

# *Public Engagement as Research Methodology*

*for*

*Learn to Lead.*

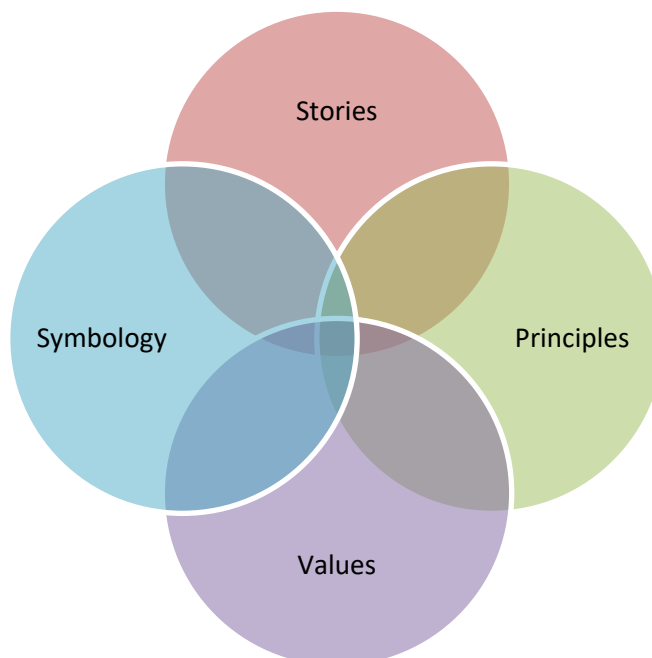
*By Dr. Jesvir Kaur Mahil*

## **Purpose of research:**

To explore the impact of cultural hegemony, using Jungian and Behaviourist psychological paradigms to identify patterns of association between deeply ingrained stories, principles, values & symbology, and their influence on professional leadership skills and behaviours.

## **Research question:**

How do Sikh socio-cultural stories, principles, values and symbology inform leadership skills and behaviours of Sikh professionals?



## Approach: Public Engagement

I chose a Public Engagement approach, based on a deep desire to maximise accessibility, availability and above all benefit, for those interested in developing their leadership skills through collaborative research.

As a researcher using a Public Engagement approach, I do not position myself as an expert. Instead, I endeavour to collaborate with my public to create new knowledge through various strategies including recorded conversations, conferences, and discourse analysis of socio-cultural influences, including religious and cultural stories.

## Assumptions

Public is Personal



“Public” is “Personal”.

To explain what I mean by the statement “Public is Personal”, I use the story about how I wrote “Sikhs of Stafford” Below is an extract taken from a speech I delivered for Postgraduate Researchers at Aston University, Birmingham on 23 February 2021

“My family have lived in Stafford, which is about 25 miles north of Birmingham since 1961. Over the past 70 years, Sikhs have established a thriving community in the town of Stafford, and to celebrate the success and pioneering spirit of our Sikh elders, I wrote a book called ‘Sikhs of Stafford’.

This book is based on research that relied solely on my Public Engagement activities within my community. My family, like most of the others in the Sikh community in Stafford were farmers and landowners in the Panjab. To settle in a foreign country, they took on very hard, low paid, unrewarding manual labour in factories. They raised their children to do well in education so they could have a better standard of living, by becoming professionals.

As a child, growing up in Stafford, my driving dream and aspiration was to become a doctor ...a medical doctor....but I didn't get the grades I needed for medical school so I studied psychology instead and became a teacher. Eventually, after many decades of teaching, I successfully completed my PhD in Education and earned myself the title Doctor....which I thought was a very creative way of fulfilling my childhood dream of being a medical doctor. Instead of helping people with their physical ailments, I was now more concerned with their standards of living and well-being through higher education. In this respect, my PhD was important to me, and it was also important to my community in Stafford because I was one of their first to reach this milestone.

