems of thought she relied on during this experience are being open to other ideas, listening to input from other organizational members, having respect for others, and giving equal consideration to different perspectives.

The dominant Discourses that were discussed by the previous executive reflect some of the Discourses mentioned by other executives. The next example comes from an executive who also seems to value having open and honest dialogue when working with other organizational members:

I feel like I'm very honest with anyone. Honesty is always a part I have with every group. I want to know if you've made a mistake. I don't care if you've made the mistake, I mean I care, but as long as I know that you've learned from it, we always make mistakes. If you can learn from that and build off of that, then it was a good learning experience even though it might have cost the company some money.

This executive also appears to be engaging in both self- and critical-reflexivity. For self-reflexivity, he recognizes that he tries to be honest in his interactions with others. The

critical-reflexive thought process involved is one that questions organizational decisions that are made solely with an interest in profit. One clear dominant ethical Discourse in this excerpt is honesty. Learning or gaining experience could also be a dominant Discourse here that helps outweigh a primary concern for efficiency and profit.

In another example of Discourses that occur in reflexivity, one of the executives explained his role in the acquisition of another company. After the corporation purchased another manufacturing company, it was his job to integrate the purchasing responsibilities of the acquired company into the larger corporation. In other words, he needed to decide where the company would be adding responsibilities, so he was not responsible for making decisions about downsizing. He went on to explain some of the things that helped him make decisions in that situation:

So if you just kinda clear your mind and truly listen to somebody so that they know you're listening, then you're more likely to make the better choice. And they're more likely to appreciate that as well, because they understand...that you're truly listening and have made that (effort). I think that's probably one of the best things that I've learned, hopefully I've learned over the years, is you have to listen. You can't really just say, 'This is the way it's going to be,' without listening to everybody.

Self-reflexivity helped this executive consider the importance of exploring multiple interpretations and meanings in this situation. In addition, self-reflexive thinking may have helped him consider how his interactions impacted the attitudes and organizational realities of other organizational members. Since the executive was making decisions that were ultimately on behalf of the organization, it could also be argued that he was being critically-reflexive by considering how the attitudes of other people would be impacted by his decisions. Similar to the first example in this section, the major ethical Discourse

at play here seems to be listening to opinions and voices of others in order to make fair and well-informed decisions.

A genuine care for the well-being of others should indicate the presence of ethical Discourses. For example, one executive I spoke with described a time when the company was downsizing some manufacturing facilities after acquiring another manufacturing business. In addition to talking about his efforts to help some of the acquired company's employees find opportunities for new jobs, he explained how some of his basic values helped him interact with a particular employee during that situation:

We had one employee that had some challenges and we supported that. One lost a family member and we sent flowers. And those are the kind of things you do anyway, so nothing really special. It's just making sure that you treat the people like they should be treated.

Notably, this executive later explained an organizational policy called the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) that was a set of legal guidelines for helping employees with family emergencies. In terms of reflexivity, this excerpt appears to be mainly critically-reflexive because the executive says he would have had the flowers sent because it was just the right way to treat people. This could also be a critical-reflexive thought process that questions organizational decisions that are made solely on the basis of profit. The overarching ethical Discourse in this example appears to be showing respect to other organizational members.

In a final example of ethical Discourses, one executive explained a leadership experience where he felt he had successfully implemented a company-wide education program about sustainability. While he said that the company had been incorporating environmental sustainability into their manufacturing processes for over ten years, this

was a new program directed at each individual member of the organization. His comments provide a more detailed description of the situation and the reflexive thought processes involved:

So it was not only an educational process whereby people would understand what (this company) was doing as a corporation, but also an educational experience whereby they could make decisions for themselves on lifestyle changes and decisions that they could make that would reduce their environmental footprint...And our customers make purchasing decisions based on our sustainability performance, so it's obviously something from a business perspective that we have a focus on and that we've had a focus on for a couple of years...But to me, no other company had ever taken sustainability to the level of doing employee education. And not only doing it from a company perspective, but also a personal perspective. There was no gain, there was nothing to be benefited by us—educating our employees on how they can save money at home—I mean ultimately there may be some good that comes from that; maybe we'll have happier more productive employees because maybe their utility bills aren't as high, I don't know. But it was a very unselfish process in that we did that for their benefit and for the benefit of the environment and not for personal gain.

