

## **Building on the concept of leadership: An individual-focused perspective**

**Dina Banerjee, PhD**

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Faculty, Organizational Development and Leadership (ODL) Program

Gender and Women's Studies Program

Shippensburg University

*"Life is a preparation for leadership" ~ Bennis (2003: xxviii)*

### **Abstract**

Very little is known about leadership at an individual level in the scholarship of leadership and social change. In this study using institutional ethnography as a research method, I survey graduate students of the Organizational Development and Leadership program of a mid-Atlantic university. Qualitative data analyses reveal that majority of the respondents believe that leadership has a micro perspective and can be practiced at individual level. Literature defines leadership primarily as a group dynamic. Literature also suggests that one of the functions of leadership is to facilitate positive social changes. Via the data analyses in this study, I propose that any attempt or idea that makes positive differences at an individual level (and not necessarily at the group level) can also be regarded as an effective leadership. Thus, I intend to build on the traditional concepts of leadership by underpinning leadership at an individual level. Future research should further explore this definition of leadership in enhancing the well-being of individuals.

### **Introduction**

This paper is about a concept of leadership that does not necessarily include a group or team of followers. Scholarship of leadership and social change has offered multiple definitions of leadership (Meyer & Slechta, 2002; Northouse, 2012). Scholars describe leadership from many perspectives such as social (Northouse, 2012), cultural (Rosser-Mims & Johnson-Bailey, 2012), organizational (Meyer & Slechta, 2002), and global (Darling, 2012; de Vries 2012). Thus, we obtain rich notions of leadership with regard to different socio-organizational settings. Sometimes the scholars agree and sometimes they disagree in many aspects of the definitions. However, they agree that effective leadership serves to facilitate positive social change(s) (Meyer and Slechta, 2002; Northouse, 2012).

Sociological literature on social change suggests that positive social changes mostly initiate from "consciousness-raising" (Keating, 2005; Guenther, 2009). Consciousness-raising is an awareness of an individual. This awareness enables the

individual to realize that one's personal problems are not personal any more, and those are shared by many others (Sewpaul, 2005). Thus, through consciousness-raising, a personal problem gets translated into a public issue (Keating, 2005; Sewpaul, 2005; Guenther, 2009). Therefore, the beginning of social change primarily takes place at the individual level which in turn gets converted into larger societal changes. Hence, in this study, I propose that since positive social changes often germinate at individual levels, effective leadership could also be defined at individual levels. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, there exists very little empirical study that addresses this gap in the literature and discusses leadership from an individual aspect.

Obtaining data from a survey of graduate students of Organizational Development and Leadership (ODL) program of a mid-Atlantic institution, I ask: (1) How do graduate students in the ODL program perceive leadership? (2) Do they think that the concept of leadership can be applied at an individual level? And, (3) Did they ever practice leadership at an individual level? Using institutional ethnography as a research method, I analyze the data qualitatively. Findings suggest that many respondents perceive leadership as an individual concept because they have practiced leadership at individual levels. Results are interpreted in terms of sociological and social science literature on leadership and social change.

This study is important for 3 specific reasons. First, it contributes to the literature on leadership by extending the definition of leadership. With the advent of globalization and changing natures of social organizations, it is vital that we explore the notion of leadership extensively. This is because a detailed idea of leadership is necessary to empower individuals as agents of positive changes. Second, this study extends the scholarship on leadership and social change by underpinning individuals as their own leaders, thereby acting as mediators of positive social changes. This is particularly important because in the literature on leadership, the dynamics of individuals impacting their own lives is often overlooked because the main focus is on group activities and accomplishments.

Finally, this study also contributes to the empirical literature on leadership and social change by using first hand data collected from graduate students of an ODL program. Students in this program gain an in-depth understanding of leadership in various social and cultural contexts. Thus, they gain insightful knowledge about effective leadership and positive social changes. Hence, I expect to obtain substantive responses from them with regards to the research questions.

The rest of the paper comprises of four sections: In the "literature review" section, I present an overview of the traditional definitions of leadership and how positive social change is portrayed as one of leadership's major outcomes. This section also presents a brief discussion of the sociological scholarship on social change regarding individuals as agents of social changes. I specify the data and analytical steps in the "data and methods" section. Findings of the study are detailed in the "results" section. Finally, in the "conclusion" section I interpret the findings and their implications.

