

Public leaders in accelerated times: a qualitative study on their reflective practices in the Netherlands

Public leaders
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times

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to phenomenologically explore the reflective practices of leaders in public organisations amidst a complex societal context in combination with rapid changes. In this article, the authors specifically explore the lived experiences of public leaders to generate new hypotheses concerning their reflective practices.

Design/methodology/approach – The phenomenological methodology consists of analysing the lived experiences of 13 public leaders, collected in an in-depth interview and written reflections.

Findings – The thick data offer new and up-to-date insights into the daily experiences of public leaders concerning their challenges, the effect of the addictive and alienating forces, their reflex to withdrawal when facing emotional incidents and the effects of their contradictory mindsets.

Practical implications – The practical implication is a critical approach towards reflective practices of public leaders. The risk is that reflectivity is approached as a socially desirable instrumental ritual. Considering the needs and desires the public leaders shared, the authors wonder: Is there a growing importance of reflective time and space – or, above all, meaningful relations and resonant moments amidst the alienation forces?

Originality/value – The phenomenological exploration offers concrete insights into the daily experience of public leaders', as opposed to the often-abstract theory. The new hypotheses provide a new starting point for further critical phenomenological research.

Keywords Complexity, Accelerated times, Public leadership, Reflective practice, Resonance, Phenomenology, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The aim of this article is a phenomenological exploration of the reflective practices of leaders in public organisations amidst a complex societal context in combination with rapid changes. In this article, we specifically explore the lived experiences of public leaders to generate new hypotheses concerning their reflective practices.

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We chose this group because of their strategic role in current fluid and ambiguous times as described by various scholars (Bauman, 2000, 2007; Rhodes and Noordegraaf, 2007; Horney *et al.*, 2010; Rosa, 2016, 2019; Van der Wal, 2017). The background of the study is the observation that research on business and management is also accelerated tremendously, thereby remaining fragmented and interdisciplinary (Snyder, 2019).

In this choice for a qualitative approach, we follow Rhodes and Noordegraaf (2007), who highlighted the value of qualitative explorations to study public leaders. They state that political science provides limited help in developing our understanding of the behaviour of top-level bureaucrats and why they do what they do. This view asks for qualitative research, collecting thick data on the beliefs and practices to penetrate beneath the surface manifestations.

Arthur *et al.* (2004) suggest in this light that the “blind spot” in understanding leadership is understanding experiences; moreover, they state that developing a method for accessing experience is of utmost importance for understanding leadership. The over-arching purpose of this paper is to use a phenomenological approach to understand better the experiences that facilitate leadership reflectivity and, thereby, leadership development.

Vaill underlined the urgency of learning considering the dynamics of “permanent white water”: the unpredictable environment in which leaders work. He explains how nonstop “white water” puts leaders in the position of doing things they have little experience with or have never done before—thus making effective learning a critical skill (Vaill, 1996). Noordegraaf (2007) emphasises the increase in visibility and expectations of public leaders due to economic, social and technological transformations in his studies. In their context, public leaders face a series of “critical demands” due to increased stakeholder multiplicity, authority turbulence, innovation forces and ethical complexities (Van der Wal, 2017).

Van der Wal (2017) refers to the term VUCA, underlining the volatility, speed, magnitude and dynamics of change, with uncertainty describing the unpredictability of issues and events in public management. In his definition, complexity stands for the chaos that surrounds all organisations and ambiguity describes the “haziness of reality and the mixed meanings of conditions” (Horney *et al.*, 2010; Kornelsen *et al.*, 2019).

In general, leaders face an increase in ambiguous situations and new questions, asking for a fundamentally new perspective on leadership (Noordegraaf, 2007; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011; Obolensky, 2014). Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the concept of “wicked issues”, as opposed to “tame issues”, referring to complex and new societal problems that others have not experienced before, which means that no prior knowledge is available.

Heifetz and Heifetz (1994) refer to problems that are too complex to be quickly resolved and which require social engagement and support, distinguishing adaptive and technical problems. Adaptive problems are, in this light, challenges that leaders face, requiring a new form of reflective practice (Heifetz and Heifetz, 1994; Grint, 2010). Adaptive problems address the same dynamic as wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Conklin, 2001; Grint, 2005; Van Mourik, 2022). In this paper, we define the context and problems as complex.