This example involves multiple critical-reflexive processes and dominant Discourses. By recognizing that this situation could be seen as a benefit to individual employees and the organization as a whole, the executive seems to be recognizing multiple perspectives rather than imposing a single overarching worldview. Further, rather than being concerned for company profits, he is recognizing the beneficial impact that this organizational program could have for each individual in the organization. The dominant ethical Discourses at work here appear to be environmental sustainability and education.

Ethics are certainly tied to reflexivity because it is a way to bring more opinions and perspectives into the decision making process. However, we should not equate reflexivity with being more ethical. The valence of ethics is in the eye of the beholder, and although it might sound pessimistic, seeing more options does not necessarily mean

that leaders will use those options in an ethical way. The following short section was not originally a focus for this study, but I felt it deserved consideration and adds to the complexity of reflexive thinking.

### Unethical Reflexivity

Reflexive thinking does not always lead to more ethical leadership. Reflexive thinking opens a window to more ethical leadership in organizations, but increased awareness for the concerns and perspective of others could also be used for unethical purposes, such as manipulation or simply paying lip-service to the opinions of other organizational members. In these instances, reflexivity can be a tool for satisfying a self-interested desire to get compliance and agreement. For instance, one executive explained what he thinks about when he communicates with organizational members who did not agree with his attendance objectives:

And I expressed to them not to look at it as though it's a rule, even though we do have policies to help us work with the areas, that when you shift it away from the rules and you shift it to where you lean on their desires; if you can get people to do things because they desire to do it rather than because they have to do it, then you'll get a whole different response.

At first glance, it might be difficult to think of this as an example of unethical reflexivity because the executive is still promoting a positive self-esteem in the people who work for him by giving them the impression that their desires are being met. There is certainly a trace of self-reflexivity here because he recognizes his influence over the organizational realities of his management team. However, this is also where the unethical use of

reflexivity can be seen. Specifically, by ‘leaning’ on their desires, it sounds as if he is using the employees’ desires against them in order to gain compliance through manipulation, a type of concertive control. In other words, in this comment, gaining compliance seems more important than considering the limitations of his assumptions and trying to get an honest reaction from the employees.

While this type of discourse was not overtly common in the interviews, it serves as an interesting example of how reflexivity might be applied in less than ethical ways. However, this type of discourse was difficult to find when I listened to the recorded interviews. For the most part, many of the executives, including the one who may have used unethical reflexivity, seemed to use different forms of reflexivity, they were very positive in talking about their experiences, and many seemed to include dominant ethical Discourses in their thought processes. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of my observations from the interviews, explore some limitations of this study, and recommend some future areas of study that could enrich the research being done on reflexivity and ethics in organizational leadership.

### Chapter 5

#### Discussion

On a broad level, this study was aimed at adding to the existing body of literature that studies language to understand how communication shapes organizational members' perceptions of leadership and social realities within an organization. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to provide examples of reflexive thinking from within leadership experiences, which has been lacking in the previous literature on reflexivity in management (see Cunliffe 2002; 2004; 2009a). Reflexive thought processes are important additions to the literature and research on leadership because it has been argued that reflexive thinking provides an avenue for more ethical, responsive, critical, and responsible actions of leadership practitioners within an organization (Cunliffe, 2009a).

To take reflexive thinking outside of the classroom and expand on how reflexivity could be applied to leadership, this study involved in-depth interviewing of 18 executives of a Fortune 500 manufacturing company about their own leadership experiences and the thought processes that occurred within them. Overall, the analysis of executives' dialogue provided interesting findings that helped address the inquiries of this study's research questions.