## Literature Review

**Reviewing the definitions of leadership:** Scholarship on leadership and social change offers more than 100 definitions of leadership (Rost, 1991). It is beyond the scope of this paper to illustrate the entire literature. Thus, I discuss the definitions as provided by Peter G. Northouse (2012); and Paul J. Meyer and Randy Slechta (2002) because their definitions represent almost all the definitions. Northouse (2012) posits that, “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). In this definition “influence process” is key to the understanding of leadership. It is noteworthy that influence process is not a trait that a leader should possess. Rather, it is the way in which a leader communicates to the followers. Here, leadership is used to impact the group towards accomplishment of a common goal (Northouse, 2012).

Interestingly, Northouse (2012) also defines leadership as a trait, an ability, a skill, a behavior, and a relationship. He argues that leadership is a trait because it often distinguishes the characteristics of an individual from those of others in a group or team setting. For example, leaders are generally more self-assured, convincing, and approachable than followers. Therefore defining leadership as a trait puts substantive attention on the qualities of the individual leader rather than on the process of influencing (Northouse, 2012).

Perception of leadership as an ability highlights the aptitude of an individual as a leader (Northouse, 2012). That is, how well one can lead. It is important to note that whereas ability generally refers to a leader’s natural aptitudes, ability can also be learned. For instance, some leaders can be natural motivators, while others make conscious efforts to motivate the followers. Therefore, “ability” primarily indicates a person’s eagerness to hone oneself as a proficient leader (Northouse, 2012). Leadership is also defined as a skill (Northouse, 2012). Skill refers to the expertise that is required to encourage followers and thereby to accomplish goals. Skilled leaders have substantive knowledge about strategies required for facilitating goal achievements of the groups such as, making networks, fund-raising programs, and foreseeing challenges. That is, skilled leaders know exactly what the group wants and what should be done to meet the needs (Northouse, 2012). Moreover, explaining leadership as a skill makes leadership accessible to everyone because skill can be acquired via learning and practice (Northouse, 2012).

Additionally, leadership is a behavior (Northouse, 2012). Behavior refers to how leaders present themselves and act with other people in different social circumstances. Furthermore, while traits, abilities, and skills are intangible, behaviors can be observed, and thus can be easily measured (Northouse, 2012). Behaviors can be of two types: (1) task behaviors and (2) process behaviors. Leaders use task behaviors when they are focused on achieving group goals, and they use process behavior to develop effective strategies to obtain maximum efforts from the followers as well as to reduce barriers (Northouse 2012). “Since leadership requires both task and process behaviors, the challenge for leaders is to know the best way to combine them in their efforts to reach a goal” (Northouse, 2012, p. 5).

Finally, leadership is a relationship (Northouse, 2012). Relationship places importance on the interactive nature of the leader with her/his followers and other people. Thus it takes away the attention from personal characteristics of the leader. Rost (1991) states that when defined, leadership as a relationship reflects a process of symbiosis and cooperation between leaders and group members. That is, a leader both impacts and is impacted by the group members and every member is impacted by the overall team experience (Northouse, 2012). Conventionally, leadership is a top-down authority. Yet, when we view it as a relationship, it acquires a multidimensional aspect that is interactive and collaborative. Thus, group members feel comfortable and motivated within their group settings (Northouse, 2012).

Whereas Northouse's (2012) definitions underpin the quality-based aspects of leaders, other definitions focus on responsibilities of leaders with regards to efficient leadership. Meyer and Slechta (2002) describe leadership in terms of five elements, which they also refer to as the 'five pillars' of effective leadership. According to them, leadership is: (1) defining specific objectives the leader wishes to accomplish, (2) creating a plan to facilitate accomplishment of objectives, (3) developing group-based motivational strategies to inspire actions, (4) creating trust and self-assurance of oneself as well as the team members to obtain best performance, and (5) incorporating positive perspectives in order to prevent members from giving up while encountering challenges.

Meyer and Slechta (2002) affirm that these five pillars are indispensable for effective leadership because it is only via these pillars the objectives of a group can be translated into substantive actions and goal attainments. Moreover, "No leader can be truly great without consistently practicing the habits represented by the five pillars. Contained within each pillar are attitudes that require more than just leadership skill to acquire and apply. "All are essential to achieving specific results through leadership efforts" (Meyer & Slechta, 2002, p. 24). Hence, leadership in this regard is more of an attitude than anything else. Thus no matter whether leadership is viewed as a characteristic, process, or attitude, scholars view it as a concept that is associated only with group contexts. In this study, I intend to present leadership from an individual perspective.