Relevant to this paper is the point that new demands on leaders ask for a more profound “attention structure” for the questions concerning complexity (Weber and Glynn, 2006). Weber and Glynn (2006) build on various scholars who state that leaders are overloaded with incoming information and impulses due to these digital times (Rosenberg and Feldman, 2008); “doing” swallows up reflecting and learning (Amulya, 2004; Raelin, 2002). Literature states that a growing number of leaders experience an accelerating force and “no time to think” (Raelin, 2002). Van Mourik (2022) illustrates this by explaining how, specifically in public organisations, the political pressure and hierarchy overrule the wish for reflective moments, dialogue and learning processes.

We define reflective practices as the process of learning through and from experience to gain new insights (Boud and Walker, 1998; Finlay, 2008). Various studies underline that reflective practices offer, above all, the time and space to address the courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos, addressing slow questions at a slow pace because of the moral dilemmas and the existential issues involved, concerning complex issues (Ghaye, 2000; Finlay, 2008; Kunneman and Suransky, 2011; Nullens, 2021).

Schön (1987, 2002) contributed to the concept of reflectivity by exploring how people can learn from their experience in their daily experiences. He introduced the concepts of reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking whilst doing) as the core moments of reflectivity in leadership practices.

In summary, there is a growing force and pressure on public leaders never to stop learning. In this light, the concept of “leadership as a reflective process” seems dominant in public organisations nowadays.

In this study, we explore two significant dimensions: firstly, the intrapersonal and embodied reflection on the experiences of public leaders. Secondly, we explored the interpersonal, dialogical dimensions, considering the processes of “sense-making” with others (Van der Steen *et al.*, 2021).

The main question we explore is how public leaders, working in a complex societal context in combination with an accelerating force, experience these dynamics and how they experience and create reflective time and space. Based on these explorations, we generate new hypotheses for further research.

Methodology

Literature review

As the first step in this study, we conducted a literature review, which shows the latest insights on leadership, complexity and the various dimensions of reflectivity. In this article, we share the results of the qualitative, empirical exploration of the study based on a series of 13 in-depth interviews with public leaders on strategic positions, collecting thick data for a phenomenological analysis.

Approach

Phenomenological research aims to attain the eidetic meanings of a “lived experience”. The methodological meaning and significance of the concept of “lived” through experience is the phenomenological question, “What is this experience like?” (Van Manen, 2017). We chose this qualitative approach since “lived experience” refers to ordinary, everyday experiences. In this study, we consider “reflective moments” as daily and ordinary experiences in the practices of many leaders. Furthermore, with the key concepts of leadership, complexity and reflective practices, we wish to explore personal and existential experiences and struggles.

We conducted this methodology to lift the daily experiences by interpreting every shared experience by the public leaders in its own unique meaning (following Van Manen, 2017; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2008).

Sampling and selection

In our sample strategy, we selected 13 leaders at a strategic level in complex public organisations, both men (8) and women (5). Each of them works as a strategic leader in a public organisation with complex challenges, such as health (3), government (6), education (1), social organisations (3). These public leaders were selected working in a context influenced by current times. We personally invited 22 leaders with an active, reflective practice as members of the so-called “Reflection Room” (9) or other reflective programmes (4). 13 of them

participated. We selected these public leaders with concrete recent reflective experiences and the ability to express their reflections in an interview. This relatively small sample enabled the collection of “lived experiences” (thick data) and a thorough and critical phenomenological analysis of each lived experience.

Data collection

The method in the data collection was an in-depth, open interview with each leader individually and, two weeks later, a written reflection by email by the participants. The key concepts offered the outline of the interview, with a focus on collecting “lived experiences”. As it is a phenomenological exploration, we did not have a strict protocol but an open, attentive explorative inquiry. As [Dahlberg et al. \(2008\)](#) prescribed, we made a profile sketch per participant based on the lived experiences, “making lived analysis”, inferring meaning from what we had heard, observed and felt literally and from the undercurrent of what was being said under the surface of the conversation. During the interview, the depth of the experiences was explored by questions on both intrapersonal and interpersonal reflective practices. [Table 1](#) shows the outline of the in-depth interviews.