However, the highest levels of education, without an impact in improving our standard of living, can seem to be counter-intuitive and counter-productive. Before my PhD I was working in Further Education Colleges and earning at least 10% more than I am currently earning working in Higher Education, with a PhD. We have to navigate barriers to our success creatively, so I shifted my focus to adding value to my community through public engagement activities, which cultivated a very deep level of trust and mutual respect.

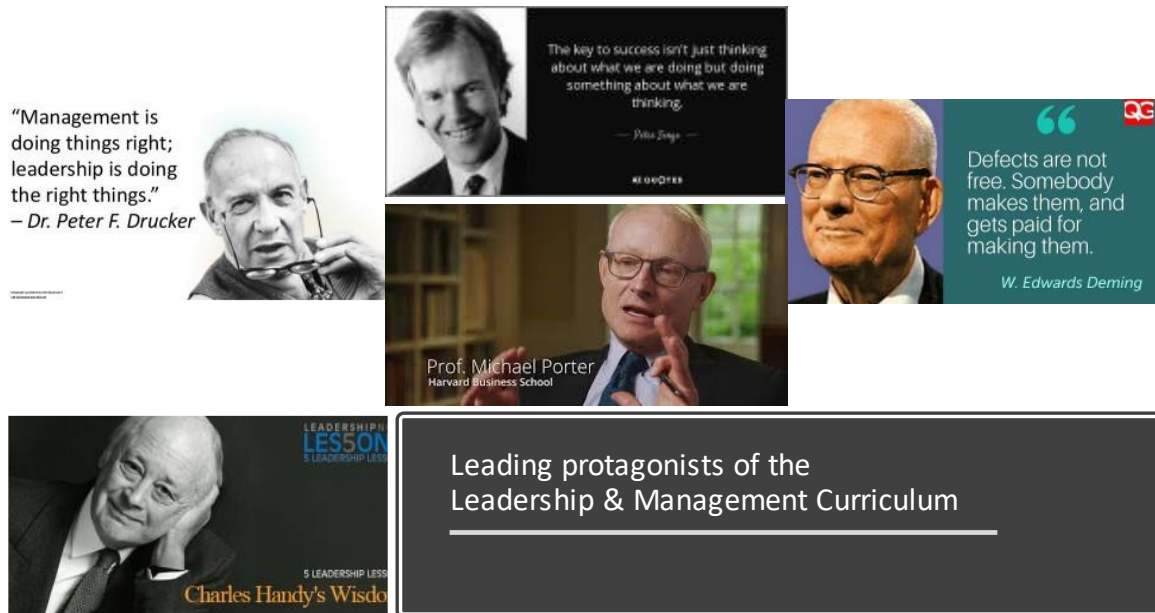
After I completed "Sikhs of Stafford", amazing things began to happen. My network of professional Sikhs from around the world grew rapidly and I am often addressed as "Doctor Sahib Ji" which is a term of very deep respect, and honour. My public engagement activities have not only expanded my sphere of influence in the public domain, they have also deepened my own childhood desires to serve my community through interventions which makes the quality of life a bit better for all of us, which is what my parents made significant sacrifices to achieve. When I am addressed as Doctor Sahib Ji, it reminds me that even though I am not a medical doctor, I am a doctor in education, and I can make a significant impact on raising the standards of living and well-being through education.

By writing Sikhs of Stafford, I demonstrated the value of my skills and established credibility. This led to 550 international Sikh professionals willing to support me in a huge leadership project which spans all continents. For each one of us, as educators or researchers, we'll find our own personal aspirations and our own public impact, in a manner that is both public and very personal."

*End of extract (speech delivered at Aston University, Birmingham 23 Feb 2021)*

Public engagement can be a strategy for navigating through cultural hegemony.

We can use public engagement to make education more relevant and useful, for a diverse range of beneficiaries, in a cosmopolitan city such as Birmingham where almost half the population, like my own family, have a migrant heritage.