**Leadership and Positive Social Change:** Literature on leadership has offered a substantive understanding of leadership dynamics for decades. This knowledge system illustrates the characteristics of leadership, and how those characteristics can be internalized theoretically when leadership is in action (LaFasto & Larson, 2012). Most of the existing literature also pays attention to the consequences of leadership. For example, LaFasto and Larson (2012) suggest that one of the major outcomes of leadership is positive social change. After studying the lives of 31 humanitarian leaders, the authors conclude that leaders make differences when they connect and commit to their causes. Here positive social change is defined as any change that enhances the well-being of individuals (LaFasto & Larson, 2012).

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) posit that effective leadership does not make any sense if it is not associated with social change. Additionally, leaders might

initiate social changes via two specific discoveries. (1) Discovery of the ideal self – in this phase, leaders realize their goals and connect their goals to their passion and enthusiasm. This is a process of learning where leaders identify goals that would not only transform them as better people but also improve lives of others in some way. (2) Discovery of the real self – in this phase, leaders gain the awareness that in the process of accomplishing their goals, they might experience disappointment, frustration, and boredom. Nevertheless, they must persevere and remain hopeful. Thus, this stage enables the leaders to strategize and re-strategize their actions to adjust to their changing environments (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

While most scholars define positive social changes as improvement of followers' lives, Meyer and Slechta (2002) illustrate change as the empowerment of the leaders themselves. In their organizations, the authors have worked with many leaders across different cultures "...helping them overcome the attitude and habits that [stood] between themselves and leadership success" (Meyer & Slechta, 2002, p. 24). Thus, leadership is a process where individuals evolve as proficient leaders with the help of others (Meyer & Slechta, 2002).

Consequences of leadership as positive social changes have been presented in multiple ways. For example, Alaedini (2012) describes social changes as resulting from leadership in terms of winning good and supportive friends in an organizational setting. Guasta (2012) refers to the development of awareness and coherence among personal and collective ideologies and positive social changes. Again, by collecting data from civilian employees and police officers, Sopow (2012) designates leadership led social changes as being ethical and collaborative vision building among group members. Laudeman (2012) explains change with regards to substantive learning experiences for both the leader and the followers. Hence, scholars of leadership and social change agree that irrespective of the nature and characteristics of leadership, the main outcome of effective leadership in any social context is positive social change.

**Individuals as Agents of Social Changes:** Sociological scholarship on social change states that positive social changes are predominantly individual efforts via the notion of "consciousness-raising" (Keating, 2005; Guenther, 2009). Consciousness-raising is defined as the realization of an individual that one's personal issues are no longer personal, and those issues are common to others as well (Sewpaul, 2005). Hence, consciousness-raising transforms a personal concern into a public matter (Keating, 2005; Sewpaul, 2005; Guenther, 2009). Thus, social changes predominantly initiate with individuals and then get translated into larger social levels.

Empirical studies on social changes also present individuals as agents of social changes. For instance, obtaining ideas from the social movement and institutional change perspectives, Hond and De Bakker (2007) examine how activism impacts corporate social change initiatives. As the responsibility of resolving social issues is transferred from state to the private sector, individuals in activist groups increasingly challenge firms to influence various changes in corporate activities. Ultimately, they succeed in targeting grassroot-level changes (Hond & De Bakker 2007).

Again, resistance is a change-based activity that includes specific behaviors. Individuals often start these behaviors. Deriving data from interviews and ethnographic accounts of behaviors in 165 classrooms at two high schools, McFarland (2004) found that individuals who facilitate social change mostly design effective strategies for resistance. Because resistance is often disrupted, the author highlights the roles of individual actors as crucial to the understanding of social changes (McFarland, 2004).

Micheletti and Stolle (2007) study the anti-sweatshop movement's commitment in global social justice. Individuals in the movement groups make it a powerful force of social change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the time global corporate capitalism gain political control, three popular unions (namely. anti-sweatshop associations, international humanitarian organizations, and Internet spin doctors) focus on garment-production concerns and encourage consumers to take substantive actions. The authors examine “actors” within the unions, their social justice responsibilities and, their views on the role of consumers in taking actions. Findings suggest that the individual activists mobilize consumers through actor-oriented and event-based meaning of their agenda and influence consumer behaviors that strongly impact corporate changes (Micheletti and Stolle 2007). Therefore, in this research, I propose that because positive social changes often start at individual levels, effective leadership could also be defined at individual levels.