Data-analysis

To analyse the tick data, we made 13 documents with observations, reflections and analyses of each leader based on the audio, our notes and their reflections by email. We chose to reflect on the data, making handwritten notes and comments based on the lived experiences per participant and our observations to explore the essence of the experiences of the particular manager. In the phenomenological approach of [Dahlberg et al. \(2008\)](#), we did a close reading with an open and enquiring mind (avoiding selecting or interpreting).

To interpret the data, we combined this open phenomenological approach with the coding system of AtlasTi. We approached every experience as a unique phenomenon. The result was 1,084 codes and 1,413 quotes, 24 memos and 41 clusters. The clusters formed a basis for qualitatively analysing the leaders’ experiences for the main explorative questions. The lived experiences offered 1,413 verbatim quotations ([Patton, 2002](#)). We summarised the most remarkable findings, asking ourselves phenomenological questions: What was calling our attention? What themes and clusters appear and emerge?

Results of the empirical study

Before laying out the reflective practices of the public leaders, we explore which lived experiences they describe as complex and how they relate to these challenges. Amongst the 41 clusters of the 1,084 codes, 359 codes were linked to the complex challenges of the 13 leaders.

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1. Introduction of research, interview and the confidentiality
 2. Introduction of the themes. Sharing the themes in mostly the following order
 - Asking: Could you describe what the following key concepts mean for you in your practice? Complexity, Acceleration, Struggles; Could you give examples of concrete situations? Mutual reflection on answers
 - Reflective practice; Alone and/or with others; Could you give examples of concrete situations? Mutual reflection on answers
 - Emotions as shame and discomfort; Could you give examples of concrete situations? Mutual reflection on answers
 - Mutual reflection on the interview
 - Email after 2 weeks, reflecting on process after the interview by email
-

Table 1.
Outline of in-depth interviews

We wonder what themes and new hypotheses emerge when we unfold the lived experiences with an open and inquiring mind. We summarise the lived experiences of the 13 public leaders in six challenges. We chose to share the quotes of the most illustrative experiences.

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a. The main challenges shared in the lived experiences

1. Forces in the volatile and complex stakeholder fields

First, the leaders shared lived experiences due to the forces in the volatile and complex stakeholder fields with multiple forms of joint responsibilities and hierarchies. One leader in health care shared:

Our care organisation has to work with four counties because we provide addiction treatment. Moreover, we also deal with the municipality because we offer sheltered housing, day-care and homeless shelters. The complexity arises because you always have to know how your organisation is structured and where you are going and often, because of the volatile force field, one of those two is missing.

A leader of a municipality expressed the second illustrative lived experience concerning complexity in the stakeholder field;

We had several austerity assignments. Moreover, if you have to make millions in cuts, the consideration is, since this issue concerns society, shouldn't society be asked: "How should we do this together?" At that moment, some people got very nervous because it was a new and complex approach.

Both quotes illustrate the intensity of the complex issues in a field of stakeholders, mainly across the borders of their organisations and thereby having to cope with insecure and unpredictable processes and outcomes.

The leaders shared how they reflect on this complexity and the forthcoming insecurity and unpredictability. One leader shared an image of a puzzle:

I came from the school of thinking "anything is possible"; the question is only how. From this perspective, complexity is like a puzzle; all the pieces are there that puzzle must be done. Moreover, somewhere in my career, I realised: forget about putting the whole puzzle together because there are too many pieces; it is often too complex. And then you get stuck in the question "how" So, the new battle I have fought is "not everything is possible". That has been decisive to no more prolonged search for the total overview. Now I realise that if you have several pieces of the puzzle, it already gives you a picture or a direction.

2. Complex issues and new challenges

Secondly, the public leaders shared lived experiences concerning complex issues and new challenges. These experiences were coloured by the leaders' specific work field, such as the energy transition, increased complex behaviour amongst patients, increased demands in special education of children and parents or administrative system issues. The leaders generally shared experiences in which they acknowledged and accepted these issues and challenges.

As one leader shared: "*We do not use words such as "complex", "problems" or "issues". Using words like these places immediate pressure and weight on me and others. I do not want to work like that.*"

These lived experiences were generally mentioned as relevant in their daily practice but not as a disturbing struggle for them.

The leaders generally consider these experiences as attractive and challenging. To illustrate this, they used metaphors referring to *top sports*, describing themselves as *athletes*

to *beat the competition*. They describe the complex context as a *Champions League*. These metaphors were used to share the attractiveness of the challenges and the thrill they enjoy.