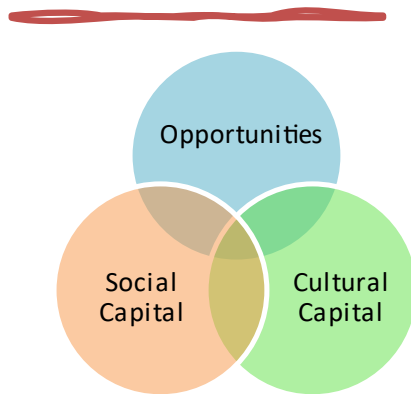


In the West Midlands, many local communities are under-represented in leadership and management roles.

When we look at the Higher Education curriculum for leadership and management, for example MBA programmes, leading protagonists include Porter, Drucker, Deming, Senge and Handy. These are some of my favourite authors and they've obviously contributed a lot to contemporary literature but having taught their leadership & management theories for decades, I notice the underlying links between leadership in education and lack of representation of local communities, from minority ethnic backgrounds, in senior leadership roles.

This current lack of diversity in leadership roles, which in the West Midlands, England, UK, is undeniable, may be associated with lack of representation in leadership education.

# Public Engagement for Social Justice



My personal motivation for using Public Engagement is based on a desire for social justice, mitigating the adverse impact of cultural hegemony.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the limitations of legislation such as Equal Opportunities in addressing inequalities in health and wealth for migrant communities.

In my view, equal opportunities, without the social and cultural capital that is required for success, are unlikely to address inequalities and injustices effectively. Public engagement activities can be used to address this. We acquire social capital through networks for sharing knowledge, mentoring to refine our skills and sponsorship that provides advocacy to support our success. Our cultural capital lies in our identity, our values, and our heritage.

Without respect to social and cultural needs and expectations, we cannot expect Equal Opportunities legislation to reduce inequalities. To benefit from Equal Opportunities legislation, we need genuine socio-cultural advocacy to feel safe, supported and valued for being who we are, instead of constantly trying to fit in, forced to comply and disown essential aspects of our identity.

## Who do we choose to be our public?



The response to the question “who is the public?” is not only personal, but also political because it’s about a choice we make:

“Who do we choose to be our public?”

As a researcher, this is one of the most important choices we make as it will determine the shape of our findings, our influence, and the impact we make.

### Identity:

Do we choose those with a familiar or unfamiliar identity? There may be a time and a place for both. For example, in my current research for a book on leadership, I have chosen Sikhs but for my research into creativity, most of the contributors are non-Sikhs.

### Language

Which language and how many different languages can we accommodate? When I wrote *Sikhs of Stafford*, I used two languages: Panjabi and English. For my research into leadership and creativity, I use only English because I want to work with an international audience,

### Education

Are we going to engage with a public that is literate or illiterate? For *Sikhs of Stafford*, I worked with both literate and illiterate contributors. However, for the book on leadership, I have chosen to work with only literate contributors because I want them to be able to read and respond to the articles I write.

### Vocation

Is our public farmers, manual workers, or professionals? In my book *Sikhs of Stafford*, I trace the transformation of my Sikh community, coming to England from farming backgrounds, taking on manual work in factories and raising their children to become professionals. In contrast, for my book on leadership, I am only working with Professionals in leadership positions.

### Values

Our choice of public is often underpinned by shared values. However, our public may also include those with opposing values. Those who position themselves as our adversaries are also part of our public. For my research on leadership, I embrace contributors who have quite different values and experiences to my own.

