

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Leaders and their witnesses: An arts-based inquiry

By Alysha Farrell, Ph.D.



### Why this research is important

This arts-based study considers the powerful role that witnesses play in sculpting the mindscape of leaders. It is an invitation to consider how one's witnesses—both real and imagined—pass on psychological inheritances that may wreak havoc with one's capacity to be rational in leadership spaces. The study poses questions about the psychological and environmental conditions that make it possible for the appearance of witnesses. Furthermore,

### What you need to know

The work of leadership is emotionally difficult, but it is often spoken of as if it is composed merely of the rules, policies, and processes that exist outside of those who lead. Leaders are asked to provide guidance and support to a diverse cast of actors in their organizations, which in turn, means their work is fraught with dilemmas and conflict. Despite the emotionally charged nature of an educational leader's work, there is little consideration given in the field to the psychoanalytic implications.

this work is intended to invite an analysis of the consequences that result from the childhood dramas that one continues to act out in adulthood.

### How the research was conducted

A lot of the research in the field of educational leadership and administration is designed to reduce what is observed and measured in order to improve things like outcomes and performance. However, there are ethical, moral, and political questions that cannot be reasonably considered in structural-functional terms. Arts-based research (ABR) allows researchers to use their imaginations to ask questions about important and unwieldy themes such as love, forgiveness, jealousy,

death, loneliness, and hope in the context of leadership studies. To explore what leading does to leaders, the researcher wrote and analyzed a three-act play called *Sincere Liars*.

### What the researcher found

One's dreams, memories and the childhood dramas rehearsed in adulthood are the sincerest of lies. The sincerity with which they are told and protected is connected to a need to manage the demands placed on the ego by the social environment. The play, and much of the discussion that surrounds the play in this study, speaks to the strong influence the unconscious wields in one's life. If one agrees with Freud's assertion that our houses (minds) are haunted by the past and that these hauntings can limit what we can perceive and do in the world, an attunement to one's witnesses may assist leaders to become more conscious of the ways in which they project their fears and fantasies on others in unhelpful ways. The researcher suggests that engagements with trusted relational others can prompt leaders to develop more nuanced interpretations of the emotionally charged incidents that occur within their organizations.

### How this research can be used

The play urges current and future leaders to engage in self-analysis about the ways in which one's formative relationships influence one's professional identity and enactments of leadership. In addition, the study provides an illustration of how intense interactions with colleagues can produce unhealthy emotional entanglements. These emotional entanglements can be rooted in an over-identification with certain followers or they may transpire when leaders attempt to take care of others in ways that inhibit their colleagues' professional growth.

### About the researcher

Dr. Alysha Farrell is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education who engages students in drama to critically examine the stories we inherit about others and the stories we tell about ourselves. She teaches courses in drama, educational leadership, and social justice in the undergraduate and graduate programs. Her research interests are in the areas of drama as educational research, psychoanalytic interpretations of educational leadership, gender and leadership, teacher-leader identity, and curriculum theatre.

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### Keywords

Educational leadership; witnessing; psychoanalytic interpretations of leadership; leadership and affect; countertransference; drama as research

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