#### Findings

Two research questions were posed in order to guide the analysis of executives' discourse and understand how reflexive thinking functions for practicing managers. Research Question 1 asked how reflexivity is demonstrated by the executives of a Fortune 500 company after recalling a leadership experience. While *simple reflection*



was not the main focus of this study, it was an inevitable starting point for every interview because the types of questions that were initially asked did not require more than baseline reflection. Based on the analysis of the interviews, it appeared that simple reflection was an initial thought process that helped practitioners recount what happened during specific leadership experiences. This was in line with Cunliffe and Jun's (2005) idea of reflection as a way of recalling an experience without questioning the means, ends, and relevance of what happened in that situation. In addition, some executives also used reflection to link their current recounting of events to past experiences and also to plan for how they would act in similar future situations, which is similar to Weick, et al.'s (2005) sensemaking process. This was not surprising since both of these are characteristics of reflective thinking that were discussed by Cunliffe (2004) and Cunliffe and Jun (2005).

Simple reflection often served as an entry point to the reflexive thinking that emerged from the discourse of the practitioners. In line with Cunliffe's (2009b) descriptions, *self-reflexivity* provided a way for the executives to examine their own ways of reacting to and interacting with other organizational members, which also helped them question their own limitations and assumptions that influenced those interactions. Further, some of the executives recognized how perceptions of organizational reality could be shaped through their communication with other organizational members. Self-reflexivity also helped them explore multiple meanings and interpretations and to question the voices and meanings that inform the ways they interacted with others (Cunliffe, 2009b). Questioning and clarifying personal values was also played out in the

self-reflexive dialogue of the executives, and it often emerged from the ways that the executives described their interactions with other organizational members.

Some of the executives also showed a capacity for engaging in *critical-reflexivity* during their leadership experiences. Drawing on the characteristics of critical-reflexivity discussed by Cunliffe (2009b) and Cunliffe & Jun (2005), some of them seemed very open to thinking about and questioning the reasoning behind overarching organizational policies, norms and the consequences they could have for other organizational members. They recognized their privileged administrative position in the organization and they often admitted that their authority did not always grant them clairvoyance to make the best decisions. As a result, many of them avoided imposing a single ideology and explained that it was important to get input from other organizational members before making a decision. They reasoned that other organizational members appreciated having their opinions included in the decision making process; they added that listening to different ideas and perspectives provided them with more options for making the best decision in a given situation. Some of them noted that profits and efficiency were important factors in their decision making during leadership experiences; however, they also noted that those factors should not always be the primary concern in their leadership experiences because it could lead to decisions that might harm other organizational members. These findings largely confirm the coding framework for reflexive thinking that was provided by Cunliffe (2009b). However, there are also some unexpected insights that have not been fully addressed in previous research. These insights will be discussed later, along with a number of other implications that can be drawn from this study.

Research Question 2 was aimed at exploring some of the dominant Discourses that were manifested in executives' reflexive thought processes during leadership experiences. Identifying Discourses was important because they are systems of thought or norms that serve as resources for communicating and interacting, and there is no communication outside of Discourse (one simply moves from one discursive network to another) (Foucault, 1995). Thus, they should emerge from reflexive thought processes that occur during interactions with other organizational members. They should also play a major role in the critical-reflexive thought processes that are aimed at unsettling organizational policies, procedures, expectations, and general norms.

To identify the dominant Discourses in executives' dialogue, I listened for familiar sounding terminology, metaphors, and habitual forms of argument in line with discursive psychologists' treatment of Discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998). Drawing from the representative excerpts in the previous chapter, some of the dominant Discourses that played a part in executives' reflexive thinking in leadership experiences were following Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which are basic sets of rules and principles for handling different situations and processes in the organization; corporate authority, which involves following corporate management's directives and goals; quality, which involves minimizing any defects in their products; safety, which includes keeping the work environment safe; and efficiency, which includes increasing manufacturing efficiency and profitability.

Research Question 2 also examined how ethical considerations figured into these Discourses. Ethical Discourses were often discussed in relation to dominant Discourses. As previously mentioned, ethical Discourses are those overarching ways of thinking that

express a concern for the well-being of others instead of acting on self-interests (Fairhurst, 2011). This involves bringing a wider variety of perspectives into the decision making process, being open and honest, giving equal consideration to different perspectives, and taking responsibility for their position as an authority figure in the organization (Deetz, 2005; Seeger, 1997). The ethics Discourse that emerged from the reflexive thought processes of the executives in this study involved respect, equality, honesty, listening, safety, educational development, and environmental sustainability. In line with Cunliffe and Jun (2005) and Cunliffe (2002; 2004; 2009a; 2009b), the reflexive thought processes of executives that participated in these interviews appeared to encourage a genuine concern for moral accountability and the well-being of other organizational members, which was expressed through giving equal consideration to the opinions of all organizational members, being honest and respectful, promoting education, and having a concern for the safety and well-being of other organizational members. In other words, the reflexive thought processes expressed by many of the executives in this study highlighted the idea that reflexive thinking and being open to multiple perspectives is part of becoming an ethical practitioner (Cunliffe, 2009a; 2009b).