One leader stated: “*Working in the top league of complexity and challenges helps me stretch and improve daily. I do realise how much I have learned and the degree of complexity and acceleration I can handle.*”

3. The adjustment to digital and hybrid work

Next to these challenges, the third most prevalent lived experiences shared by the public leaders were the adjustment to digital and hybrid work in these times of technology and COVID-19. Positive and negative experiences were shared concerning this theme, from new expressions such as *digital intimacy* to *worn-out feelings of exhaustion and functioning as a productive robot*. These experiences concern the new way of working as a team primarily, illustrating the new questions with new concerns without clear answers or solutions:

Digital working is still in its infancy. It means that you have to give people a considerable measure of co-responsibility. However, at the same time, you can only make it partially non-committal, and you also have to make sure that there are several checkpoints. However, the question is whether we still have sufficient control and idea about the integral approach and necessary coordination. Moreover, there is a certain degree of non-committal risk at a distance.

4. The addictive fast work pace and alienating forces

The fourth most striking lived experience these public leaders shared was the constant pressure of acceleration on themselves and others. The experiences these leaders shared show the enslaving pressure of being accountable at high speed, often 24 h, seven days a week. They report various lived experiences of “shrinking time”, wanting to do more in less time, expressed by one leader: *‘I see a tendency around me of leaders who want to get results and score quickly. We become uncomfortable when things are unclear and uncertain.’*

Another interviewee stated, *‘If you have an ultimate responsibility as a leader, you must always take everything seriously. You must never fade away.’*

Generally, a daily struggle is the constant state of stress leaders report. Even though they relativise complexity as a problem, at the same time, they describe how they are under constant pressure due to the chaotic dynamics, resulting in continuous stress and tension.

Several declare that “*most people working here are regularly on the edge of a burnout.*”

In general, most leaders take the pressure as a given, having the freedom to choose a slower pace from time to time and to *go off the radar* for a few hours when they need to slow down and *come to their senses* again. One leader illustrated, “*I regularly lose connection with my deeper senses, as if there is a solid slide between my head and body, due to the digital work and constant productivity.*”

In this light, the leaders lived shared experiences in which they experience an uncontrollable pace and, as a result, a feeling of alienation in their context. A few of them experience room to play with time and experience a healthy balance.

5. Area of tension: acting vs. waiting

Furthermore, all leaders shared lived experiences expressing an awareness of the changing paradigms concerning their role as a leader. They share how they constantly reflect to figure out either to do this (one side of the pole) or that (the other side of the pole), realising that both choices have a shadow side and there is never a simple one-stop-solution in the chaotic processes. The most frequently experienced theme the public leaders address is the consideration to act and intervene on the one hand or wait and see how processes will co-evolve and emerge.

The tension in these experiences concerned the awareness of their position as a leader, having the responsibility and, at the same time, the urgency to address the complex challenges in co-creation as a team.

6. Relational barrier as a leader

The last theme in the lived experiences was the relational barrier they experienced to share their feelings, doubts and unfinished thoughts because of the hierarchical difference in power. They express how they want to lead and connect in a complex and hierarchical system in the times and the complex dynamic they encounter. For leaders and employees, their changing roles towards mutual reflection and co-creation are uneasy when things are at stake. One leader expressed:

My leadership position means there is always a brake in relationship development. In an organisation that you lead, you are always the one who has to stand above it. I can do that just like I can intervene in complex situations. I can do it all, but it also takes a lot out of me. Emotionally. Is that good or not good? It has become part of my story.

Other experiences in this theme demonstrate how these leaders are aware of the hierarchical structure and patterns in the organisation (e.g. as with ministers or the alderman demanding quick answers) and, at the same time, realise they are part of a system, often using machine-metaphors such as *radar* and *wheel*.

b. The primary reflective practices shared in the lived experiences

In their lived experiences, the participants distinguished two forms of reflective practices in their role: (1) proactive, reflective practices, the planned regular meetings or days outside the organisation and (2) reactive reflective practices, during emotional incidents and distress, in the work process. All interviewees value the relevance of both forms. Some call the planned reflection the “active reflectivity” and the reactive reflections “passive”.

Above all, the leaders share how they value reflection highly as part of their intense role and position. By contrast, most leaders do not have a systematic way of intrapersonal reflecting. Three of the 13 participants have an agenda structure with specific time slots to reflect.