## **Data and Methods**

**The broader research project:** The larger project of which this paper is a small part intends to explore the work-life experiences of graduate students in the ODL program at a teaching-oriented mid-Atlantic university. The project is designed around three specific ideas: (a) to study the impact of gender on leadership abilities of ODL graduate students (b) to study the impact of race/ethnicity on leadership abilities of ODL graduate students; and (c) to study the impact of leadership on work/academic experiences of ODL graduate students. To meet these objectives I have conducted an online survey with open-ended questions among the graduate students of the ODL program in the Fall semester of 2013.

**Selection of respondents:** I studied the ODL program's graduate students because of four precise reasons: (1) Being graduate students they are more focused on their career expectations as compared to undergraduate students. Many of them know exactly what they want in terms of their professional aspirations. Thus, they are more in control of their academic experiences as compared to students who are still figuring out their future goals. Hence, it is possible that graduate students in the ODL program acquire greater leadership qualities than undergraduate students; (2) Being the graduate students of the Organizational Development and Leadership program, they obtain in-depth knowledge about leadership dynamics within various social and organizational contexts, as a part of their course work. It is expected that they would reflect deeper understandings of leadership and its challenges than students who are not enrolled in the ODL program; (3) Graduate students in the ODL program of this mid-Atlantic university are diverse in terms of their gender, race/ethnicity, culture, and age, and (4) Many of the students in the

ODL program are non-traditional. Therefore, it is possible that they have different life experiences than traditional students. Those life experiences might contribute substantively to the understanding of leadership dynamics from several perspectives.

**Data collection:** An online survey with open-ended questions to the graduate students in the ODL program constitutes the data for this study. I decided to conduct survey instead of face-to-face interviews because the data are collected in the middle of a regular semester (Fall semester, 2013). Thus, to create minimum disruption in the busy schedule of the students, I administered the survey in order to enable them to take the survey at their convenience. The questions are open ended to encourage in-depth responses from the students. This survey is an ongoing one. At the time of writing this paper, 19 students have responded to the survey. This paper is based on the data obtained from those 19 students.

The survey is administered in the program called “Survey Monkey.” To encourage more participation, I have limited the survey to eight questions only that are focused on the broader research project (Please refer to Appendix A for details of the survey instruments). Students’ participation in the survey is voluntary. Other than gender and race/ethnicity, no other demographic information is obtained from the respondents. Also, respondents are aware of the fact that their decisions of not participating in the survey would not affect their academic performance in any way. Out of the 19 students who have responded, 12 are women, and seven are men. Sixteen students have identified themselves as whites, three students identified themselves as African Americans, and one student has checked the “other” category.

**Research method - institutional ethnography:** Institutional ethnography (IE) is a research method in which a researcher explores the world in which one lives but focuses on “knowing the known,” and “understanding the understood” comprehensively by discovering the fundamental ideas that are usually taken for granted (Smith, 1999; 2005). This analytical method enables the researcher to construct a body of ideas that surpasses the ordinary lives of people and provides a richer understanding of otherwise day-to-day existences (Smith, 1999; Campbell & Gregor, 2004). Smith (1999) postulates that, “. . .[the] student in institutional ethnography is required, for instance, to see herself as a knower located in everyday world and finding meaning there, in contrast to reliance on library research and application of theories – what we would see as remaining ‘in the discourse,’” (p. 11).

IE is essentially a feminist method. It is inspired by the concept of consciousness-raising, an ideology of the Women’s Movement in the U.S. in the 1960s (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). Smith (2005) illustrates this method mainly as a tool to explore and analyze unthinkable notions that are hidden in our ordinary lives. By analyzing people’s experiences systematically, IE is also a powerful method for examining the complexities of how the same idea can be perceived differently by different individuals. Whereas IE primarily focuses on the work-life experiences of women within organizations, it also highlights the importance of revealing the underlying aspect as common ideas in a way that has never been studied.

Researchers conduct IE by means of in-depth data. These data can be derived from interviews, content analyses of careful observations, or comprehensive surveys (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). This is to enhance the understanding of people's perspectives that are embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts. In particular, researchers closely study how individuals conceptualize commonplace ideas that impact their lives within various institutions of socializations such as family, schools, churches, and workplaces. Hence, I believe that this method can be used as a compelling way to examine people's perceptions of leadership from an individual standpoint.