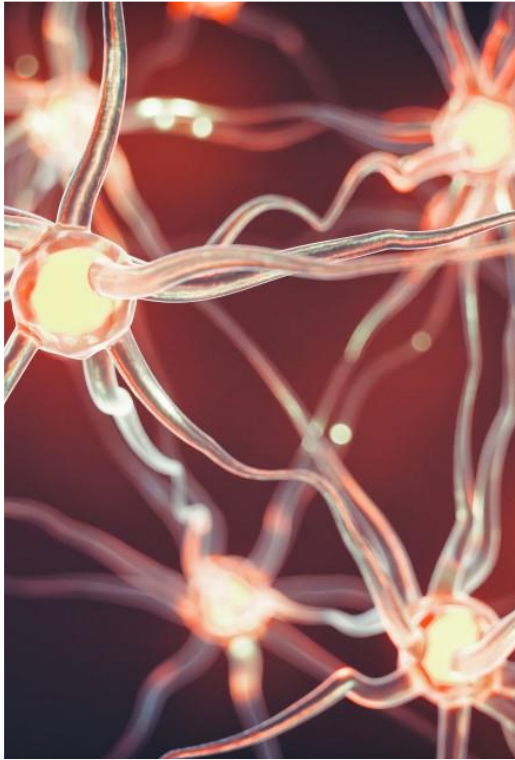
### Location

The location of our public is important. For *Sikhs of Stafford*, I chose a local public. These are members of my community who have seen me grow up. They know my family history and they have shared times of sadness and celebrations with us. On the other hand, for my current research on leadership, most of the contributors are international and they came into my sphere of influence after I wrote *Sikhs of Stafford* and they perceive me very differently to those I grew up with. They address me as Dr Mahil Sahib instead of simply by my first name, Jesvir.

## My personal and political choice of a public that is potentially interested and influential in my research.

Using factors such as identity, values, and location, I personally chose my public to be 550 international Sikh professionals from my network on LinkedIn. In March 2021, around 10% of my network on social media are Sikhs (roughly 500 out of a total network of 5,000 professional connections across different platforms). As the size of our public grows, the extent of our influence and impact should deepen. My aim is to expand my sphere of influence in education and research where Sikhs are a highly educated but very under-represented minority.

## What do we mean by engagement in research?



### What do we mean by 'engagement'?

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**Multi-directional communication** (not one way communication)

**Researcher is willing to listen, learn and adapt** (not an expert)

**Participants are allowed to represent themselves;** researcher avoids speaking on behalf of the participants

**Research is done *\*with\**** rather than *\*on\** the community of research participants



### Normalising the marginalised

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- Normalise voices that have been marginalised.
- See behaviour patterns as interesting and inspiring rather than odd and exotic.
- Make insights relevant to large, significant international communities rather than to small local communities.

As a researcher using Public Engagement as part of my methodology, I am making a political choice to work with those who are normally marginalised; seeking to position them centrally rather than as outsiders.



In writing my current book on leadership, 'Learn to Lead', as I am also a Sikh, the Sikhs in my research are not positioned as the "other". They have not been invited to contribute to the research because their behaviour styles are exotic, strange, or unfamiliar to me. In doing research **with** my public rather than **about** them, our collective voices become normalised rather than marginalised. Our behaviour patterns are interesting and inspiring rather than odd and exotic. Our insights may be of relevance and significance internationally rather than to a small local community.



## High level of engagement with our public

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Engagement can also mean **co-creation** of knowledge:

Articles

[Creativity&MoralEconomy](#)  
[Presence&Creativity](#)

Conferences

High level of participation from audience:  
[Creativity&CultureConference2018](#)

With a high level of engagement with our public we can co-create knowledge: For example, I have written several articles in collaboration with those who have seen my conference speeches about creativity: I publish these on my website where they are freely available to the public. Another example is an extremely high ratio of active versus passive participation at the online conferences I organise. Over the past 5 years I have had up to 80 speakers with a total of 120 participants. In other words, two thirds of the audience were actively speaking. They were actively engaged rather than passively engaged as listeners.



## Research is a journey

Regular & frequent dissemination of findings through the research process

Evaluations

Incorporation of public insights and critique

Feedback loops

Another aspect of engagement is that open communication takes place regularly and frequently during the process of the research journey rather than simply dissemination of research findings when the exploration has been completed and concluded. Findings are shared with the public before they have been finalised and evaluations, insights and public critique is embedded into the research through feedback loops.

## Aims, objectives and underpinning theories.

In developing Public Engagement activities, as researchers, we need to ensure we are clear of our aims, objectives and also the underpinning theories that advocate the use of Public Engagement.