However, there was also some evidence of reflexive thinking that did not necessarily lead to ethical decision making. Rather, becoming open to multiple perspectives sometimes provided a way for practitioners to coerce organizational members into agreement by telling them what they want to hear, or to give organizational members the false impression that their voices and opinions were included in the decision making processes of the leader or manager. The instances where reflexive thinking was used for unethical purposes were not common in the interviews with these executives, yet

even a single example provides an interesting contrast to the idealized ethical outcomes of reflexive thinking that are common throughout previous literature.

In general, the executives in this study seemed very open and honest during the interviews, and some even mentioned that the interview questions helped them gain a better understanding for themselves and their role in the organization. At the end of the interviews, many of the executives said they appreciated the opportunity to take time for reflecting on their past experiences, to think critically about their own ways of being and interacting, and to consider the effects and justifications for decisions they made on behalf of the organization. Some even added that they would be thinking more about their past experiences when they returned to their offices later that day.

Many of these findings reinforce previous literature and provide some examples for how practitioners could apply reflexive thinking within leadership situations. Yet there were a few inconsistencies between what was described in the literature and what was actually said by the executives. As a result, there are a number of implications that need to be discussed in relation to our understanding of reflexive thinking in leadership.

### **Implications**

This study was centered on understanding the reflexive thought processes that guide the decisions and actions of managers from within their own leadership experiences. When linked with the findings of this study, the idea of reflexive thinking points to a number of implications that are relevant to current literature and to the practical applications of reflexivity in leadership.

First, the findings of this study are certainly useful for describing some of the reflexive dialogue that occurs in leadership experiences. In other words, when compared to the coding framework provided by Cunliffe (2009b), the examples of self- and critical-reflexivity expressed by the executives give us some ideas for the ways that reflexivity might be practiced within leadership situations. Further, reflexive thinking appears to be a way of encouraging more ethical decision making from leaders and managers in organizational settings, as Cunliffe (2009a; 2009b) has noted. This is shown in the way ethical Discourses were manifested through reflexive thought processes that questioned and clarified the moral justifications for those Discourses. This study also shows that reflecting on past experiences can be a valuable method for learning as a number of executives made this very comment themselves as the interview concluded. In addition, as Cunliffe and Jun (2005) described and as some of the excerpts from the executives show, simple reflection expressed by the executives does not recognize that situations, perspectives, and interpretations are always changing (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

Second, some of the executives' responses in this study suggest that simple reflection may not be as simple as previous literature makes it seem. I noticed that some executives had trouble recalling a specific example of a past leadership experience in response to questions like, "Can you describe a specific situation in which you felt you were successful (or less successful) as a leader or manager?" To explain this, it might simply have been difficult for them to draw on a single situation that stands out from years of leadership experiences. In other words, their mental models are already well-formed. Also, the time constraints of the interview put the executives on the spot, so some executives mentioned that they needed more time to draw on a specific example of

their past leadership experiences. Finally, knowing that their responses were being recorded and studied may have made some of the executives hesitant to criticize organizational practices or to openly question their own limitations, which could explain why some of them chose to speak in generalities rather than discuss specific situations. In this way, the decision not to disclose a specific experience could itself be a reflexive thought processes because they might be thinking of the multiple ways that their responses could be interpreted, or misinterpreted from the perspective of other people. Whatever the reason for the lack of specificity, there could be more complex thought processes involved with reflection that the previous literature has explored.