The data for this study are semi-structured and collected as transcripts via a survey of the graduate students of the ODL program. The survey instruments (see Appendix A for details) include questions about leadership perceptions of the students. To address the research questions in this study, I have used students' responses from questions # 3, 4, and 5 (see Appendix A for details).

**Research design - one case study with multiple embedded cases:** I studied the leadership-based opinions of 19 ODL graduate students as embedded cases within a single case study of a leadership concept. This method is proposed by Yin (2009) who suggests that a single case study could be comprised of many units of analyses. Moreover, the case study could focus on an organization/institution with events, decisions, or programs (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) explains those units as embedded cases. For example, he has conducted the 1956 Union Democracy case study that focuses on the concept of "state of the art" as the main case and individual members in the organization as embedded cases. Similarly in this study, I underpin leadership as an individual-based concept as the main case and individual graduate students in the ODL program as embedded cases.

**Data processing and analyses:** I have conducted the survey using an online service called "Survey Monkey." As stated earlier, other than gender and race/ethnicity, I have not asked for any demographic information in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. I have read each survey carefully in order to explore participants' perceptions about leadership at an individual level, noting responses on individual-based leadership. The survey includes specific questions on leadership at individual levels. I have used that data to address the research questions of this study.

I analyzed the data in three steps. The survey instruments numbers 3, 4, and 5 include questions for these steps (see Appendix A for details of the questions). In step one, I present participants' general opinions about leadership (addressing research question 1). In step two I discuss whether or not they perceive that the concept of leadership at an individual (addressing research question 2). And step three details whether participants themselves have ever used leadership at an individual level. And if they have, then, in what way they use leadership to enhance their own well-beings (addressing research question 3). In each step, I categorize the responses via various emerging themes as based on the responses. The emerging themes are derived directly from the responses and the commonalities among responses.



To obtain the themes I read the responses carefully and insert comments beside each response. Then I search for patterns in my comments. The themes are based on the patterns of those comments. While presenting the data, I have omitted or aggregated some information regarding respondents' number of children, gender of children, and names of organizations and social settings to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.

## Results

**Step one - opinions about leadership in general:** In this step, I addressed the first research question: How do graduate students in the ODL program perceive leadership? To obtain answer to this question I use question # 3 in the survey instrument: "what is your idea of leadership?" Out of 19 students, 17 responded to this question. Three specific themes have emerged (presented with underlines) from those 17 responses.

Majority of the participants define leadership in the traditional way. For them leadership is the ability to guide and govern groups of people towards the achievement of a common goal. For example, one of the students has responded that:

[Leadership is] *being in charge of a group of people.*

Another participant has posited that:

[Leadership is] *an individual or group of individuals who influence others in a positive way.*

Again another student remarks:

*My idea of leadership is a blend of strategy and inspiration to help others to reach personal and group goals.*

Similarly someone else expresses:

[Leadership as] *decisive, empathic and pragmatic self-initiated behavior procession that impels others to join, share and succeed in partnership to a common goal*

The second theme that emerges in this context also confirmed to the traditional definitions of leadership. Few of the respondents describe leadership as facilitating social changes towards positive directions. For example, a participant comments that:

*I view leadership as bringing about change and innovation in various aspects of life, in a positive way.*

And another respondent remarks:

[A leader] *... is someone who influences others to take a positive course of action/path.*

Interestingly, the third theme deviates from the traditional definitions of leadership and present leadership as an individual level approach that might not necessarily include a group or a team. Only two students contribute towards this theme. One of them posit that:

*Leadership is an idea or action that pushes a person or group of people toward a goal.*

The other student responds:

*I have a big image about leadership. I realized that leadership start in us in the first place.*

To summarize, graduate students in the ODL program perceive leadership in three particular ways. Two of those perceptions confirm to the traditional definitions of leadership: leadership is guiding groups of people; and leadership facilitates changes in positive directions. It is important to note that the third way of defining leadership did underpin the individualistic aspect of leadership that might not involve a group.

**Step two - whether or not the concept of leadership can be applied to the life of an individual:** In step two, I addressed the second research question: Do students think that the concept of leadership can be applied at an individual level? To obtain this answer, I have used question # 4 in the survey instrument: “Do you think that the concept of leadership can be applied to the life of an individual? if yes, how? if no, why not?” Out of 19 students, 16 have responded to this question. Four themes emerge (presented with underlines) from those 16 responses.