### Empowerment of our Public

Our aim may be to empower those who are normally marginalised, through providing opportunities for representation, making the research relevant and valuable. I do this by organising online conferences for sharing ideas and networking with other speakers. This is supported by the philosophical Theory of Communicative Action, following the contemporary philosopher Habermas. When communication is sincere, truthful and articulate, it generates power that can serve as a catalyst for change and transformation.

### Reciprocity

To acknowledge the time, effort and contributions of my public, I write research-based articles and share these regularly and frequently. This is supported by Cialdini's theories of influence. Reciprocity builds trust and it encourages collaboration.

### Learn & adapt

To learn and to adapt my research with new ideas from my expanding network of contacts, I use an emergent model to continue to learn from and respond to, an expanding network of contributors. This is based on Systems Thinking theories of emergence and complexity. Through the process of public engagement, we can expect surprises and we may need to adapt in response to both positive and negative feedback.

### Improve quality

I evaluate and improve quality throughout my research process by collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders who have a vested interest. I request feedback from interested stakeholders to evaluate and improve quality of research. This is based on the management theory that active participation leads to better outcomes.

### Critical reflection

We can use pertinent, critical feedback from research participants and also research consumers, to reflect on researcher biases, positionality and context. I use this feedback to reflect on the impact of internal and external drivers, catalysts and barriers, throughout the research process.

### Praxis

We can use Public Engagement to transform outdated, unchallenged beliefs, oppressive stereotypes and ineffective behaviour patterns with new ideas, concepts and ways of thinking. I have found it useful to record changes in behaviour, beliefs and attitudes (both in myself and those collaborating in my research).

### Communication Skills

Engaging in conversations, discussions, and debates with an expanding network of educators and researchers who are already influential in the field of research has helped me to develop my communication skills. I am now regularly conversing with professionals in hugely different locations and positions to myself and I am learning to remain confident in uncharted territory during discussions.

### Impact

## Impact

Apply the research to create innovative products, services and systems

e.g., publish books, create courses and conferences



Some of the products I intend to create, to make an impact through my public engagement

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activities are writing and publishing books, creating new courses and expanding my international reach, for example through online conferences.

## Influence



# Influence

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Become increasingly  
visible,  
credible  
and influential

As researchers, we can use our articles, books, courses and online conferences to engage with influential gatekeepers in the field (e.g. Universities, Employers and Politicians) This is based on the theory that academic research needs to be increasingly relevant in public discourse. Public Engagement can fulfil numerous aims and there are a multitude of underpinning theories to support these aims

## Benefits and risks in using Public Engagement as research methodology

There are many social media platforms that can help us with Public Engagement activities. Each of these has its own benefits and disadvantages. I use LinkedIn the most.

The benefit of LinkedIn is that it is a list of professional and business contacts who are generally supportive of my work (otherwise I would not have added them to my list)

The disadvantage is that it can be very time-consuming contacting everyone in my network individually and personally. Only 50 people can be mass emailed, and contacts do not like to receive a generic impersonal message that has obviously been sent to a lot of people.

I also use Twitter to publicize my Public Engagement activities. The advantage of Twitter is diversity. I can potentially attract many unknown followers. However, the risk is the lack control over where my messages will end up. We may attract more of those who disagree with us than those who share our values and this can be very draining emotionally.

For my conferences and post conference activities, I use YouTube. The wide range of international contacts on YouTube can improve our credibility. However, the risk is that thousands of comments may prove to be a distraction and a lot of time can be wasted managing irrelevant comments.

In contrast to all the benefits of Public Engagement, there are also many risks, for example it can be time consuming and much of this time can be wasted. It can also lead to numerous distractions, red herrings and blind alleys.

Moreover, I am aware that in using Public Engagement, I have to be willing to relinquish control over ideas that I express. These ideas may easily be distorted, misused or misappropriated to support counter-narratives. Ownership and copyright of ideas may be contested. Who owns knowledge that was created in a conversation on social media? One person may want to commercialise the knowledge whereas another may not.