A third major implication that can be surmised from this study is that self- and critical-reflexivity are not always separate lines of thought, which seems to be the way they have been conceptualized in previous literature (see Cunliffe, 2002; 2004; 2009a; 2009b; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Instead, it seems possible that self- and critical-reflexivity are intertwined. The findings in this study suggest that when you start talking about managers who are open to multiple perspectives, or who recognize how their values impact other organizational members, it becomes difficult to distinguish between self- and critical-reflexivity because the individual manager or leader is in a position of authority that creates and reinforces overarching dominant Discourses of the organization. In other words, power is omnipresent; the manager or leader is in an authority position that serves as an extension of the organization itself. So, by becoming more aware of their own limitations through self-reflexive thought processes, they are, by extension, questioning the limitations of dominant organizational Discourses, which is more in line with critical-reflexive thought processes. This implication ultimately

reinforces Cunliffe & Jun's (2005) point that self-reflexivity is the most important element in changing an individual or an organization (p. 239), because for leaders and managers, self-reflexivity is a way for the organization to become critical of itself.

Fourth and most importantly, this study challenges the assumption that reflexive thinking will bring about more ethical communication and decision making in organizations. Thinking reflexively and critically allows leaders to bring more voices and perspectives into the decision making process (Deetz, 2005; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005), but that does not always mean those multiple perspectives and voices are used in an ethical way. This study highlights the possibility for leadership practitioners to use the increased awareness they gain from reflexive thinking in order to satisfy organizational interests and ultimately exclude other organizational members from participating in decision making processes. Getting buy-in, reducing conflict, coercion, and paying lip-service to the perspectives and opinions of other organizational members instead of actually involving them in the decision making process are a few examples of the less-than-ethical ways that leaders can use their awareness of other organizational members' perceptions.

For practitioners, the fifth implication of this study is that simple reflection may not be so simple. It takes more time for some practitioners to reflect on a specific experience and then think reflexively about what happened in that experience. So, managers and leaders should regularly give themselves enough time to reflect on their experiences and consider the justifications and thought processes that influenced their actions and decisions in those situations.



Further, leadership practitioners and managers should also be encouraged to engage in self-reflexivity in order to question their own limitations, question their own values and ways of interacting, explore multiple meanings and interpretations, and recognize the influence they have over the perceptions of other organizational members. By so doing, they are also becoming critical of organizational practices and Discourses that impact their own decisions and the lives of other organizational members.

Of course, it should be recognized that all of these implications are based on my own interpretations of the discourse from a considerably small number of executives in a single Fortune 500 company. Thus, there are a number of limitations that need to be recognized when considering the findings of this study.

### **Limitations**

As I have mentioned, this study provides a localized account of reflexivity in leadership and should not be taken as a way to generalize the ways that reflexivity emerges for practitioners in every organization. While generalizability was not a major goal, there are still a few limitations that could have significantly altered the findings in this study.

The first issue concerns my own familiarity with the organization and some of the executives. Because some of the executives were familiar with me, it is possible that they could have been inclined to portray their experiences in a more favorable way than what actually happened. The opposite might also be true; some executives may have been less open because they could have felt that my familiarity with them would compromise the confidentiality of their responses. Another possibility is that being

familiar with me might have made the executives feel more comfortable, which might have encouraged more open and honest responses.

Further, my familiarity with the organization and some of the executives likely influenced my interactions during the interviews and my interpretations of the interview discourse. Though I tried to avoid this bias, there is probably no way for me to remain entirely objective in this study. For this reason, my perceptions of the organization and the executives' dialogue might be more favorable than the perceptions of someone with a different perspective. As a result, a major limitation in this study is the subjective nature of coding and analysis of interview responses.

Next, because this is a Fortune 500 company that competes on a global market, some of the executives may have felt uncomfortable disclosing some of the successful or less successful organizational practices and procedures. For the same reasons, I am under contractual obligations not to disclose specific information about the types of products manufactured by the organization, their specific manufacturing processes and equipment, and even some of the specific locations of their manufacturing facilities. This is unfortunate because there was a significant amount of reflexive dialogue that could not be used in the study due to the confidential information disclosed by some of the executives.