It is important to note that 15, out of 16 students who have responded to this question affirmed that they believe the concept of leadership could be applied in the lives of individuals. The first theme that emerges in this step is that leadership is an inherent aspect of an individual’s life. And that’s why it could be practiced at an individual level.

For instance one student says:

*Yes, because you can look at an individual’s life and see where they have demonstrated leadership.*

Another student remarks:

*It is impossible for an individual to be immune from leadership. An individual is likely to either be a leader or follower at some point in time*

Again, one of the respondents comments:

*[Definitely] yes.....leadership could apply on our daily bases function... it starts from our childhood*

Likewise someone else states:

*The concept of leadership is applicable to every person’s life at some point. Even as an individual, the person may be a leader by example to someone else, or will have gleaned [her/his] own ideas from another leader at some point*

Few of the students contribute to the second theme in this step. They believe that leadership could be applied to individuals' lives because leadership is primarily about taking initiatives. And this could be accomplished at individual levels as well. For example, a student responds:

*Yes, everyone can be a leader by stepping up and doing a job.*

Also, another student posits:

*Yes it can be applied to the life of individuals. As we all go through life, we have many different tasks daily that we are either leading to get done or following to help get them done*

The third theme that emerges in this regard was: leadership could be applied to individual lives because leadership is an important component to manage one's personal, familial, professional, and religious lives. For instance, one of the participants states:

*Yes, it can be applied to reach personal goals or to help manage life. This includes managing family life.*

Another participant says:

*Absolutely. Leadership is somewhat of a personality trait, and somewhat of a learned trait. Leadership that has developed in an individual can affect every aspect of his or her life, from family or friends to career and workplace.*

Another remark in this regard is:

*Yes. Professionally, an individual can demonstrate leadership in his/her occupation and through his/her participation in professional interest groups. Personally, I think leadership can be demonstrated in how one provides direction to his/her family, church, etc.*

Also, one more comment is:

*Yes: leadership is a practice that can be applied to all parts of life for an individual regardless of their career or personal life. All persons will be presented with obstacles in life that require leadership; therefore, all persons will apply leadership and its concepts in their lives.*

Finally, only one of the respondents believes that leadership could be applied at an individual level because leadership at an individual level is a way for an individual to become a role model. In specific, this student says that:

*I think that an individual can be a leader in the things that they do and [thus can] often serve as a role model for others.*

To recapitulate, graduate students in the ODL program strongly believe that leadership as a concept could be applied to the lives of individuals. This is because leadership is an indispensable part of one's life; leadership also indicates taking initiatives; leadership at individual level helps people to manage their personal, familial, professional, and religious lives; and leadership is a way to become a role model.

**Step three - whether or not leadership as a concept was applied in individuals' lives:** In this step, I responded to the third research question: Did students ever practice leadership at an individual level? To obtain answer to this question I have used question # 5 in the survey instrument: "Have you ever applied any leadership concept in your own life? If yes, please elaborate?" Out of 19 students, 16 have answered to this question. Two precise themes emerge (presented with underlines) from those 16 responses.

Majority of the students have applied individual-based leadership in their personal and professional lives. It is noteworthy that these students have focused on enhancing their own lives via the concept of leadership. They did not talk about leading any group or team. For example, one respondent states:

*Yes, I apply the concept of leadership constantly in my personal life as well as in my graduate school program. I have [X number of] children under the age of two years old and a teenager. I have to prioritize on a daily and sometimes hourly basis to keep a balance and make sure multiple goals are being met. Example: Trying to put dinner on the table while my toddler has a meltdown and a school project is due. I can put a movie on for my toddler to watch while I cook dinner. Once [she/he] goes to bed I work on [schoolwork]. In real life I have a new baby and [she/he] would be in the mix and crying because he got hungry. So I would put the movie on, pop a stir fry in the microwave and feed him a bottle to meet the goals of: calming my toddler, preparing dinner and feeding the baby. I usually work at night on school work when my toddler sleeps and then flip flop my time between the baby care and school work.*

Another student posits:

*Yes, I have applied many of the [leadership] concept[s] to my own life to have a better understanding of them while in [a social situation]. I continue to use them as they help me understand a situation and how I may need to approach the situation.*