The study on the reflective practices of leaders also shows that slower and deeper reflective time is mainly spent at home, in the evening and during the weekend.

A dominant pattern appears in the lived experiences concerning the incident-driven vulnerable moments of reflectivity. The pattern the leaders shared was: (1) the occurrence of an unexpected emotional situation (sensing a loss of control, a disturbing overload or conflict in work); (2) their reflex; withdrawal to an isolated place or home (downloading, recovering); (3) after downloading and digesting the incident on their own or with a partner, they return the next day at work with a sense of overview, conclusions and a fresh mind; and lastly, (4) connecting and sense-making with others.

The reflex to withdraw stood out of the lived experiences as opposed to their wish to connect and reflect with others.

Table 2 summarises the top six subjects the public leaders reflect. It shows a mix of work-related issues to reflect on and personal issues and patterns.

Reflection on struggles and tension fields
 Reflection on addictive accelerated dynamics and self-care
 Reflection on personal emotional patterns
 Reflection on personal history and personal drive
 Reflection on mindset and attitude
 Reflection on the role as a leader and their presence and interventions (vocabulary and timing)

Table 2.
Reflective practices in
summary

1. Intrapersonal: intuitive embodied reflective practices

When asked how and when they reflect as a strategic public leader intra-personally, the participants shared various practices. The most common forms of intrapersonal reflectivity were moments with coffee at home, reading, philosophising, walking alone or with a partner, internal dialogue, talking, writing blogs or essays, mindful breathing, meditating, therapy, relaxing, drawing, listening or making music and going on nature trails or retreats. More unorthodox reflective practices the leaders applied were “dropping out” for a few hours, adjusting the agenda on the spot, taking side jobs and excursions in other organisations or taking a sabbatical.

These leaders emphasised the importance of the body as a mediating link between internal and external experience and between meaning and action. All of them acknowledge that they are foremost intuitive and creative beings. However, they also demonstrate little awareness or ideas on how to integrate this into their work. Most public leaders struggle with rationality in work, stating that “others” expect solid and predictable solutions. It is a broadly shared lived experience in the form of a prisoner’s dilemma, locked in a collective paradigm of rationality with similar desires to broaden this.

2. Interpersonal reflective practices: dialogical “sense-making”

The second reflective dimension dominant in literature concentrates on leadership as an interactive, interpersonal process of dialogue with others. When asked how they reflect as a public leader interpersonally, the participants shared various practices and experiences.

All leaders stated that this side of reflectivity is a daily reality in their role. They shared various experiences of how they lead by connecting with others to face the challenges.

We observed different mindsets in the lived experiences concerning the role of a leader in this interpersonal dimension. Several leaders acted with the focus on themselves (me), including others, with the invitation, “*Help me to think*”. Others are focussed on involving themselves in the process of others (you) with the question, “*How can I help?*” The third mindset was leaders with a mindset of *helping us* by expressing; “*Since I do not know, I need others to connect and reflect. It is an emergent process of discovering together.*”

On the other hand, the leaders shared lived experiences, revealing barriers to connect and co-create in an equal exchange. First, the majority shared how they, due to the time pressure, miss the mental space to share their thoughts and ideas with others explicitly. Secondly, almost all of them pointed out the relational barrier due to their power and hierarchical position. A third barrier mentioned by all leaders was their more personal struggles, emotions, patterns and fears, influencing their openness to show themselves in a vulnerable state. They shared various lived experiences illustrating the precariousness of the role of a public leader.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we specifically explored the meaning public leaders give to the concept of reflection to generate new hypotheses. Based on the outcomes, we wondered: What is calling our attention? What themes and hypotheses appear and emerge for further research? We formulate seven phenomena with new hypotheses and implications.

1. Complexity as an attractive asset

The leaders seemed critical at the assumed pressure of complex challenges. They emphasised the attractiveness of this part of their work and context. They generally consider these challenges as attractive, challenging them in their reflectivity. In this light, the number of Topsport metaphors in the lived experiences seems meaningful. This outcome brings a

nance to the view of various scholars who emphasise the problematic side of these challenges for leaders.