Arguably, another limitation of this study is that it did not explore executives' discourse about gender, class and race in this organization. In addition to a lack of diversity among the participants, there was also very little discussion of how these issues might play out in the reflexive thought processes of the leaders in the organization. This is a limitation because one of the major ethical concerns of CMS is to surface taken-for-

granted power relations that might marginalize voices of underrepresented voices in the organization (Deetz, 2005). Although equality was one of the ethical Discourses mentioned by the executives, neglecting to specifically address race, gender and class issues during the interviews might have led me to overlook some important reflexive thought processes that help the executives make decisions during their leadership experiences.

From my own observations another limitation was the limited amount of time that the executives had to reflect on their past experiences. This was not a problem in every interview, but it might have been helpful for some of the executives to have more time in order to describe the thought processes they had during specific leadership experiences. This ultimately could have allowed a deeper analysis of reflexive dialogue in the experiences of some of the executives.

Finally, by focusing specifically on the discourse of managers and leaders, I did not account for the ways that leadership is co-constructed between other organizational members in different organizational contexts (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). It was interesting to look at the perceptions of the leaders in the organization, but a discursive leadership approach was not entirely followed, so there was less opportunity to study the ways that leadership is played out in different situations between different organizational members.

The limitations of this study make it impossible to generalize these findings across multiple organizations and leadership practitioners. Still, this study provides a valuable step in the direction of understanding the ways reflexivity might be applied within leadership situations.

### Conclusion

Based on the findings and implications from this study, there are a few major areas that need to be explored in future research about reflexivity in leadership.

First, there needs to be a deeper understanding for the thought processes involved in simple reflection. How individual leaders choose which specific experiences to reflect on, how they decide on the best way to communicate what happened in those situations, and how that can lead to self- or critical-reflexive thought processes are all areas of reflection that need to be further examined.

There is also a tendency in the literature to discuss self- and critical-reflexivity as two separate ways of thinking; however, this could limit our ability to study the ways practitioners intertwine their reflexive thought processes. In other words, future studies could build on the idea that self-reflexive thought processes of authority figures in an organization are a way of being critically-reflexive towards dominant organizational Discourses.

Finally, there needs to be more research that considers the less-than-ethical outcomes of reflexivity in leadership. Previous research has romanticized reflexivity as an intrinsically ethical process. I suggest that the emphasis should not be that reflexivity *will* lead to more ethical leadership and management practitioners, but that it *could* help them make more ethical decisions. Disregarding the possibility that reflexivity could lead to unethical practices could leave us blind to savvy practitioners or marketers who might use knowledge of our interests in order to meet organizational goals at our expense.

In conclusion, the review of literature highlighted a need for gaining a deeper understanding for how reflexivity manifests itself in the discourse of leaders from within leadership situations. This study provides some interesting examples that might give us some insight into the application of reflexivity in leadership. It also shows that reflexive thinking can meet ethical interests of bringing a wider variety of perspectives into the decision making process. However, ethics are a tricky issue because they are always socially constructed and always subjective (Cunliffe, 2009a p.97); one person's sacred cow is another person's steak dinner.

In other words, there needs to be more research into the ways that ethics are played in the discourse of other organizational leaders in different organizations, and a closer consideration for the voices of other organizational members. Economic crises, personal injury and death are more visible representations of what can happen when leaders act solely on self-interests, but unethical and single-minded leadership decisions can happen more frequently and on much smaller scales within organizations. For this reason, reflexive thinking should be practiced in times of stability as well as in times of crises.

In closing, one executive articulated an idea that I think provides a good example and final summary for the application of reflexivity in leadership:

Well, first of all you have to kinda clear your mind; you have to have an open mind. And a lot of times your experiences will interfere with your listening if you're not careful, because with your experiences you've learned a lot of things. But you've got to really understand that times change, everybody is different, and there is usually more than one way to get the job done.

## Appendix A

### Reflexive Leadership Interview Protocol

I want to thank you for taking time out of your busy day to help with this study. My name is ##### and I am working on my Master's thesis at the University of Cincinnati to study the individual experiences of leaders within your organization. For the next 30-45 minutes, I'm going to be asking you a few questions that are going to tap into these experiences, both when you felt you were successful as a leader or manager and then less successful as a leader or manager.