As researchers, we have to be prepared for the emergence of unpredictable competitive initiatives, organised by the public we have created. Some members of our public may compete for self-interest rather than collaboration & public interest.

One of the greatest risks, in my view, is the potential for a loss of reputation and self-confidence when academics see our public engagement as popular journalism rather than scholarship (especially if we comment about academic topics that we do not have expertise in). Negative feedback can be damaging rather than useful. People have lost their jobs, or career progression opportunities and friends due to careless public comments in social media. Therefore, we have to be mindful about what we say publicly, knowing that our words can easily be taken out of context to denigrate our work and to undermine our authority.

## Personal & Public Shared Values Driving Collaboration

Over the years, I've noticed that my public is often motivated to contribute because of shared values that reflect my own personal values as a researcher and educator.

### Compassion

There are those who are motivated by a compassionate desire for citizenship. They want to contribute to public debate for the benefit of our community and society.

### Courage

Others are motivated by a courageous desire to challenge the status quo so that inequities, imbalances of power and the needs of marginalised groups can be addressed.

### Creativity

Some members of the public are interested in creative learning and creation of new knowledge. They want to learn new ways of thinking & behaving; like myself, they want to pioneer fairer systems.

### Connections

A fourth type of public is motivated by a desire to develop their confidence and self-esteem through being connected to an expanding network of supportive professionals.

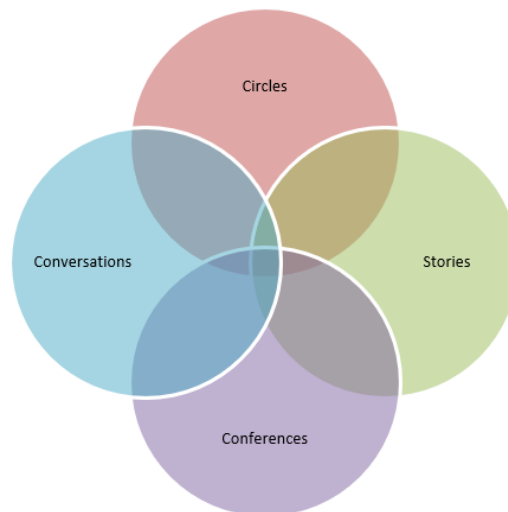
## Innovative Methodology for greater Public Access to Research

At present (March 2021), high quality research is not easily accessible and available to all who wish to learn, explore, experiment, and create new knowledge, theories and concepts. As a researcher, with an intention to advocate social justice by making high quality research accessible and beneficial as a form of social and cultural capital, I have created a paradigm shift in my research process, moving from the concept of participants to circles; from focus groups to conferences; from interviews to recorded conversations; and from case studies to stories.

## Creating accessible & beneficial, high quality research for all

Moving from:

1. participants to circles
2. case studies to stories
3. focus groups to conferences
4. interviews to conversations



To make research available, accessible, and beneficial to all, we need to overcome barriers such as finance, distance and time. I am overcoming these barriers by using technology to organise online conversations, conferences and sharing of knowledge through social media and my own websites.

### Ethics

My research is conducted in alignment with the principles outlined in the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (honesty, accountability, professional courtesy and fairness and good stewardship). The full statement can be downloaded [here](#).

I am funding this research through my Education Consultancy, University for Life, which I founded in 2004. In the spirit of sewa, kirat kamao and bandh shako, the investment is meant to create socio-cultural capital that will empower Sikhs & non-Sikhs to lead in alignment with their values, principles and aspirations.

#### Note to research co-creators and collaborators.

*You will have the right to remain anonymous in all published findings and you will also have the right to change your mind about participating in the research and withdraw from a scheduled interview with no negative consequences, by emailing me at [jesvir@universityforlife.com](mailto:jesvir@universityforlife.com). If you withdraw, all data related to your input will be destroyed. No deception is involved in any part of the research. As a research collaborator, you will receive regular updates on my findings and electronic copies of any articles that I publish related to this research as appreciation of your time and effort in supporting this research.*

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