Few of the students suggest that they practice individual-based leadership concept in order to encourage and motivate others. This might appear as leading a group. However, these respondents want to encourage others by being an example and not by mobilizing a group or a team. For instance, one of them comments:

*I feel like I regularly apply leadership concepts to my life; I am constantly observing my employees actions and behaviors in an effort to ensure that I am changing my behaviors in an effort to motivate them accordingly.*

Likewise, the second comment in this regard is:

*Yes. I have primarily used the idea of leading by example, working hard in my job and in school to encourage others to do the same.*

Therefore, many graduate students apply the concept of leadership in their own lives at individual levels. They did so in order to improve their personal or professional lives; and to encourage or motivate others in their respective social settings.

## Conclusion

In this study, I explore the concept of leadership that does not essentially involve followers. I attempt to extend the definition of leadership via providing an individual-based notion. Using qualitative data from a survey of graduate students of the ODL program of a mid-Atlantic university, I addressed three research questions: (1) How do graduate students in the ODL program perceive leadership? (2) Do they think that the concept of leadership can be applied at an individual level? And (3) Did they ever practice leadership at an individual level? Findings suggest that although many students define leadership with regards to its traditional definitions, they do believe that leadership could be practiced at an individual level without including any group of followers.

Students in the ODL program assert that leadership as a concept could be applied to the lives of individuals. This is because leadership is an integral part of one's life. It also indicates taking initiatives and helps people to manage their personal, familial, professional, and religious lives. Again, leadership could be used as a tool to become a role model. Respondents not only believe that leadership as a notion could be individual-focused, but they also apply the idea at individual levels. They do so in order to enhance their personal or professional lives as well as to inspire others in different social settings.

I interpreted the findings with help of the literature on leadership and social change. LaFasto and Larson (2012) suggest that one of the primary consequences of leadership is positive change. Here positive change is described as any change that enhances the well-being of individuals (LaFasto & Larson, 2012). Again, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) posit that effective leadership always leads to positive social change. And, leaders could initiate social changes via leader's discovery of her/his ideal self, and discovery of her/his real self. Hence, I argue that positive changes can also be experienced at individual levels. For example, in this study the students experience positive changes by improving their personal or professional lives. They create these changes by realizing their personal or professional goals, figuring out their aspirations. Hence, these individual efforts to improve one's life can also be regarded as leadership.

Literature on social change postulates that benevolent changes are largely individual efforts that develop from “consciousness-raising” (Keating, 2005; Guenther, 2009). Consciousness-raising is the awareness of an individual that her/his personal issues are not personal any more but shared by many others (Sewpaul, 2005). Therefore, consciousness-raising, converts a personal problem into a public matter (Keating, 2005; Sewpaul, 2005; Guenther, 2009). Thus, social changes primarily start with individuals and then get transformed into changes at broader social levels. Indeed, the respondents in this study have the awareness that unless they improve themselves via their actions and behaviors they cannot act as role models. I propose that if every individual in a specific social setting has the same awareness, then substantive relationships can easily be developed in that context. And substantive relationships in turn would lead to smooth accomplishments of people’s aspirations-- positive social changes.

Via this study, I expect to extend the literature on leadership by expanding the definition of leadership. With the emergence of globalization and new facets of social organizations, it is important to delve into the concept of leadership. I believe that a comprehensive analysis of leadership would empower individuals as mediators of social changes. I also want to inform the scholarship that individuals, as their own leaders are capable of acting as agents of positive social changes. This is particularly important because in the literature on leadership, the dynamics of individuals impacting their own lives are often disregarded since the key focus is on group dynamics.

This study is not devoid of limitations. One of the significant limitations is the limited nature of data. Whereas data from 19 students do provide an insight regarding leadership, these data are inadequate to generalize the findings. Hence, future research should focus on large-scale surveys of demographically representative samples. And, deriving data from people in various leadership positions outside of a specific leadership program is another way to extend the empirical literature. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the empirical literature on leadership by using first hand data from graduate students of a well-regarded ODL program. Students in this program learn the details of leadership processes in several social and cultural contexts. Hence, they gain a thorough understanding of effective leadership and its influences on positive changes. Therefore, they are capable to present substantive viewpoints about leadership at an individual level.

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### **Author Biography**

Dr. Dina Banerjee received her Ph.D. from Purdue University and is on the faculty at Shippensburg University in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Her current research interests are gender, work, and occupations & leadership and organizations.