With your permission, I'd like to record the interview because it is difficult to write down all of the information that you might share. If you do not wish to be recorded, that is perfectly acceptable. The interview will be transcribed and then any identifying features will be blacked out. I want to stress that anything you say will be held in the strictest confidence; your name and those to whom you refer will not be attached to any of the comments in the thesis I write.

As you talk about your experiences as a leader or a manager, my goal is to explore your thought processes during this time as best you can recall. Please remember that your participation in this study is voluntary. You are not obligated to answer any of these questions, so if you are uncomfortable sharing about an experience, then please let me know so that we can move to a different one.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

#### **Background Questions**

1. What is your job title in this organization?
2. What are your job duties?
3. How long have you been in this organization? In your current job?
4. How many people report to you?

#### **Reflexive Leadership Experiences (Part 1)**

1. In this job or another, can you describe a situation in which you felt you were successful as a leader or manager?
2. What happened? Who was involved?
3. About how much of your time was involved in dealing with this situation?
4. Why do you see this as an instance of successful leadership?
5. What would you say are your values as a leader or manager?
6. Did your handling of this situation reflect those values?
  - 6a. If so, then how were they reflected? If not, then why weren't your values reflected?
7. As events were unfolding, did you have any inner dialogue with yourself? In other words, did you debate within yourself courses of actions, things to say, or not say either before or after you handled the situation?
  - 7a. If you had little or no inner dialogue about this incident, why do you suppose that is the case? (Jump to Question 165).
8. Can you recall a little of those inner conversations or debates within yourself? For example, what were you most memorable thoughts?
9. Did any specific emotions play a role in these conversations?
10. What did you worry most about?

11. Did the situation present opportunities?
12. Do you remember feeling trapped, “damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” or otherwise dealing with a lot of contradictory circumstances?
  - 12a. If so, how did you overcome these feelings?
13. Did you have to contend with organizational policy, standards and practices, or just generally “the powers that be” in this situation?
  - 13a. If so, how did you reconcile these concerns with what you felt you had to do to be effective?
14. Ultimately, did you arrive at a “bottom-line” in terms of what you felt you had to do to be successful? What was that bottom-line?
15. In the end, how helpful was your inner dialogue with yourself in terms of how you handled the situation?
16. What did you learn about yourself as a leader or manager as a result of this situation?
17. Since this situation has occurred, how often do you think about it in dealing with new situations?

### **Reflexive Leadership Experiences (Part 2)**

1. In this job or another, can you describe a situation in which you felt you were not successful as a leader or manager?
2. What happened? Who was involved?
3. About how much of your time was involved in dealing with this situation?
4. Why do you see this as an instance of unsuccessful leadership?
5. What would you say are your values as a leader or manager?
6. Did your handling of this situation reflect those values?
  - 6a. If so, then how were they reflected? If not, then why weren’t your values reflected?
7. As events were unfolding, did you have any inner dialogue with yourself? In other words, did you debate within yourself courses of actions, things to say, or not say either before or after you handled the situation?
  - 7a. If you had little or no inner dialogue about this incident, why do you suppose that is the case? (Jump to Question 16).
8. Can you recall a little of those inner conversations or debates within yourself? For example, What were you most memorable thoughts?
9. Did any specific emotions play a role in these conversations?
10. What did you worry most about?
11. Did the situation present opportunities?
12. Do you remember feeling trapped, “damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” or otherwise dealing with a lot of contradictory circumstances?
  - 12a. If so, how did you manage those feelings?
13. Did you have to contend with organizational policy, standards and practices, or just generally “the powers that be” in this situation?
  - 13a. If so, how did you reconcile these concerns with what you felt you had to do to be effective?
14. Ultimately, were you able to arrive at a “bottom-line” in terms of what you felt you had to do to be successful? If you were able, what was that bottom-line? If you were unable, then what kept you from arriving at the bottom-line?

- 14a. If you were unable, was this the reason you labeled this situation as unsuccessful?
15. In the end, how helpful was your inner dialogue with yourself in terms of how you handled the situation?
16. What did you learn about yourself as a leader or manager as a result of this situation?
17. Since this situation has occurred, how often do you think about it in dealing with new situations?