2. Avoidance of sharing vulnerable struggles as a reflex

Analysing the reflective practices in the case of emotional incidents, a dominant reflex appeared in the stories of the leaders: at the moment that they experience distress from an incident (sensing a loss of control, an emotional overload or conflict in work), in the first instance, their reflex is withdrawal. Alone, they download, recover, reflect, interpret and come to their “senses”. This seems to be a flight response due to stress and a reflex to stay in control and remain stable for others. Even though they wish to be a connecting leader, they avoid sharing emotions and vulnerable struggles amidst the ambiguity in the first instance. The perceptions of others might reinforce this, aiming to keep the image of a strong leader.

3. Addictive pace, constant stress and physical intelligence

Generally, the primary challenge is the constant state of stress leaders report. Even though they relativise complexity as a problem, at the same time, they describe how they are under constant pressure due to the chaotic dynamics, resulting in continuous stress and tension. These leaders’ struggles reveal their patterns due to their values and mindset expressed by their expressions such as “I have to work hard”, “maximise talents”, “always take everything seriously” and “never fade away and perform 100% at high speed”. The view of [Rosa \(2019\)](#) concerning alienation and the need for more resonance in relation to reflectivity might be interesting for further research. He pleads for resonance, offering a basis for experiencing a slower, more profound, meaningful and transformative rapport between leaders and their environment amidst the acceleration and the experience of shrinking time.

4. Contradictory mindsets:

In the interviews, it became clear that leaders act and reflect from two contradictory paradigms: on the one hand, the open, receptive paradigm of what we summarise as the “growth” mindset: with a readiness to experiment and learn. On the other hand, a control paradigm of judgement and fear, the “fixed” mindset with an attachment to the outcome of the issues at hand ([Dweck, 2016](#)). This underlying tension seems to be the source of the majority of struggles they share and the cause of their most dominant reflexes: to work and learn hard at the same time. We wonder, what is the deeper desire for public leaders to work and learn hard?

5. Being a leader and a public servant

We wonder what is the more profound desire for public leaders to work hard at a continuously addictive pace? This phenomenon raises questions on the role of these public leaders employed in a public organisation, being both leader and public servant. In various experiences, their loyalty and servant mindset working in a regulated system overrules their leadership and autonomy. From the perspective of [Ehrenberg \(2010\)](#), at the “paradox of autonomy” he describes, one could question if reflectivity has also become a “overregulated” instrument and a “mode of dominance”.

6. Espoused theory vs. theory in use

As a result of these contradictory mindsets, a gap appears between the “espoused theory” in literature and the “theory in use” by these leaders on three appearing clusters, illustrating relevant themes to explore further ([Kerr and Todd, 2021](#)). First, the espoused theory is that leaders should be reflective and address slow questions. Secondly, the espoused theory is that leaders should be co-creative and share meaning with others through reflectivity. Lastly, the espoused theory that leaders should be reflective, wise and self-aware.

7. Canonical effect of dominant concepts

In the interviews, the feeling of socially correct behaviour crept upon us. The subject of reflective practices and their habits and patterns enticed the participants to show first of all, how reflective they were by sharing numerous examples. The personal invitation and the theme of reflective practices might have caused this limitation. The participants seemed critical at certain moments during the interview, but none were critical concerning the subject of reflectivity. The assumption was in their approach; the more reflective, the better, delivering a series of lived experiences with contradictory information. The concept of “leadership as reflective and relation process” seems dominant in explaining the required view on leadership nowadays. We suspect a canonical effect in this study of the concepts reflective concerning leadership. The canonical effect refers to the phenomenon where certain concepts dominate an intellectual landscape and hinder the critical gaze; the concepts become “frozen” (Mattingly, 2019).

These outcomes based on the lived experiences of Dutch public leaders can be considered as illustrative for other public leaders in democratic countries dealing with a similar complex context. The limitation of this study is the relatively small sample. This limitation asks for further research to be able to formulate relevant hypotheses.

Lastly, we hypothesise that planned reflectivity could become a goal in itself and an overregulated ritual. The ethical question of why reflectivity in a particular context seems essential and with which aim or subject seems relevant for leaders, coaches and educators. This new hypothesis provides a new starting point for further critical phenomenological research on the ethics and the instrumental rationality of reflectivity in the practices of public leaders. There is a risk that reflectivity is approached as a socially desirable ritual.

Considering the needs and desires the public leaders shared, we wonder at the end of this paper: Is there a growing importance of reflective time and space – or, above all, meaningful relations and resonant moments amidst the alienating forces?

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