### **Wrap-Up Questions**

1. Comparing the two situations in which you felt more successful in one than the other, which did you learn more from? Why?
2. Which do you reflect upon more as time goes by?
3. Do you have any questions before we conclude?

M: This concludes our interview. I want to thank you for taking the time to answer some questions about your experiences today. Your input will be very valuable to this study.

M: Again, thank you very much for your time and I hope this has been an interesting experience for you.



**APPENDIX B**  
**Adult Consent Form for Research in Individual Interviews**  
**University of Cincinnati**  
**Department: Communication**  
**Principal Investigator: Michael Halliwell**  
**Faculty Advisor: Gail Fairhurst**

**Title of Study:** Reflexive Leadership in Practice

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

**Who is doing this research study?**

The person in charge of this research study is Michael Halliwell of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Communication.

He is being guided in this research by Dr. Gail Fairhurst, Professor and Advisor.

**What is the purpose of this research study?**

The purpose of this research study is to learn about the reflexive processes leaders use when reflecting about their experiences. The goal is to understand the inner “conversations” leaders have with themselves when faced with challenges or opportunities.

**Who will be in this research study?**

About 15-20 people will take part in the interview portion of this study. You may be in this study if you are an executive employee of Fruit of the Loom, Inc.

**What if you are an employee where the research study is being done?**

Taking part in this research study is not part of your job. Refusing to be in the study will not affect your job. You will not be offered any special work-related benefits if you take part in this study. Further, nobody in the company will know if you choose to participate or not participate in this study.

**What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?**

- You will be asked a series of questions that will require you to recall some of your past leadership experiences.
- Specifically, you will be asked to recall your thought processes during these leadership experiences.
- The interview will take about 45-60 minutes.
- The interview will take place in an office at Fruit of the Loom Headquarters in Bowling Green, Kentucky, or at a location of your choice.

**Are there any risks to being in this research study?**

The risk is not expected to be more than you would have in daily life. Some questions may make you uncomfortable. You can refuse to answer any questions that you don't want to answer.

**Are there any benefits from being in this research study?**

As a participant, this interview could benefit you by learning about different kinds of reflexivity available to help you process your experiences. This could provide you with more options for thinking, communicating, and behaving in leadership roles.

**Will you have to pay anything to be in this research study?**

You will not have to pay anything to take part in this study.

**What will you get because of being in this research study?**

You will not be paid or given anything to take part in this study.

**Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?**

- If you do not want to take part in this research study you may simply not participate.
- You will not be treated any differently and your relationship with the researcher will not be affected if you choose not to take part in the study.
- If you choose to participate, you may skip any questions you don't want to answer.
- You have a choice whether or not to allow your interview to be audio taped.
- There is a place at the end of this form to mark your choice.

**How will your research information be kept confidential?**

Information about you will be kept private by:

- Using a study ID number instead of the participant's name on the interview records.
- Limiting access to research data to the researcher and faculty advisor.
- Keeping research data on a password-protected computer.
- Your information will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's campus office.
- Signed consent documents, master lists of participant names, and ID numbers will be stored separately in a locked cabinet in the faculty advisor's campus office.
- Participant names and information will be deleted as soon as the study is closed.
- The signed consent documents will be kept in a secure location for 3 years after the study is closed and then be shredded and destroyed.
- Further, nobody in the company will know if you choose to participate in the study.

Note:

- The data from this research study may be published; but you will not be identified by name.
- Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes.
- The researcher cannot promise that information sent by the internet or email will be private.

**What are your legal rights in this research study?**

Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

**What if you have questions about this research study?**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Mike Halliwell at Halliwml@mail.uc.edu. You may also contact Dr. Gail Fairhurst at fairhug@ucmail.uc.edu.

The UC Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences (IRB-S) reviews all non-medical research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the Chairperson of the UC IRB-S at (513) 558-5784. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB-S, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

**Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?**

No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop being in the study, you should tell Mike Halliwell at Halliwml@mail.uc.edu.

During the interview, you may skip any questions that you don't want to answer.

If you would like to stop participating in the middle of the interview, simply tell the interviewer to stop.

**Agreement:**

I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ YES, you may audiotape my interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ NO, I do not want you to audiotape my interview.

Participant Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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